

BARBICAN ART

Andres Serrano

The Curve 4 October – 23 December 2001

Press View – Wednesday 3 October, 12noon-2pm

Barbican Art presents Andres Serrano's first major retrospective in The Curve from 4 October-23 December 2001. The selection of approximately 60 abstract and figurative photographs covers Serrano's work from 1984-1999 and features many works never previously shown in the UK. His larger-than-life, colour photographs include images of the most basic elements of human life: power, religion, sex and death. Whilst many of the artist's images are shocking, they are intended to provoke the viewer into reconsidering their attitudes to pertinent cultural issues of our time.

Andres Serrano was born in New York in 1950. The only son of a Honduran immigrant father and a mother of Afro-Cuban origin, Serrano spent most of his childhood in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York City. His family were devoutly Catholic, and religion played a significant part in his growing up.

After an initial school visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Serrano began to return to the museum on his own and became fascinated by Renaissance painting, in particular its religious iconography. At the age of 15, Serrano dropped out of school with the ambition of becoming an artist, and from 1967-69 he attended the Brooklyn Museum of Art School. During this time, he became involved in drugs and the harsh street life of New York's urban poor which effected his artistic career.

At the age of 28, Serrano gave up drugs and began working as an assistant art director at an advertising agency. During this time, he focused on his own photographic work. In 1989 Serrano was thrown into the public eye following the outrage at the hugely contentious **Piss Christ** (1987) – which features a miniature plastic crucifix submerged in the artist's own urine. In a US congressional session, New York State Senator Alfonse D'Amato tore up a reproduction of the image. The action sparked a huge public debate over the National Endowment for the Arts' funding of 'obscene' art.

Over the last decade, Serrano has continued to explore issues that had a profound impact on him and his values.

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The exhibition is divided into the following sections:

Abstractions in Bodily Fluids

In his early work, **Two Hearts** (1985) and **Locked Brains** (1985) Serrano fills plexiglass tanks with internal organs and blood – suggesting the dual connotation of body and soul. In his **Fluids** (1986) series, which incorporate blood, semen and urine, Serrano is interested in the way they can be used to create vividly colourful abstract images on a large scale. **Milk, Blood** (1986) was the first of many images created exclusively with bodily fluids. These works can be read as portraits of individuals and also as portraits of the era because blood and semen were vectors for the transmission of HIV, thereby becoming symbols of the public's fear of AIDS.

Body and Soul

The first images in the Immersions series were made shortly after Serrano began his bodily fluids series. In these, cultural and religious iconic figurines were submerged in tanks of bodily fluids. He was interested in exploring his personal religious sentiments by deconstructing and reworking the meanings of Catholic icons and the Christian struggle between good and evil. The most well known of these images is **Piss Christ** (1987).

Backstage Portraits

Serrano explored social and political identity in a body of portraits made at the beginning of the 1990s. **The Nomad** (1990) series features images of homeless people photographed during a period of rising homelessness in New York. They are intended to give a positive image of his subjects, each reflecting the character and dignity of the sitters. The artist's interest in political issues is also expressed in his photographs of Native Americans (**Cleveland Indian** 1986), Ku Klux Klan members (**The Klansmen** (1990) and **The Church** (1991).

Death and Destruction

Death is a significant theme in Serrano's work in the 1990s. His photographs taken in the **Morgue** (1992) series includes images of death caused by disease, suicide and murder. These portraits of nameless people are intended to leave the viewer with a sense of morbid curiosity. Serrano challenges society's prevailing attitude towards death by using saturated colour and dramatic composition, scale and lighting. In **Objects of Desire** (1992), he uses another symbol of death – the gun – as an icon. During a period of unprecedented street violence in the early 1990s Serrano forces the viewer to look down the barrel of a gun.

Serrano photographed **The Unborn** (1993) series at the same unidentified pathology lab as the **Morgue** works. His images of fetuses resemble carefully studied specimens in the laboratory. At the time he produced the series, abortion was an especially controversial issue in the USA.

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Material and Sexual Body

The final section of the exhibition looks at three series of works **Budapest** (1994), **A History of Sex** (1996) and **Body Builders** (1999) in which Serrano confronts society's inhibitions about the human body and sexuality. He focuses, in particular, on a range of individuals and sexual acts deemed peculiar by society at large – thus confronting negative social attitudes. In **Budapest**, Serrano includes an image of an elderly couple posing in the nude, challenging preconceptions of age and sexuality. **A History of Sex** explores sexual fantasies which navigate a fine line between the erotic and the obscene. Also portrayed are those with unusual physical attributes, types that are not often associated with sexuality. **Body Builders** portrays Amazonian women who have fashioned their bodies to muscular perfection, challenging perceptions of the female beauty.

The exhibition has been curated by Malin Barth, ~~The Rockmorton Fine Art~~, New York and organised by Bjørn I Follevaag at Foundation3, 14 Hordaland International Art Gallery, Bergen Norway and in co-operation with the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York.

Public Information: 020 7638 8891

Admission: £4; £2.50 concessions

Opening Times: Mon, Wed Fri, Sat 10am-7.30pm;

Tue and Thur 10am-6pm; Sun 12-7pm

Media information/images/interviews:

Lisa Collins, Senior Media Relations Officer

t: 020 7382 7169

f: 020 7382 7107

e: lcollins@barbican.org.uk

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