



Joel-Peter Witkin, *Portrait of Nan*, 1984
© Joel-Peter Witkin
Cliché : Michel Urtado
BnF, Estampes et photographie



Joel-Peter Witkin, *Prudence, Paris*, 1996
© Joel-Peter Witkin, © Courtesy Galerie Baudoin-Lebon
Collection Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris
Cliché Patrice Maurin-Berthier



Joel-Peter Witkin, *The Paris Triad: the Reader*, 2011
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Cliché Malala Andrialavidrazana

Joel-Peter Witkin. Heaven or Hell

Joel-Peter Witkin, born in New York in 1939, is at the height of his career. His personal mythology, his taste for classical art, and his bold ideas make him a unique artist in the international photography scene. The exhibition proposes a dialogue between Witkin's photographs and precious prints selected from the library's collection.

"The encounter between the sacred and profane that underlies Witkin's work finds parallels in the work of the great printmakers. The exhibition takes a new slant on the work of this visionary artist, an heir to dark romanticism." Bruno Racine, chairman of the BnF.

Witkin calls himself a photographer but he is also a draughtsman and a master printmaker.

He prefers studio photography, meticulously staging amateur models who are either classically beautiful or deformed. Without falling into morbid voyeurism, he reflects on the way the body is represented, exploring all aspects of the flesh, including dereliction, death, and extreme erotic practices.

Before he picks up his camera, he makes precise preliminary sketches. Witkin takes few photographs and makes only a limited number of his sumptuous prints. His rather iconoclastic printing methods require perfect mastery of atypical procedures: corrections on the negative, scratching, tearing, abrasion, collage, highlights added with paint or wax polish. Witkin exhibits a subject, certainly, but he also exhibits the very flesh of the photographic medium.

His prodigious artistic culture and his fluency in its language are apparent in a vast deployment ranging from ancient mythology to American pop culture, from religious iconography to fin-de-siècle painting.

Whether due to deliberate reinterpretation of the classics or a subtle impregnation, these references to the great works of painting or sculpture are a constant in his work. His portraits, nudes or still lifes are all based on two fundamental themes: Eros and the Sacred.

The notions of death, suffering, ecstasy, vanity and incarnation feed his imagination and are subtly interwoven throughout his work. The choices made from the BnF's print collection – Dürer, Goya, Ensor, Picasso, Rops and other great printmakers – are evidence of that. Forty-five engravings from the Renaissance to the twentieth century are displayed in counterpoint to eighty-five of Witkin's photographs, giving visitors an opportunity to reflect on the way forms and themes are manifested in the photographer's oeuvre.

The exhibition was made possible by loans from the Musée national d'art moderne, the Fonds national d'art contemporain, the Fonds régional d'art contemporain in Lorraine, the Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain in Strasbourg, the Maison européenne de la photographie and by the participation of the Baudoin Lebon gallery (Paris).

Sponsored by Champagne Louis Roederer

Exhibition

Joel-Peter Witkin. Heaven or Hell

27 March - 1 July 2012

BnF Richelieu

5, rue Vivienne, Paris Ile

Galerie Mansart

Tuesday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Sunday, 12 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Closed on Mondays and public holidays

Admission: € 7; concession: € 5

Bookings FNAC at 0892 684 694 (€ 0.34 inc. tax /min) and on www.fnac.com

Curator

Anne Biroleau, General curator of the prints and photographs Department of the BnF

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Paris Book Fair 2012

Joel-Peter Witkin will be at the BnF stand at the Salon du livre in Paris to sign the book from 3 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Saturday 17 March 2012 (Paris, Porte de Versailles, Stand H24).

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