



# THE NEW MUSEUM

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OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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Andres Serrano:  
Works 1983-1993

# ANDRES SERRANO

WORKS 1983-1993

It is virtually impossible to introduce the work of Andres Serrano without acknowledging the place of his 1987 *Piss Christ* at the center of the 1989 censorship crusade led by the American Family Association (AFA) and Senator Jesse Helms—a campaign that culminated in the annulment of several National Endowment of the Arts grants, the insertion of an obscenity clause in NEA proposal guidelines, and a tumultuous public controversy over state regulation of art and the First Amendment rights of artists and museums. To do so would be to ignore the means by which Serrano has become one of today's best known living artists. *Piss Christ* is a photograph of a crucifix ensconced in a golden light, an utterly reverent visual image of the crucifixion that would hardly seem to merit charges of blasphemy and obscenity. Voicing his desire to reinvent rather than destroy Christian iconography, Serrano contends that "the best place for *Piss Christ* is in a church." What the AFA responded to was not the image itself, but the revelation furnished by the work's title that the source of the golden glow is urine.

Through the censorship debacle, *Piss Christ*, along with the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe and eventually a number of other works, became an icon of the censorship position. More importantly, across the political spectrum the press represented Serrano as a kind of anti-censorship desperado. *Andres Serrano: Works 1983-1993*, the first midcareer survey of the artist's work, allows viewers to move beyond this media stereotype and to assess the depth of Serrano's critical engagement with a range of challenging subjects. The works in the exhibition were selected from seven series of photographs that span the artist's career to date: early religious and classical tableaux, Immersions, the Church, Nomads, the Klansmen, Objects of Desire, and the Morgue (Cause of Death).

These series have taken as their focuses ecclesiastic and mythological iconography, bodily emanations (urine, menstrual blood, semen), dead bodies (fragmented "portraits" shot in a morgue), and guns (the Objects of Desire series), themes that converge on a blunt evocation of death and afterlife, the body and its dismemberment. His

continued focus on rituals of violence, spiritual life, and the body has led critics to cast Serrano as a kind of purveyor of abjection and blasphemy, a reading that has been framed through the lens of the late-1980s censorship debate and its dichotomies of sacred and profane, totem and taboo, reverence and repulsion.

Censorship issues continue to be crucial to the future of the politics of artistic production and exhibition, and it is important to recognize the historical place of Serrano and his work within this controversy. But it is also important to see the cultural meanings and issues Serrano's photography raises in terms other than those dictated by the opponents of free speech. Serrano's work insists upon a much more complex consideration of the iconography of the church and myriad other social institutions—institutions as diverse

as the morgue, the Klan, and urban homelessness. Serrano's photographs are deeply disturbing and perplexing not because they are universally transgressive, but because they simultaneously exalt and assault a range of icons that are already the object of intense cultural anxieties about power, mortality, and spirituality.

Serrano repeatedly describes his own deep ambivalence about such subjects. As Lucy Lippard has noted, Serrano is one of a number of 1980s artists using the iconography of the church; however, he is unique among these artists in that he creates from a position of belief. As Serrano himself explains, his photographs of religious tableaux are informed by "unresolved feelings about my own Catholic upbringing, which help me redefine and personalize my relationship with God. For me, art is a moral and spiritual obligation that cuts across all manner of pretense and speaks directly to the soul."<sup>1</sup> Serrano belies the fundamentalist view of his work as "anti-Christian bigotry." "As a former Catholic and as someone who even today is not opposed to being called a Christian," he argues, "I felt I had every right to use the symbols of the Church, and resented being told not to."<sup>2</sup>

This kind of perverse and ambivalent reverence for the church is embodied in works like *Piss Christ* and *Black Mary*, a photograph of a plaster Madonna painted black and immersed in water. Veiled in an ethereal mist of jewel-like air bubbles, *Black Mary* and the *Black Supper* series are as aes-



**Piss Christ, 1987**

thetically gorgeous as they are potentially idolatrous. Serrano recasts the residual imagery of his Catholic upbringing and beliefs to produce a new iconography, a project quite distinct from the renunciation of Christianity. The photographs in these series testify to a broader cultural need for an iconography of memory, belief, and history, an iconography that would allow the repressed side of religion to be considered as something other than profanity. They hint at the simultaneously repressive and productive role of the church as a cultural resource. Although this work was widely discussed as an indication of the artist's personal irreverence, it is important to put it in his historical perspective by acknowledging its real function as an expression



of conflicted ambivalence within the broader culture about the church and power, repression and desire. Serrano's concern to draw out this tension without questioning the devotion of individual believers is explicit in his respectful portraits of members of the clergy in the later Church series.

Although references to religion in Serrano's work are often discussed in terms of the artist's Catholic upbringing, Serrano also has emphasized his debt to Renaissance and medieval religious paintings—particularly the work of European Catholic painters like Hieronymous Bosch which he first saw as a teenager at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—He has even discouraged the classification of his work as simply photography.

**Pieta, 1985**

"I use photography, but I'm not a photographer," he explains.

"I consider myself a conceptual artist with a camera."<sup>3</sup> Pursuing painterly subjects and formal concerns through the use of photography, he indirectly challenges the historical ranking of painting over photography in the art market. The religious and mythological tableaux series exhibit a reverence for European fine-art conventions; but they also enshrine other art historical movements, such as modern abstract art, color field painting, and the commercialized aesthetics of advertising photography (represented in the use of Cibachrome) that gained popularity and value in the 1980s.

Serrano's highly abstract images of blood, piss, semen, and milk challenge the cultural

response of disgust toward bodily functions while also drawing on a modernist tradition of painterly abstraction. Serrano cites the 20th century Dutch painter Piet Mondrian as an inspiration for these works. Ultimately, however, this overture to formal abstraction only heightens the works' direct and disturbing effect. Serrano's use of blood, piss, milk, and semen coincided with an influx of debates and policies linking these bodily fluids

with cultural identity in public institutions like medicine and law following the advent of the AIDS crisis. Art historian Robert Hobbs has noted that "although Serrano views his emphasis on blood as a natural progression from the carcasses which appear in the earlier tableaux as well as a critique of the implicit violence of

Catholicism, this substance became highly politicized in the mid eighties, when it was first acknowledged as a medium for transmitting AIDS."<sup>4</sup> As a number of critics have noted, Serrano's sustained engagement with bodily fluids in abstract photographs of 1987 such as *Blood, Milk, and Piss* coincides precisely with growing anxieties about blood's newly acquired status as a biohazard. The 1989 *Untitled: Ejaculate in Trajectory* has been likened to the gestural works of abstract expressionism, but it also can be seen within the framework of DNA testing and the linkage of bodily fluids with drug use, criminality, and proof of identity in the work place and the legal system. But, as Hobbs notes, critical attention to the theme of the sacred and the profane precluded the question of why these photographs presented such highly charged materials without appearing to take a stance.

The ambivalent relation to institutions of power represented in Serrano's photography becomes more difficult for many viewers to fathom, much less to embrace, when the focus shifts from the church and the museum to institutions like the morgue or the Ku Klux Klan. Few viewers would admit the level of ambivalence, much less the perverse reverence, toward these subjects that is implied in these photographs. Serrano's Klan series consists of highly saturated Cibachromes of Klan members in full regalia, their bodies presented in head-and-shoulders close-ups of their concealing and powerfully symbolic gar-

ments. Dramatically lit and shot against a black backdrop, the pointed hoods and ragged eyeholes of the Klan robes suggest religious raiments and a kind of disembodied higher authority. But unlike the ethereal, radiant images of the earlier tableaux, these photographs are clinical in their starkness, almost scientific in their harsh detail. Devoid of faces and stripped of context, these are stunningly iconic images that immediately invoke the blunt force of this nationalist hate group.

Like the photographs of bodily emanations, these images fail to convey a clear political stance on their subject. These are hardly the condemning documents that one might expect from an encounter between a U.S. photographer of Afro-Cuban and Honduran parentage and members of a white supremacist group. Indeed, these photographs could be said to be respectful, if not venerating, of the Klan. Throughout the production of this series, Serrano placed himself in hostile situations and endured the racist comments of his sitters. Giving precedence to his goal of confronting the broader cultural significance of the Klan through his artwork, Serrano felt that it was necessary to establish a professional distance from his subjects, suppressing his personal conflict with and vulnerability to their agenda of racist violence.

#### **The Morgue (Death by Drowning II), 1992**

Nonetheless, Serrano notes that in the course of shooting their portraits he felt compassion for the Klansmen as human beings; he related to their experience as cultural outsiders, as underdogs or pariahs.



It would be easy to condemn this series; who would want to admit any possible identification with Klan members, whether on the basis of class or regional or ethnic identity and experience? The almost clinical neutrality and ambiguity of the Klan series is frightening because it demonstrates that an artist of color can take a distanced, and even a respectful, view of the Klan. But this unthinkable fact also forces us to acknowledge

the complexity of cultural belief systems, a complexity that allows Serrano to feel an affinity with these people on the basis of a shared marginality. He invests his portraits of homeless people with a similar degree of dignity. This forces us to acknowledge the degree to which belief, cultural identity, and racism are always

inflected in contradictory ways by issues such as class, regional identity, religious affinity, and diverse experiences of marginalization. As in his earlier images of bodily emanations, Serrano demonstrates an uncanny ability to register—and implicate us in—deeply felt cultural ambivalences about our bodies and our beliefs, despite powerful cultural prohibitions against their expression.

*Andres Serrano: Works 1983-1993* invites viewers to look beyond the familiar dichotomy of the sacred and profane that thus far has framed Serrano's work, and to confront the complexity of our own relationships to our belief systems, bodies, and cultural practices that we would rather not face, much less display in public.

**Brian Goldfarb**  
Curator of Education

#### **Notes**

1. Lucy R. Lippard, "Andres Serrano: The Spirit and the Letter," *Art in America* (April 1990), p. 239.
2. Coco Fusco, "Sublime Abjection: An interview with Andres Serrano," XX.
3. From a conversation with the artist.
4. Robert Hobbs, "Andres Serrano: The Body Politic," *Andres Serrano, Works 1983-1993*, ed. Gerald Zeigerman, (Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1995) p. 27.

#### **Selected Bibliography**

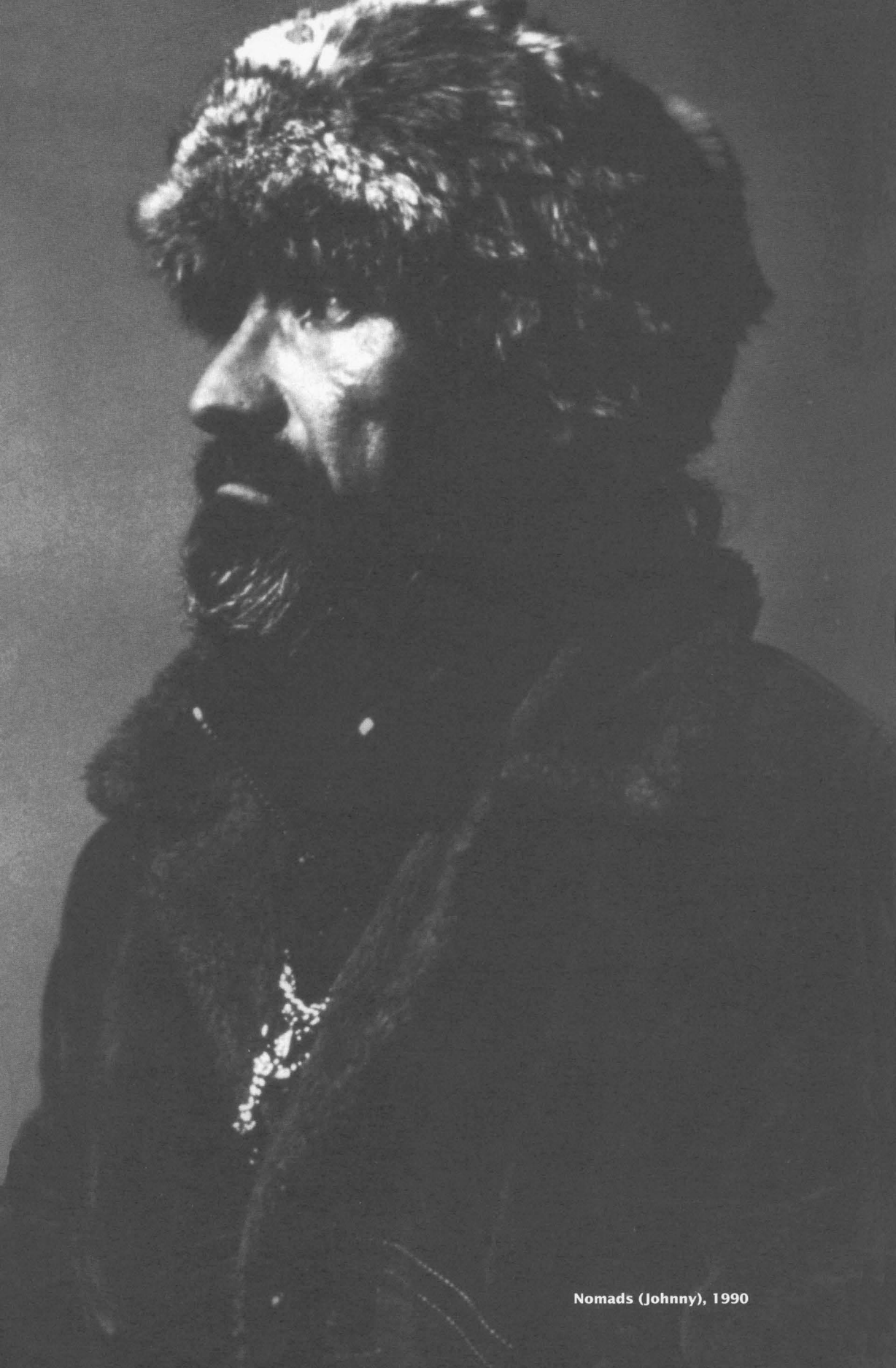
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The Church (Soeur Bozema, Paris), 1991



Nomads (Johnny), 1990



Klansman (Imperial Wizard), 1990

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A short video accompanies the exhibition *Andres Serrano: Works 1983-1993*. Produced by the Education Department of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, the video explores the serial photographs produced over the last decade through interviews with museum director Marcia Tucker, art critic Brian Wallis, and Andres Serrano. Support for video was generously provided by the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, and the Center for the Fine Arts, Miami.

All photos courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, NY

## Public Programs

### Workshop for Teachers

*Images of Illusion:  
Exploring the Visual Metaphors  
of Andres Serrano*  
Saturday, February 4th  
10:00 am-3:00 pm  
Free with Museum Admission.

Workshop will be conducted by Carmen Bardeguez, a published poet, writer and history teacher at Satellite Academy High School in Queens, New York. For further information and to R.S.V.P., please call (212) 219-1222.

*Dialogue with Andres  
Serrano and Bruce Ferguson,*  
independent curator and critic  
Thursday, February 23rd  
6:30-8:30 pm.

*Symbols of Power and  
States of Anxiety*  
Thursday, March 2nd  
6:30-8:30 pm  
Conversation between cultural producers and critics on the symbolic and real power of contemporary institutions.

All programs will take place at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway, between Prince and Houston Streets. Tickets: \$7.00 general, \$5.00 students, seniors, members. Tickets are sold in advance at the Admissions Desk of The New Museum during Museum hours; no reservations or ticket orders will be taken by phone. For further information, please call (212) 219-1222.

### Membership Programs and Events

*Breakfast Reception and  
Tour* with artist Andres Serrano and Director Marcia Tucker  
Saturday, February 25, 1995  
10:00-11:30 am  
For Advocate level members and above.

Frescobaldi wines have been graciously donated by Paterno Imports as part of the "Wine for Arts Sake" Program.

## The New Museum of Contemporary Art

583 Broadway  
in SoHo between Prince  
and Houston Streets  
New York, NY 10012  
(212) 219-1222

### Hours:

Wednesday, Thursday,  
Friday, and Sunday 12-6 pm;  
Saturday 12-8 pm (6-8 pm  
free); closed Monday and  
Tuesday.

### Admissions:

\$4.00 general; \$3.00 artists,  
students, seniors; members  
and children under 12 free.

### Directions:

Subway: Lexington Ave.  
line (#6) to Spring St. or  
Bleecker St.; Broadway line  
(N/R) to Prince St.; 8th Ave.  
line (A/C/E) to Spring St.;  
and 6th Ave. line (B/D/Q/F)  
to Broadway/Lafayette.  
Bus: #1/5/6/21 to Houston  
St. or Broadway.

### Group Visits

Guided group visits are  
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for adults and students  
grades 7 through 12. Please  
call (212) 219-1222.

For Membership programs  
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Cover: **Black Mary, 1990**