

BRUCE SILVERSTEIN

For Immediate Release

Joel-Peter Witkin: The Early Works

December 1 – January 14, 2022

*“What is new in photography has always been new vision.
A new vision that brings truth to formal, social, and cultural reality.”*

- Joel-Peter Witkin

Bruce Silverstein Gallery is pleased to present *Joel-Peter Witkin: The Early Works*, an exhibition consisting of twenty-four vintage photographic prints by one of the most idiosyncratic and recognizable photographers of the 20th century. With images spanning 1950 to 1978 - many of which are unique and have not yet been displayed - this exhibition offers the viewer rare insight into the origins of the artist's innovative and distinctive vision.

Joel-Peter Witkin and his identical twin brother- notable painter Jerome Witkin- were born in 1939, in Brooklyn, New York. Early in the artist's life, he witnessed a gruesome car accident in which a little girl was decapitated. This traumatic event surely left an indelible mark on the artist's psyche and would permeate all aspects of his creative vision and sensibility throughout his life.

Witkin's interest in photography began at age 15, after the artist received his first camera and enrolled in an introductory photo course. In these early photographs, one begins to see the origins of the artist's interest in the surreal and experimental, as illustrated in *Puerto Rican Boy*, 1956, created just two years later at the age of 17.



Puerto Rican Boy, Gelatin silver print, printed c. 1956

Raised in a deeply religious Catholic home, his profound admiration for works of early Renaissance painter Giotto contributed to his lifelong interest in using the tableau to explore religious themes, as foreshadowed in the photograph *Christ, Coney Island*, 1967. *Still Life (In an Air Shaft)*, 1967 would be the

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first ever still life made by Witkin. It is one of the earliest works to feature the remains of a living life form, which would later evolve to include not just animals, but also human cadavers, body parts, and fetuses.

By all accounts, Witkin is a master printer. His works often feature markings and manipulations created by the artist both in the dark room and directly onto the print afterward. In addition, Witkin is renowned in the medium for his work in encaustic, an ancient process where a painting, and in his case a photograph, is coated with a mix of pigment and hot wax. For Witkin, printmaking is an essential element of the process; the resulting image is "the final form of all the hope and desire that went before it." Featured in this exhibition, *Star of David Dancer*, 1963, the artist's first work manipulated in printing, as well *Olympia*, 1974, an example of encaustic work.



Still Life (In An Airshaft), Gelatin silver print mounted on board, printed c. 1967



Christ, Coney Island, Gelatin silver print, printed c. 1967

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By 1981, the year Joel-Peter Witkin received his MFA from the University of New Mexico, all the elements and themes of his distinctive style would be in place. As the artist states, "this early time was devoted to seeing the ideas in ME and testing how my images could explain the world." For the next 40 years, Witkin's images would continue dismantling our preconceived notions of sexuality, beauty, life, and death.

In 1996, Joel-Peter Witkin was given a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. His work has been widely exhibited around the world, including such prestigious institutions as the National Gallery of Canada; Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris; Guggenheim Bilbao; Moscow House of Photography; ARCO Madrid; Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago; Houston Center for Photography; Israel Museum; Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan; the Whitney Museum in New York; and the Louvre in Paris where he is currently part of the exhibition titled, *Les Choses*.

Witkin's works are included in numerous public and private collections worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California; the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Centre George Pompidou, Paris; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; George Eastman House, Rochester; Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Some of his most important published works are the monograph *Joel-Peter Witkin (2007)*, *Joel-Peter Witkin Disciple & Master (2000)*, *Joel Peter Witkin, A Retrospective (1995)*, *Harms Way (1994)*, *Joel-Peter Witkin, Twelve Photographs in Gravure (1994)*, *Gods of Earth and Heaven (1989)*, and *Joel-Peter Witkin: Forty Photographs (1985)*. The artist currently lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he continues to make photographs.

Joel-Peter Witkin: The Early Works opens Thursday, December 1, with a reception from 6 - 8 pm. For more information, please contact inquiries@brucesilverstein.com or go to www.brucesilverstein.com.



Woman Breast-feeding an Eel, Gelatin silver print, printed c. 1979