

# Images of Death and Dying:

## Kathe Kollwitz, Gerhard Richter, Andres Serrano and Joel-Peter Witkin

*Dying Gaul*, Hellenistic sculpture, 240 BC

*The Deposition*, van der Weyden, oil 1435

*Death of Socrates*, David, 1787

Art history is full of images of death – battles, murders, executions, a dying child, a dying lover – death has been a staple of artistic images in the west. These often portray death as noble, tragic or poetic, sometimes senseless.

We'll look at the work of four artists who have made work or series of images that focus on death, or specific events of death. In Witkin's work we'll view work that makes use of cadavers for the creation of the work itself.

### **Kathe Kollwitz**

For Kollwitz, death was a continuous theme. Being a German who lived through both world wars and lost both children to wars, her work dealt with the tragedy and senselessness death of her grown sons.

*Pieta*, 1903, lithograph

*Woman with Dead Child*, 1903, etching

*Battlefield* (from Peasants War Cycle), 1907, etching

This work draws on a play by Gerhardt Hauptman, following a battle a woman goes to the field of fallen men and boys searching for her son or husband among the dead.

*Death, Mother and Child*, 1910, charcoal

*Death and Woman*, 1910, etching and softground

These works dealt more symbolically with Kollwitz own mortality and her observations of poor women who died, leaving behind small children. In these works death appears as a skeleton pulling the child or mother/woman apart.

### **Gerhard Richter**

*Woman Descending the Staircase*, 1965, oil

Richter has been painting in a style that references photography for most of his career. The idea of painting photos is one that is reflexive and somewhat ironic.

## **The Red Army Faction and The Baader-Meinhof Group**

This cycle of paintings was created based on video footage, journalist photos and forensic photos; it commemorates the October day in 1977 when several imprisoned student-terrorists in West Germany were found dead in their cells.

Some background on this event: Increasing dis-ease among college students developed in the late 60s/early 70s. Concerns with the national secret of Germany's past Nazi regime, rampant consumerism, and fears of another world war in Europe (between the USSR and US) fueled youthful outrage and criticism of German culture and politics.

Numerous small college student factions emerged, but the most notorious was the The Red Army Faction (RAF). Clashes between then-peaceful student protestors and more violent government authorities, led to increased calls for violence.

The RAF undertook numerous guerilla attacks – kidnappings, shootings, bombings, robberies and the like, until 1972 when some members of a smaller, subgroup of the RAF were arrested and imprisoned. These students were the members of “the Baader-Meinhof Group” after its founders, Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof. Other members included Baader's lover, Gudrun Ensslin and Holger Meins, Jan Carl Raspe, and Irmgard Moller.

The images in the cycle begin with the 1972 arrests

### ***Arrest I, 1988, oil, 36 x 49 in***

Shows Meins surrendering to an armored car whose gun is trained on him while he disrobes to prove that he is unarmed.

## **October 18, 1977**

But the events of October 18 – which included the aftermath in which the remaining imprisoned members were mortally attacked or committed suicide is the subject of these paintings.

It is unclear whether the deaths of the imprisoned B-M Group generated out of official retribution (murder) or desperation (suicide)

### ***Cell, 1988, oil***

Reveals the book-lined cell belonging to Baader

### ***Record Player, 1988, oil, 24 x 32 in***

The smashed record player in which prison officials say Baader hid a smuggled gun he later reportedly used in his own suicide.

### ***Man Shot Down I, 1988, oil, 39 x 55 in***

### ***Man Shot Down II, 1988, oil***

Two versions of the same forensic photo of Baader dead on the floor of his cell.

### ***Hanged, 1988, oil, 78 x 75 in.***

Centers on Ensslin's corpse as it was discovered the morning of October 18

What we have here is *paintings of photos* of events.

“Death is the perfect subject for photography” says James Hamilton, photographer. After all isn't a corpse really a photograph of the living human being? Stilled? Captured? Arrested?

Also, the documentary nature of photography tells us death is real as opposed to the fictionalizing possibilities of painting (Remember *Death of Socrates*? Fictionalized, idealized and romanticized)

## **Andres Serrano**

### ***Piss Christ, 1987, 40 x 60 inches, edition of 3***

Serrano is the photographer who touched off a firestorm of controversy with *Piss Christ* (1988), a large color photograph depicting a small plastic crucifix submerged in the artist's urine. Serrano's *Piss Christ* raised the ire of numerous religious and secular groups, including the American Family Association, and brought public condemnation from U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms. It also heated up the debate over whether the federal government should fund such artwork. Serrano had received in 1988 a \$15,000 grant from Awards in the Visual Arts, partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts.

### **The Morgue Pictures**

A pathologist and well-known forensic expert authorized Serrano to photograph bodies housed in the morgue under his jurisdiction, providing that the deceased in Serrano's images were not identified. As a way of protecting the identity of the individuals, Serrano has never revealed the location of the morgue. Many of the bodies were there for autopsies. He could not work on a body that had not been autopsied (so as not to compromise evidence). He did work with cadavers after autopsies.

When he first arrived at the morgue, he watched the autopsy of an 8-year old child and decided he would have to work fast or he would not have the emotional detachment to continue the work for long.

The project took three months. He photographed 95 % of the bodies that came in the door.

At first he made large –sectioned photos of the bodies, but the photos all looked the same – all lying down, legs torso. He revised his idea and composed in close-ups.

The formal beauty of his work owes much to the Baroque era – in its lighting, the simplicity of forms, the often dark backgrounds, the oblique angles (not to prove the ability to draw in perspective, but to disorient the viewer). The closely cropped, emphatic narratives.

All this beauty serves Serrano in these works about raw, real deaths – sometimes violent.

This work was unfavorably met – its content found doubly objectionable due to its beauty. Art critic, Peter Schjedahl took Serrano to task for producing beautiful images of dead flesh. Yet Serrano counters this criticism: “[viewers are] seduced and then they feel tricked when they realize what they're seduced by. To me that's the works' saving grace – that it doesn't repel altogether, that it works on more than one level.”

That he makes beautiful images of dead bodies is an exercise in tension and contrast.

*“The form of the body, the skin, the comely exterior hides contents that are shapeless and nightmarish... One of our primal terrors is that this form will spring a leak, letting the inside's fluids, organs, life spill out to become visible and in the process deathly. The flawlessness of bodily*

*form (beauty?) is a reassurance of mortal safety and a denial of death”*  
(Wendy Steiner)

***Rat Poison Suicide, 1992***

This photo of a woman about 30 years old. She was found in a freezer after rigor had set in.

***Rat Poison Suicide II, 1992***

***Drowning, 1992***

***Death by Drowning II, 1992 (black person)***

The mouth is like a gaping wound in the face and the skin is mottled in an inhuman, supine composition – cut off too quickly, cropped in a restrictive life-sapping manner.

***Infectious Pneumonia, 1992 (white man/red drape)***

Here the motif of the bisected form – this time in red – appears again. The red masking and symbolizing the life force that remains beneath the skin.

**Joel Peter Witken**

In discussing Witken’s work, little has been written by art historians and his work is irregularly covered by art critics. What we have of substance are Witken’s own comments about his intentions and his work. In an effort to portray his work —which makes use of unusual people and corpses – I’ll rely heavily on quotes by journalists and critics and Witken himself.

***Poet: From a collection of Relics and Ornaments***

Joel-Peter Witkin is a contemporary American photographer. He received his MFA from the University of New Mexico in 1976 and is currently a major, if controversial, photographer with numerous grants and one-person exhibits on record.

***Leda***

***Bruja***

Witkin is infamous as one artist whose work has been regularly and frequently rejected as offensive, blasphemous and decadent.

**Influences**

***Image of christian martyrdom***

Witkin claims that his earliest fascination with the macabre was initiated when he witnessed a car wreck in which a young girl was decapitated. Witkin was also raised by a Catholic mother and some interest in early christian iconography and imagery/stories are also influential in his work.

***Edvard Munch, The Vampire (death as redheaded woman)***

***Egon Schiele – Death and the Maiden***

There is a precedent for artistic work that values images of death as beautiful or even erotic. These are the works of the Decadents also related to the Symbolists (Redon and Edvard Munch, Egon Schiele

were notable among these artists in their equation of death as a beautiful woman or an event with erotic undertones)

***Gods of Earth and Heaven (after Botticelli's Birth of Venus)***

***Gods of Earth and Heavens***

***Las Meninas (by Witken, referencing Velazquez painting)***

His work has far more in common with a more traditional approach to painting than it has with contemporary photography! The work in some respects deals with similar images that painting has dealt with for centuries (especially the martyrdom of saints, nightmares, and dreamlike chimeras). The distinction – one that makes Witkin's work offensive for many people is the imagery depicted through the use of photography. The factual and documentary nature of photography forces the viewer to reckon with these images as actual rather than imagined.

**Subjects and Models**

Witkin describes his model/subjects as “unusual people” ranging from “pinheads, dwarves, giants, hunchbacks, pre-op transsexuals, bearded women...sex masters and slaves...geeks: and hermaphrodites and teratoids [monsters] (alive and dead). He has used corpses and parts of corpses. Also dead fetuses in his work.

(Peter Schjedldahl, *Shudderbug, The Village Voice*, October 31, 1995.)

His use of these subjects in his images, according to Witkin are an attempt “...to show the beauty of the distinction of these unusual people. Hours are spent informing them so i can have their consent to be photographed. I show them my work, I assure them I'll make a photograph that is exquisite. I can't cause harm – I want to cause healing. It's my job to create trust between them and me.”

(Jan Even, *Joel-Peter Witkin is the Master of the Macabre, Seattle Times*, Jan. 16, 1994.)

"I divest myself of the need for darkness by making my work, and by showing my work I hope to divest the viewer of the same need," . [Witkin, whose images often include the physically abnormal and/or socially aberrant, dealt only superficially with the questions of representation that are often raised in discussions of his work. That transvestites, hermaphrodites, amputees, etc. are used to represent darkness, as they are in his photographs, went unquestioned.]

**The Artist's Technique/Process**

Witken's work is largely in the creation of the expansive tableaux or sets which he carefully plans and builds. These are extensive undertakings which, Witken claims, limits his ability to produce numerous works. He makes about 6 – 10 photos (editions?) a year and works 10 – 12 hours a day in the studio developing ideas, drawings, tableaux as well as selecting and working with his models.

The work is *painterly* and may be described as ‘baroque’ in its overall aesthetic sensibility and complexity. Much of his work quotes or refers to other historical works (las meninas, gods of earth and heaven, john kane, and poet:... are a few)

He works tirelessly on negatives. He scratches, cross contaminates, occasionally using sandwiched or layered negatives to create photomontages (the kiss). He also liberally retouches and hand draws/paints on the negatives. The result frequently appears splashed, harmed, sepia-toned and long-aged.

(Book review of *Sacred and Profane*, by G Celand and J-P Witken, *New Statesman and Society*, London, Nov. 24 1995, by Elizabeth Young.)

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*Afterimage*; Rochester; Jul/Aug 1998; [Kathryn N Andrews](#); [Isaac Rivera-Caban](#)

# Death and Dying Lecture

**Kathe Kollwitz, Gerhard Richter, Andres Serrano and Joel-Peter Witkin**

## **Kathe Kollwitz**

*Pieta*, 1903, lithograph

*Woman with Dead Child*, 1903, etching

*Battlefield* (from Peasants War Cycle), 1907, etching

*Death, Mother and Child*, 1910, charcoal

*Death and Woman*, 1910, etching and softground

## **Gerhard Richter**

*Woman Descending the Staircase*, 1965, oil on canvas

## **October 18, 1977**

*Arrest I*, 1988, oil, 36 x 49 in

*Cell*, 1988, oil

*Record Player*, 1988, oil, 24 x 32 in

*Man Shot Down I*, 1988, oil, 39 x 55 in

*Man Shot Down II*, 1988, oil

*Hanged*, 1988, oil, 78 x 75 in.

## **Andres Serrano**

*Piss Christ*, 1987, 40 x 60 inches, edition of 3

## **The Morgue series, photography, 1992**

*Rat Poison Suicide*,

*Rat Poison Suicide*,

*Drowning*,

*Drowning*,

*Death by Drowning II*,

*Infectious Pneumonia*,

## **Joel-Peter Witken**

(All works by Witken are photography. No precise dates available – most of this work was created in the 1980s)

*Poet; From a Collection of Relics and Ornaments*

*Leda*

*Bruja* (photo and drawing)

*Gods of Earth and Heaven*

*Las Meninas* (after Velazquez)

*Leo*

*The Kiss*

*Woman with Severed Head*

*Mandan*

*Expulsion from Paradise of Adam and Eve*

## Seminar

Following the lecture on the work of Joel-Peter Witkin, break up into small groups ( 4 – 5 students) and discuss the work and issues it brings up using this outline as a guide to formulate observations, conclusions and questions. Determine scribe responsibilities as a group -- document the discussion and report to the large group when we reassemble.

1. Discuss the *power of representation* with regard to each of the following media. How are they similar, how are they unique, what sorts of subject/themes or images might each medium best be suited for?

*Photography*

*Drawing*

2. Discuss the relationship of the Artist to the Viewer: what is the nature of the relationship? how is it conducted? How do you imagine or experience it when *you* are the artist.....when *you* are the viewer? What are some of the challenges inherent in this relationship? What do you expect from an artist when you view her work? What do you expect from a viewer when s/he views *your* work?

3. Discuss the relationship of the Artist to the Subject/Model: what is the nature of the relationship? how is it conducted? How do you imagine or experience it when *you* are the artist What are some of the challenges inherent in this relationship?

4. Do artists have responsibilities? If so, what might these be? To whom might an artist be responsible? Discuss.

5. What themes/subjects should artists simply *not* address in their work?

6. What is (or should be) the goal of making a work of art?

7. What is Joel-Peter Witkin's goal in the creation of his work? Do you agree?

8. Describe Witken's work in aesthetic terms including, but not limited to a general formal analysis of the character of his work overall. Is the work effective? If so, what is it effective in achieving?