

Grotesquerie.

Grotesque, macabre forms of art have been in existence for centuries. Often overlooked for being weird, unappealing to the human eye, and unsettling to perceive in any way other than strange. This exhibition, Grotesquerie, aims to shed light upon the beauty that can be seen within the macabre, and the uncanny. It aims to strike your morbid curiosity and raises the question of why these forms of art are shunned by the world. Is it the fear of the unknown? The resistance to the limits being pushed?

Grotesquerie displays the work of the likes of Stephen Gill, Joel Peter Witkin, and William Mortensen. These artists' works are a fine example of the idea of what the world of art often views as unsettling and dislikeable, are beautifully crafted and have deeper meanings that can only be understood if truly taken in. This exhibition will touch upon the semiotics within photography, how photographs convey meaning and evoke emotions. The field of semiotics within photography has been significantly contributed to by Roland Barthes, a French literary critic and philosopher. His work explores the symbolism within photography, and the effect this has on the viewer i.e. the viewer's interpretation of an image. By creating grotesque photography, a photographer can evoke a range of emotions that go beyond the literal meaning of the images. The grotesque elements of these photographs can serve as commentary on societal norms, cultural attitudes, and the human condition, which pushes the boundaries on what is seen as acceptable in visual representation.

Joel Peter Witkin.



Joel Peter Witkin, *Harvest*, 1984.



Joel Peter Witkin, *Anna Akhmatova*, 2003.

Joel Peter Witkin's work is notorious within the genre of art that is macabre and death centred. His most notorious works were produced mostly in Mexico, displaying various corpses and body parts. Witkin was able to get away with such a thing legally within Mexico, and he'd worked out a deal with a hospital in Mexico City that let him sort through, and use the body parts, of unclaimed, anonymous corpses, to use in his

artworks. Witkin's work is known to portray the interest in the grotesque in a dreamlike, almost fantastical way. His photographs challenge conventional beauty standards and confront viewers with the uncomfortable realities of the human condition.

Semiotics in photography involves the study of signs and symbols within an image, and how these signs and symbols can create meaning. In Witkin's work, the subjects themselves become signs, where they represent themes of mortality, suffering, and the grotesque. The settings, the props, and the poses, further contribute to the semiotic meaning of the images, where they often reference art history and religious photography.

In the first image seen above, 'Harvest', the way in which the severed head and the body parts are arranged references the classical arrangements of still life paintings, yet the gruesome content subverts the traditional beauty associated with the genre. 'Harvest' can be interpreted as commentary on death, decay, and the transience of life. The semiotics here rely on the juxtaposition of familiar artistic techniques and forms with shocking imagery. This image was created in 1984, a time when issues like AIDS and body horror were becoming more prominent in cultural consciousness, which could have influenced the themes.

The second photograph pictured, 'Anna Akhmatova', references the famous Russian poet, but Witkin's interpretation presents the viewer with a fragmented, distorted version of her image. This is seen as a reflection on memory, identity, and the impact that time has on the human form. The semiotics in this photograph involve the deconstruction of a well-known figure, challenging the viewers perception and understanding of her.

Both images address semiotics by using visual language to convey complex ideas about mortality, identity, and representation. The challenge the viewer to look beyond the surface and engage with the deeper meanings embedded within the image.

In an interview, where he was asked the connections between 'freaks', religion, and art history influences he has found within his work, Witkin responded;

"First, I'm not comfortable with the title 'freaks.' it's a terrible, sensationalistic term. Thank God there are no more Freak Shows. When I was in my teens, I would go to Conny island with my brother to photograph people. The barker, the man that tries to get people in the show, was telling a lot of people, "unless you live good lives, your children are going to look like the people in here." it was a cruel, stupid, primitive thing to say.

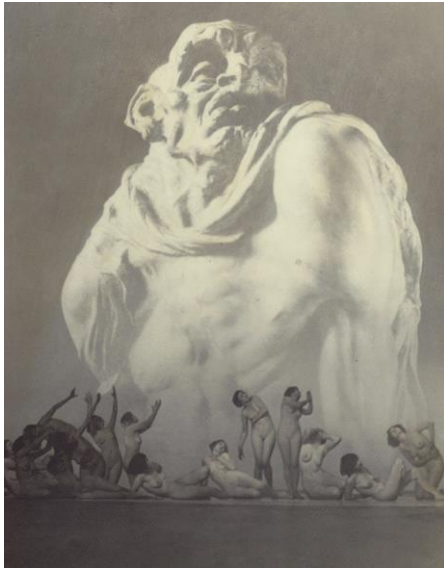
I can't be cornered, like many artists – there is no A, B, C, D, to my work. Some artists deal in cyclical things, but for me, it's never been that clear, because I photograph people who have all different characteristics and consciousness. I never know who I'm

going to meet. I work with those people – I don't use them. The same thing applies to human remains or inanimate objects.

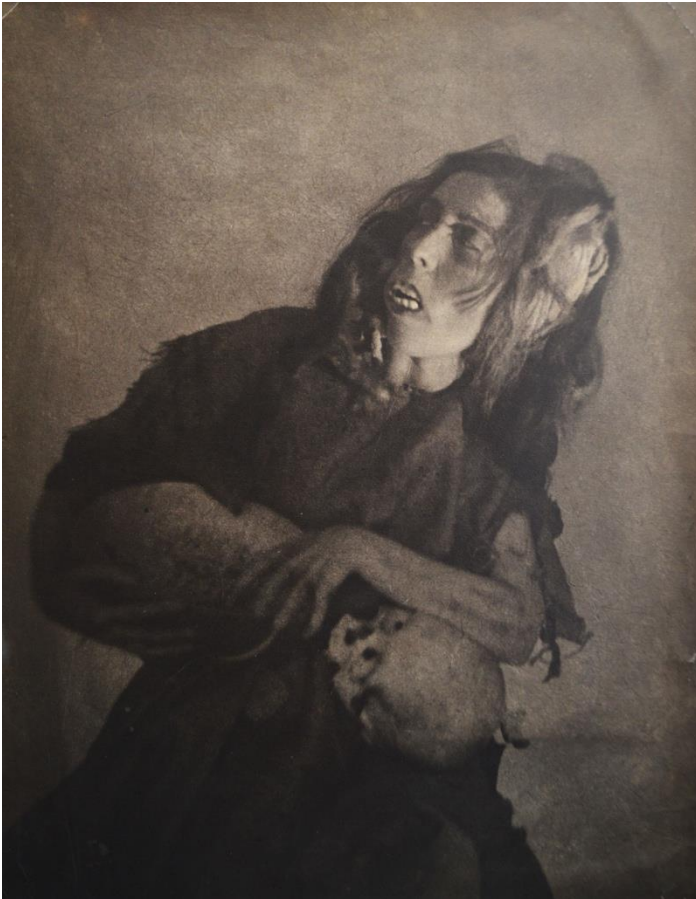
My work isn't linear; it's more of a phenomenology.”

[The famous photographer Joel Peter Witkin's interview | THE PHOTO ACADEMY](#)

William Mortensen.



William Mortensen, *Monster Brains*.



William Mortensen, *The Old Hag*, 1928.

To create these images, Mortensen used techniques like manipulation, retouching, and theatrical staging to create scenes that evoke horror and the bizarre. He challenges conventional notions of beauty and realism. The subjects, props, and settings are carefully chosen to convey specific ideas and emotions. The use of light and shadow, as well as the manipulated textures, add to the semiotic complexity, and created layers of interpretation. Mortensen's grotesque techniques saw him banished from 'official' histories of the art form. To photographers such as Ansel Adams, Mortensen was seen as enemy number 1, with Adams even being known to describe him as 'the anti-Christ'.

In the first image pictured, '*Monster Brains*', the grotesque element is evident in the depiction of a monster with oversized, exposed brains, which symbolises the monstrous or abnormal aspects of human intellect. The photograph can be interpreted as a commentary on the darker sides of human nature, or the potential for intellectual perversion. The semiotics rely on the shocking and unnatural imagery to provoke a strong emotional response.

The second photograph, '*The Old Hag*', depicts an exaggerated image of an elderly woman, emphasising her aged and grotesque features. This image can be seen as a reflection on the fear of aging, the decay of the body, and the societal attitudes that are

shown towards the elderly. The semiotics in this image involve the use of caricature and exaggeration to challenge beauty standards and present the viewers with the unpleasant realities of aging.

Both photographs created by William Mortensen use visual language to convey complex ideas on the darker aspects of human nature, the fear of aging, and the grotesque.

Stephen Gill.



Stephen Gill, *Please Notify the Sun*, 2020.

Stephen Gill's photography often involves layering and embedding found objects, creating a multi-dimensional representation of a place. In Gill's work, the embedded objects act as signs, representing the history, ecology, and human presence of a location. The layering technique adds complexity, inviting viewers to decide the various elements and their relationships.

In this body of work, Gill photographed a decaying fish over the period of 10 weeks. These images act as signs of time, the interaction between nature and organic material, and transformation. The images address semiotics by creating a visual language that speaks to the interconnectedness of organic decay, nature, and the environment. Gill said,

"It was in 2017 that I began to have an inkling that a single fish might contain a universe of infinite proportions and how amazing a journey within its body could be."

These 3 photographers are great examples of semiotics within photography, with Witkin's work exploring symbolic representation and the subversion of cultural norms, Mortensen's work for studying deliberate construction of meaning, and Gill's work for understanding the layering of signs through elemental interaction.

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