

Andres Serrano

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Photo 1
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The idea of Andres Serrano is far more frightening than the man himself. Though he himself is a polite, very likeable character who is a little reclusive, the idea of him and his works strike fear into the hearts of many right-minded individuals and can leave many questioning him and his use of photography. If one had to describe his artworks using only one word, many would chose “controversial.” There is no denying their graphic nature, but what many seem to look over is the message and idea behind the graphic displays.

Serrano was born in 1950 to a strict Roman Catholic family. He is half Honduran and half Afro-Cuban, but generally refers to himself as being Hispanic (Wikipedia). Being born into a religious family during the morally influenced 1950s, Serrano was in a constant state of repression. It would be my guess that it was these feelings that lead to his decision to work in such controversial topics.

Though many revere Serrano for his courage and insight, as well as remarkable works, many more, including art critics, have lashed out against him. He is either someone who you love, or you hate. One critic in the New York Times when reviewing his “A History of Sex” showing, wrote, “Andres Serrano’s 15 minutes are up. An artist whose reputation grew, above all, from the enemies he made in public office, he was defended by people who evidently believed that to endorse him was somehow brave or correct, never mind that his photographs of homeless people, among other sensationalistic subjects, were trite and mean” (Kimmelman).

Though many earlier artists embrace the camera and proudly announce that they are photographers, Serrano simply finds the medium as a way to capture what he visualizes. In an interview he said, “I am an artist first and a photographer second...I feel as though I am anti-photography because I have no interest in the medium except as a means to an end. I am interested only in the final image” (Fusco).

Though Serrano's works cover many different genres of photography, he is best known for his portraits and abstract works. Working with bodily fluids, he created a series of beautiful abstract images using liquids like milk, semen and menstrual blood. Without the viewer being told what the fluids are however, chances are the images are too abstract for someone to point out as being blood or semen. Two of his abstract works were used for the cover art of Metallica's *Load* and *Reload* albums. The fluids create a deep sense of color and movement. The bright reds and yellows, the flow of liquid or the shapes made when placing liquid between two panels of glass create works that relate back to the essence of life.

Serrano is sought out for his portrait work. Celebrities and nobody's alike have given all for a chance to be immortalized by his lens. His portraits of the homeless in New York (who consequently are mostly African-American) were coupled with portraits of Ku Klux Klan members from the Southern United States in a showing in 1990. This caused a stir among people who found the works disturbing. Later, he caused even more upset with his "A History of Sex" series. It was mostly portraits of couples engaging in kinky sexual acts, with the occasional single portrait of hermaphrodites or transsexuals, completely nude. The sex acts included someone urinating into another's mouth, bondage couples, or even a woman wearing a strap-on as her man counter part is bent over, waiting. He also took a series of post-mortem portraits, which included people who had drown, been stabbed, burned, or suffocated. One in particular of a young girl with a sheet covering half her face is a particularly popular and endearing photograph. In his latest book, *America*, Serrano compiles portraits of people who make up his view of America. In it are portraits of celebrities, such as Yoko Ono and Snoop Dogg, and ideas, such as a boy scout and the "girl next door." Other portraits are paired to create joint images. Examples are a cowboy covering his face coupled with a proud portrait of a Native American

woman, or a white Virgin Mary holding a dying black Christ contrasted against a photo of a Superman costume on a hanger (Serrano).

Though Serrano is known for all these works and more, he is usually defined by one singular piece of art that to this day is a symbol of all that is wrong (or maybe all that is right?) with art. His breakthrough work is from 1989, titled *Piss Christ*. One doesn't have to even know who Serrano is to know of *Piss Christ* and all that goes along with it. The image itself is of a small plastic crucifix, submerged in a jar of the artist's own urine, and possibly cow blood. Without knowledge from other sources, almost all viewers would be unable to determine that the crucifix is in urine, and the title itself is controversial in its own right. What upset many though, wasn't necessarily the fact that the artist had put the symbol of the Christian church in a jar of his own urine, but that he was paid \$15,000 for it from the National Endowment for the Arts, a government funded organization. When the issue was eventually taken to the Senate by Senators Alfonse M. D'Amato and Jesse Helms, *Piss Christ* had become a battle against the right wing activists and the supporters of free speech. D'Amato was quoted as saying in his address against the work to the presiding officer of the Senate, "This matter does not involve freedom of artistic expression- it does involve the question whether American taxpayers should be forced to support such trash" (Van Camp). Senator Jesse Helms took a particularly vicious stance against *Piss Christ*, and didn't just attack the art, but the artist as well. He said, "I do not know Mr. Andres Serrano, and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an artist, he's a jerk" (Van Camp). The artwork was so offensive to some, that it was physically attacked- not once, but twice. First incident occurred when John Allen Haywood took the photograph off the wall and kicked it. When asked what he would say to Serrano for damaging his work he replied, "I wouldn't like to say nothing to him. I'd just like to punch him in the nose." His actions only caused minor

damage to the frame. The second and much worse attack happened the following day when two teenagers, aged 18 and 16, had a plan set. One started to kick at another of Serrano's prints on display of a Ku Klux Klan member. As security rushed to subdue him, the other teen took out a hammer and proceeded to smash *Piss Christ* with it. He hit it about eight times before being apprehended. Both teens claimed to be against racism and blasphemy when questioned about their actions. The exhibition was removed the following day because of the incidents (Art Crime).

Serrano himself was not trying to cause any sort of controversy when he created *Piss Christ*. Raised a strict Catholic but later no longer considering himself to be a Catholic, he originally felt that his message was lost in the hoopla. Until today, he is still questioned about his decision and his feelings surrounding everything that happened. In 2003 he wrote, "I was appalled by the claim of 'anti-Christian bigotry' that was attributed to my picture... My Catholic upbringing informs this work which helps me to redefine and personalize my relationship with God. My use of such bodily fluids as blood and urine in this context is parallel to Catholicism's obsession with 'the body and blood of Christ'...Is the subject of religion so inviolate that it is not open to discussion? I think not" (Serrano 30-31). What Serrano was doing when creating *Piss Christ* was commentary on current society's use of Jesus, which he called the "billion dollar Christ-for-profit industry" (Serrano 31). It isn't saying that the symbol of the Catholic Church should be dropped in urine; it's saying everyone is responsible for tainting the Catholic Church for corporate profit. It should be noted that art historian and Catholic nun Sister Wendy Beckett voiced her approval of *Piss Christ*, saying that she saw it as a statement on "what we've done to Christ" adding, "It isn't very *good* art, but he's doing his best" (Wikipedia).

Love him or hate him, it's hard to deny that Serrano has had a lasting effect on the art community and continues to do so. As each series of his comes and go- and as the values of all of them increase enormous amounts- he only proves his place in the hall of fame of contemporary art, and well as the hall of fame (or shame?) of controversial artists.

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