

PRESS RELEASE  
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April 8, 2014

JOEL-PETER WITKIN  
**LOVE AND OTHER REASONS . . . TO LOVE**  
April 18 - June 21, 2014

**"To love has always been the cornerstone of my work. This selection of new photographs deal with social justice, history, philosophy and phenomenology."** ~Joel-Peter Witkin

Andrew Smith Gallery, located next to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum on the corner of Grant Ave. and Jonson St., open an exhibit of 15 photographs by the internationally acclaimed artist Joel-Peter Witkin titled **Love and Other Reasons . . . To Love** on Friday, April 18, 2014. There will be an opening reception for the artist from 4 to 6 p.m. The exhibit continues through June 21, 2014.

Joel-Peter Witkin is one of the leading photographic artists of our time, world renowned for his provocative and controversial works that deal with matters of life and death, myth and allegory. His fantastic imagery, often compared to the dark imaginations of Goya and Bosch, frequently alludes to classical works of art, often with religious themes. Witkin's influences range from Giotto to Max Beckman to 19th century daguerreotypes.

Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1939, Witkin was fascinated as a child by sideshow performers at Coney Island and newspaper articles about mental illness, atrocities and misfits. Later he studied art at Cooper Union, Columbia University and at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He was a photographer with the U.S. Army from 1961 to 1964.

In his earlier work Witkin made photographs of elaborate tableaux composed of dismembered human bodies, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, and physically deformed people. His works were often shocking, but not gratuitously so, because they invited viewers to consider weighty subjects like compassion, morality and spirituality. According to Evi Papadopoulou, Witkin "honors and

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pays respects to a human being deprived of the advantage of a 'normal' life by joining her suffering present with the eternal dimension of a global work of art."

Witkin says of his work: "It is vital in two-dimensional art to persuade the viewer to look deeply and carefully into the work. I accomplish this by creating narrative photographs through original vision to make indelible images through meticulous execution and moral purpose. I've devoted my life to creating photographs which inform and heal by describing how the world affects souls."

The exhibit at Andrew Smith Gallery demonstrates how Witkin's work continues to evolve over time. In a 2011 interview the artist said, "I think the new work is romantic, I think it's genteel, I think it's tender, and it's more compassionate, because I've grown. I'm seventy-two now and I'm facing the big 'D,' and I don't mean Dallas. But I can say that the older work is more visually combative, where I basically photographed very, very strong subject matter. But both the new work and the old work are part of my life, because I think that -- not life as such -- but that the world is irrational. And since I'm living in that world through this life that I'm living I have to basically confront the irrationality, the strangeness and the conflicting aspects of being in that world."

Witkin begins his projects by sketching them on paper until he is satisfied with the design before constructing the tableau to be photographed. In the darkroom he scratches the negatives, and bleaches and tones the images before printing them in limited editions ranging from standard sizes up to mural size. As he describes it, ". . . in the process of making my photographs the decisive moment is not what's in the camera, it's what's on the paper. For me, the negative is the first stage of photographic creation. The final stage, the print, must contain the emotional, visceral and aesthetic realities, which only the consciousness of the photographer, as printmaker, can achieve. I make the print myself, and that's a lost art in photography."

**THE PHOTOGRAPHS**



**"Performers, New Mexico", 2014**

toned gelatin silver print

Edition: 1/6s

An out-of-focus hand pulls back a curtain to reveal a tableau containing two ribald figures cavorting on a stage. The scene is crowded with photographs and paintings referencing pictures from prior centuries: Velasquez's *Venus at her Mirror*, Holbein the Younger's portrait of Henry VIII and Gainsborough's *Portrait of Queen Charlotte* among them. The central characters are an earthy, voluptuous "bearded" woman whose nude body is covered with nipples and her consort, a bald, mustached sailor, upon whose belly is painted a sinking ship and whose legs are tattooed with snakes, women and mermaids. Their genders are blurred; each mutable personage has attributes of the other sex. Subtexts about the wild gamut of human sexuality abound in images of pleasure, sensuality, bondage, levitating, blindfolding and grotesqueries.

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**"A Woods Dream of Signs and Wonders", New Mexico, 2013**  
toned gelatin silver print  
Edition: 1/6s

Reflecting the somber reality of mass extinction of natural habitats and species happening to our biosphere, Witkin created a miniature Passion Play of objects from the natural world arranged on a white altar cloth. Allusions to Christianity include a dead Blackbird holding a small cross; coral (an endangered species as well as an ancient charm against evil); a dead fish on a rickety chair, a symbol of Jesus Christ because the Greek word for fish ICQUS or ichthus, forms the acrostic Jesus Christ God's Son Savior; a Picasso-like drawing of a large breasted, two-faced woman who may represent the anguished Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalen and Mother Nature all rolled into one and the feathered bodies of two small birds whose heads have been replaced with a skull and a doll's head much like a woodland version of Death and the Maiden. The title of the work brings together two contradictory views of reality; the existence of a Christian God revealed in miracles, signs and wonders vs. the belief of natural science.

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**"The Reader", Paris, 2010**

hand painted toned gelatin silver print

Edition: 3/10

An elegant, studious woman seated in an ornate chair reads a book held in gloved hands. On her head is a contraption that is part hat and part bookshelf from which a transparent veil falls over her unclothed shoulders and breasts. Her legs are encased in nylon stockings and high heels. Unconcerned by the python crawling over her leg, the spotted animal nearby, the human skull at her feet or the large speckled bird above her chair, she might be a biblical Eve evolved into a thinking woman who eagerly seeks knowledge and is quite at home with her animal instincts. Witkin says "At times in my new work, I include a caption or an invented story in order to present poetic mystery as explanation for the work. This image is hand painted to resemble a daguerreotype".

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**"White On White", Paris, 2009**

toned gelatin silver print

Edition: 2/10

A voluptuous woman, lovely as a goddess, rests her arms over her head as she reclines majestically in fabric-draped chair. Her pale skin, white as snow, contrasts dramatically with her cascading dark hair and the tendrils of a leafy vine. Two small quail nestle comfortably next to her hips like feathered putti while at the top of the scene hangs a delicate embroidered fabric. The surface of the print is purposefully marred with cracks, gouges and scratches that recall the damaged beauty of photographic plates. Witkin says "The model worked at the gallery representing him in Paris. I wanted to show her quiet mystery by the leaves growing out of her body and by the presence of the two small birds".

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**"Venus in Chains," Paris, 2010**

hand painted toned gelatin silver print

Edition: 1/10

The text below the photograph reads, "Beauty is ten million giant butterflies in Alexander McQueen high heeled shoes, walking over the Brooklyn Bridge reciting arcane prayers to Venus during an eclipse of the Moon". According to Witkin, "The model is a lingerie model in Paris. She has a nineteenth century body. I photographed her at an estate outside Paris in open shade but with studio lights. This image is hand painted to resemble a romantic souvenir. The caption suggests beauty as aesthetic meditation".

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**"Presenter of the 'The End Of Time Awards", New Mexico, 2013**

toned gelatin silver print

Edition: 1/6s

Like a celebrity holding an Oscar trophy, a risqué young woman with a sibylline smile cradles a rustic crucifix in her gloved hands. This is an awards ceremony occurring after a nuclear catastrophe, which has blown us back to 19th century technology. That is why this image resembles a stereo view. The smudges, scratches and scuffmarks show this along with her abbreviated costume, reminiscent of former, post-modern fashion.



**"Good Americans, When They Die, Go To Paris, Bogotá," 2011**

toned gelatin silver print

Edition of 2/6s

Witkin says: "This photograph with collage and painting represents the American romantic association with all things French. Perhaps it is that the French depict their human comédie while always enshrining tragedy at its center. That, too, is something always present in my work."

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**"Execution Of An Extraterrestrial, Petersburg, Virginia, 1864," 2013**  
toned gelatin silver print  
Edition 2/6s

Although the photograph looks authentically historic, the scene of the hanged "extraterrestrial" was constructed in Witkin's back yard. Two dogs and a Confederate soldier on horseback look on beneath the towering trees. In the sky, two spaceships on a reconnaissance mission, add to this crazed anachronism.

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**"Religion of Self-Interest," New Mexico, 2013**

toned gelatin silver print

Edition: 1/6s

Witkin sardonically brings together such unlikely subjects as Adam and Eve, Dutch Masters, Surrealism and global politics. A giant nude man and woman stand in a Sea of Time holding pearl-studded tubes connecting their genitals to their mouths. Witkin is drawing comparisons between our present materialistic age and the egotistical pursuits of vanity. The text below the image provides a humorous justification for indulging in the madness of empire and acquisition.

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**"Love in Post-Modern Oblivion" 2011**

toned gelatin silver print

Edition 1/6s

Two urinals kiss, symbolizing our age of confused love. Scratches on the negative add to the scene's rawness and world-weariness.



**"Our Daily Bread", New Mexico, 2013**  
toned gelatin silver print  
Edition 1/6s

Witkin's droll commentary on what nourishes us physically, mentally and spiritually shows a chained Janus-faced (male-female) figure engorging itself of itself.



**"Woman Christ," New Mexico, 2014**  
toned gelatin silver print  
Edition 1/6s

Here Witkin revises traditional Christian iconography, making us reflect on how we might view "The Crowning with Thorns" by Hieronymus Bosch very differently had Christ been a Woman. In Bosch's painting, Christ is robbed. In Witkin's revision, Christ is a woman whose bra has been pulled down to expose her breasts while her torturers; a Philistine, a Magician, a Mercenary and a Warlord look on with expressions of confusion and lust.

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**"Above the Arcade, Paris", 2013**

Mixed Media Silver Gelatin Print

Edition 2/65

Witkin says the following: "In our time, many are blind to all the transcendent wonder around us. We have been conditioned to be part of a system of economic survival making people accidental tourists in a tabloid culture".

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**"Penis Shoe With Turnips", New Mexico, 2012**

toned gelatin silver print

Edition: 1/6s

With a few simple props Witkin creates a highly amusing and at the same time thought provoking still life of a black stiletto shoe that resembles a penis and testicle placed next to two turnips whose shapes are an earthy parallel of the high heel. Witkin's ability to see connections between such unlikely subjects presents a brilliant, open-ended study of foot fashion, the organic world and sexual politics.

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**"Gathering Poetic Texts for use in a Pastoral Discourse", New Mexico, 2014**

toned gelatin silver print

Edition 1/6s

This image represents a history of inhumanity known as warfare. The individual soldier is merely an expendable asset controlled by the military complex whose propaganda in time converts its atrocities into idyllic myth.

Joel-Peter Witkin has won numerous awards including four National Endowments in Photography and the ICP Infinity Award. His work is in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, CA; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, and many others. He lives near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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For more information please call Andrew Smith Gallery at (505) 984-1234, Fax (505) 983-2428. Visit us online at [www.andrewsmithgallery.com](http://www.andrewsmithgallery.com)

Liz Kay

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