



Joel-Peter Witkin

Joel-Peter Witkin (born September 13, 1939) is an American photographer who lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. His work often deals with themes such as death, corpses (and sometimes dismembered portions thereof), often featuring ornately decorated photographic models, including people with dwarfism, transgender and intersex persons, as well as people living with a range of physical features. Witkin is often praised for presenting these figures in poses which celebrate and honor their physiques in an elevated, artistic manner. Witkin's complex *tableaux vivants* often recall religious episodes or classical paintings.^[1]

Biography

Witkin was born to a Jewish father and Roman Catholic mother. His twin brother, Jerome Witkin,^[2] and son Kersen Witkin, are also painters. Witkin's parents divorced when he was young because they were unable to overcome their religious differences.^[2] He attended grammar school at Saint Cecelia's in Brooklyn and went on to Grover Cleveland High School.

In 1961 Witkin enlisted in the United States Army, with the intention of capturing war photography during the Vietnam War. However due to scheduling conflicts, Witkin never saw combat in Vietnam. Witkin spent his military service at Fort Hood, Texas, and was mostly in charge of Public Information and classified photos.^[3]

In 1967, he became the official photographer for City Walls Inc. He attended Cooper Union in New York, where he studied sculpture, attaining a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1974. Columbia University granted him a scholarship for graduate school, but his Master of Fine Arts degree is from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.^[4]

Influences and themes

Witkin claims that his vision and sensibility spring from an episode he witnessed as a young child, an automobile accident in front of his house in which a little girl was decapitated.

Joel-Peter Witkin



Witkin in 2009

Born	September 13, 1939 ^[1] <u>Brooklyn, New York City</u>
Occupation	Photographer
Family	<u>Jerome Witkin</u> (identical twin brother)
Website	<u>www.joelpeterwitkin.com</u> (<u>http://www.joelpeterwitkin.com</u>)

It happened on a Sunday when my mother was escorting my twin brother and me down the steps of the tenement where we lived. We were going to church. While walking down the hallway to the entrance of the building, we heard an incredible crash mixed with screaming and cries for help. The accident involved three cars, all with families in them. Somehow, in the confusion, I was no longer holding my mother's hand. At the place where I stood at the curb, I could see something rolling from one of the overturned cars. It stopped at the curb where I stood. It was the head of a little girl. I bent down to touch the face, to speak to it – but before I could touch it someone carried me away^[5]

He says his family's difficulties also influenced his work. His favorite artist is Giotto. His photographic techniques draw on early Daguerreotypes and on the work of E. J. Bellocq.^[1]

Those of Witkin's works which use corpses have had to be created in Mexico to get around restrictive US laws. Because of the transgressive nature of the contents of his images, his works have been labelled exploitative and have sometimes shocked public opinion.^[1]

His techniques include scratching the negative, bleaching or toning the print, and using a hands-in-the-chemicals printing technique. This experimentation began after seeing a 19th-century ambrotype of a woman and her ex-lover who had been scratched from the frame.^[1]

Joel-Peter Witkin's photograph *Sanitarium* inspired the final presentation of Alexander McQueen's Spring/Summer 2001 collection based on avian imagery, the walls of another box within the faux psychiatric ward collapsed to reveal a startling *tableau vivant*: a reclining, masked nude breathing through a tube and surrounded by fluttering moths.

Documentary films

In 2011, filming began on the feature-length documentary, *Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye*. The film, directed by Thomas Marino, examines Witkin's life and photographs. Along with interviews with Witkin, the film includes interviews from gallery owners, artists, photographers, and scholars who share insight into the impact of Witkin's work and influence on modern culture. The film was released in 2013. It will be part of the permanent collections at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, and the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile in Santiago, Chile.^[6]

Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye was first publicly shown in Santiago, Chile at the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile in 2013, as part of the opening of the exhibition, *Vanitas: Joel-Peter Witkin en Chile*.^[7]

In 2017, a documentary about him and his brother, Jerome Witkin, was made by Trisha Ziff, entitled *Witkin and Witkin*.^[8]

Publications

- *Gods of Heaven and Earth*. Twelvetreets, 1989. ISBN 9780942642391.
- *Joel-Peter Witkin, Twelve Photographs in Gravure* (1994)

- *Harms Way: Lust and Madness, Murder and Mayhem*. Twin Palms, 1994. ISBN 9780944092286.
- *Joel-Peter Witkin: a Retrospective*. Scalo: 1995. ISBN 978-1881616207.

Exhibitions

Solo exhibitions

- *Joel-Peter Witkin: Forty Photographs*, [Brooklyn Museum](#), Brooklyn, New York, 1986;^[9] [La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art](#), San Diego, CA, 1987^[10]
- *Vanitas: Joel-Peter Witkin en Chile*, [Biblioteca Nacional de Chile](#), Santiago, 2013. *Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye* documentary premiered at the opening of this exhibition.^[7]

Group exhibitions

- *Bodies*, [Fotografiska Museum](#), Stockholm, 2010^[11]
- *Heaven or Hell*, [Bibliothèque nationale de France](#), Paris, 2012^[12]

Collections

Witkin's work is held in the following permanent collections:

- [Art Institute of Chicago](#), Chicago, IL: 7 prints (as of 28 March 2023)^[13]
- [High Museum of Art](#), Atlanta, GA: 1 print (as of 28 March 2023)^[14]
- [J. Paul Getty Museum](#), Los Angeles, CA: 7 prints (as of 28 March 2023)^[15]
- [Library of Congress](#), Washington, D.C.^{[16][17]}
- [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), Los Angeles, CA: 6 prints (as of 28 March 2023)^[18]
- [Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía](#), Madrid, Spain: 3 prints (as of 28 March 2023)^[19]
- [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#), Philadelphia, PA: 7 prints (as of 28 March 2023)^[20]
- [Princeton Art Museum](#), Princeton, NJ: 24 works (as of 28 March 2023)^[21]
- [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#), San Francisco, CA: 4 prints (as of 28 March 2023)^[22]
- [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#), Washington, D.C.: 2 prints (as of 28 March 2023)^[23]
- [Stedelijk Museum](#), Amsterdam, Holland^[24]
- [Whitney Museum](#), New York: 1 print (as of 26 March 2023)^[25]

Films about Witkin

- *Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye* (2013) – feature-length documentary directed by Thomas Marino

- *Witkin and Witkin* (2017) – feature-length documentary directed by Trisha Ziff, about Witkin and his brother Jerome^[26]

Notes

1. "Joel-Peter Witkin" (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/joel-peter-witkin>). www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org.
2. "Brothers Jerome and Joel-Peter Witkin and their 'Twin Visions'" (<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-jerome-joel-peter-witkin-twin-visions-20140822-story.html>). *Los Angeles Times*. August 26, 2014. Retrieved March 27, 2023.
3. "Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye (Bonus Scene: Vietnam/JFK)" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtylzliMJN0>). December 22, 2013. Archived (<https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/youtube/20211212/PtylzliMJN0>) from the original on December 12, 2021 – via YouTube.
4. "Etherton Gallery - Joel-Peter Witkin" (https://web.archive.org/web/20111029003218/http://ethertongallery.com/html/artist_detail.php?recordID=10). www.ethertongallery.com. Archived from the original (http://www.ethertongallery.com/html/artist_detail.php?recordID=10) on October 29, 2011.
5. Storck, Jeanne (2001). "Band of Outsiders: Williamsburg's Renegade Artists" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070928043826/http://www.billburg.com/localcolor/content.cfm?id=134>). [Billburg.com](http://www.billburg.com). Archived from the original (<http://www.billburg.com/localcolor/content.cfm?id=134>) on September 28, 2007. Retrieved August 19, 2007.
6. Lowe, Juli (December 2, 2011). "Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye" (<https://cyclopsblog.com/2011/12/02/joel-peter-witkin-an-objective-eye/>).
7. [1] (http://www.mnba.cl/Vistas_Publicas/publicNoticias/noticiasPublicDetalle.aspx?idNoticia=43563) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20130812024853/http://www.mnba.cl/Vistas_Publicas/publicNoticias/noticiasPublicDetalle.aspx?idNoticia=43563) August 12, 2013, at the Wayback Machine
8. Gould, Rachel (June 15, 2018). "A Poignant Documentary Examines the Tension Between Photographer Joel-Peter Witkin and His Identical Twin, Painter Jerome Witkin" (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/documentary-film-witkin-witkin-1301411>). *Artnet News*. Retrieved November 5, 2021.
9. "Brooklyn Museum" (<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/1019>). www.brooklynmuseum.org. Retrieved March 27, 2023.
10. McDonald, Robert (March 21, 1987). "Art Review : witkin's perverse photos fail as art" (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-03-21-ca-4468-story.html>). *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved March 27, 2023.
11. [2] (<http://en.fotografiska.eu/The-Museum/Exhibitions/Bodies>) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20100516004016/http://en.fotografiska.eu/The-Museum/Exhibitions/Bodies>) May 16, 2010, at the Wayback Machine
12. "Espace presse" (<https://www.bnf.fr/fr/presse>). *BnF – Site institutionnel*. April 4, 2023.
13. "Joel Peter Witkin" (<https://www.artic.edu/artists/42867/joel-peter-witkin>). *The Art Institute of Chicago*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
14. "You searched for Joel-Peter%20Witkin" (<https://high.org/search/Joel-Peter%20Witkin/>). *High Museum of Art*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
15. "Joel-Peter Witkin (The J. Paul Getty Museum Collection)" (<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/person/104N1V>). *The J. Paul Getty Museum Collection*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
16. "The raft of George W. Bush" (<https://lccn.loc.gov/2012645135>). *Library of Congress*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.

17. witkin, joel-peter. "Search results from Witkin, Joel-Peter" (<https://www.loc.gov/search/?all=T rue&fa=contributor:witkin,+joel-peter&st=list>). *Library of Congress*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
18. "Joel-Peter Witkin - LACMA Collections" (<https://collections.lacma.org/node/165452>). *collections.lacma.org*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
19. "Witkin, Joel-Peter" (<https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/coleccion/autor/witkin-joel-peter>). *www.museoreinasofia.es*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
20. "Search" (<https://philamuseum.org/search>). *philamuseum.org*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
21. "Search the Collection - Princeton University Art Museum" (<https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/search/collections?artistList=%5B%2522Joel-Peter%2520Witkin%2522%5D>). *artmuseum.princeton.edu*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
22. "Witkin, Joel Peter" (<https://www.sfmoma.org/artist/joel-peter-witkin/>). *SFMOMA*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
23. "Joel-Peter Witkin - Smithsonian American Art Museum" (<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/joel-peter-witkin-5455>). *americanart.si.edu*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
24. Grrr.nl. "Joel Peter Witkin" (<https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/collectie/maker/9523-joel-peter-witkin>). *www.stedelijk.nl*. Retrieved March 28, 2023.
25. "Joel-Peter Witkin" (<https://whitney.org/artists/3901>). *whitney.org*. Retrieved March 26, 2023.
26. " "Witkin and Witkin" -The wit of it all [MOVIE REVIEW]" (<https://easyreadernews.com/witkin-and-witkin-the-wit-of-it-all-movie/>). *Easy Reader News*. September 29, 2021. Retrieved March 28, 2023.

External links

- Official website (<https://www.brucesilverstein.com/artists/joel-peter-witkin>)
 - Joel-Peter Witkin: Tribute to a Genius (<https://www.correnticalde.com/joelpeterwitkin/>) at *correnticalde.com*
 - Photographs by Witkin (<http://www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/witkin2/>) at *zonezero.com*
 - More photographs by Witkin (http://www.art-forum.org/z_Witkin/gallery.htm) at *art-forum.org*
 - 21st Editions (https://web.archive.org/web/20110721201200/http://www.21stphotography.com/plat_witkin3books.html) *The Journal of Joel-Peter Witkin* at *21stphotography.com*
 - transgressive Art (<https://mathilda-herve.blogspot.com/2009/12/transgressive-art-why-are-we-as-society.html>) essay at *mathilda-herve.blogspot.com*
 - Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye (<https://web.archive.org/web/20120308053944/http://witkinmovie.com/>) at *witkinmovie.com*
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