

Keitelman Gallery

JOEL-PETER WITKIN

LOVE AND OTHER REASONS

24.01.2014 – 29.03.2014

Opening (6-9pm) Thursday 23.01.14
Tuesday - Saturday 12 to 6pm
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Joel-Peter Witkin was born in New York in 1939, son of a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant father and a Catholic Italian mother. His brother Jerome Paul Witkin is a successful painter. He has one son.

Witkin's parents divorced when he was young, as a result of religious differences. After attending Saint Cecilia primary school in Brooklyn, Joel-Peter Witkin went to Grover Cleveland High School. Later, as part of his military service, he worked as a military photographer, which gave him an introduction to the technical side of photography. He was not – contrary to popular belief – sent to fight in the Vietnam War, which was then raging, but was sent to document life on military bases around Europe, specifically reporting on accidents and suicides.

After demobilisation, Witkin studied visual arts at Cooper Union, where he gained his Bachelor of Arts. In 1974 he received a scholarship from Columbia University. He later moved to Albuquerque (New-Mexico) – where he still lives today – and enrolled at the University of New Mexico, where he received his Master of Fine Arts.

This marked the beginning of his career as a photographer. Witkin describes in detail the origins of his work as a photographer and the way in which he began to focus on narrative as well as the use of unconventional models, whom he found through small ads or chance encounters. One story tells of the time he spent with a freak show and the friendships that he made with its stars. It was during this period that he began to develop his particular style of shooting and printing. He still only takes a small number of shots and develops his own prints, in limited numbers.

Although his photographic practice in no way resembles that of a reporter or a documentary photographer, he travels a great deal. Sensitive to the differences between different cultures and the resulting different atmospheres, he takes photographs all around the world, always according to his unchanging practice of a strict and rigorous staging which he arranges with great attention to detail.

Witkin is immensely erudite and his knowledge of both the vocabulary and the themes of Western art, both classical and modern, is visible in his choice of subjects, settings and the way he frames his shots. Part of his work is based on the reinterpretation of classical painters, such as Goya, Courbet and Manet; whether or not this influence is openly stated in a work's title or implicit, it is a constant theme in his work.

Witkin does not use digital technology either to take or to manipulate his images. When he makes collages, they are made by hand, done directly using the final print. The image is planned right from the beginning and is often prepared with the help of preliminary sketches done in pencil or charcoal. His work, so distinctive that his pictures are immediately identifiable, is done during the printing process. He uses various techniques that he has made his own, such as scratching, tearing, rubbing the negative, use of filters and other techniques applied in the stage between the camera and the enlarger. He is unafraid to take any liberty when he prints his pictures. He goes into the darkroom and works relentlessly until he achieves the effect he is looking for. This is a crucial point, because where many photographers delegate this phase of their work to a professional printer, Witkin considers it centrally important to the material process of creation. What Witkin gives us is a 'subject' but also the physical nature of the photograph itself as an object. What Manet did for painting, that is, show beyond themes and stories the importance of the material and its medium, Witkin does for the photograph.