

## Performing Amputation: The Photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin

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### **Abstract:**

The contemporary photography of Joel-Peter Witkin takes center stage in *Performing Amputation*. Many of his photographs feature amputee models in excessive and theatrical displays. The compositions recall, parody, and strategically corrupt traditions of bodily representation found in classical and neoclassical sculpture, ornamental motifs, the art historical still life, medical exhibits and photographs, and the early modern freak show. With the amputee body and amputating techniques, Witkin dismembers and sutures together multiple visual traditions. Witkin takes on the history of art and photography and effectively performs amputation on their visual conventions as he performs literal surgery on his images. His personal touch on the photographic plate and print perverts the assumed neutrality of the photographic gaze. The camera has been used as an instrument of medicine and of the gaze historically, a history in which Witkin's images intervene. I argue that Witkin's controversial and excessive photographs disrupt medical models for disability by presenting disabled and disfigured bodies as objects of art, design, and aesthetic magnificence, particularly because of their curious and spectacular, abnormal bodies. His camera both references and enacts images of objectification by displaying the body as an object. However, Witkin's amputee and other disfigured subjects elect and even request to be photographed; they therefore collaborate with Witkin in their production as photographic spectacles. As stages on which these models perform, the photographs may serve as venues for progressive self-exhibition and unashamed parading of the so-called abnormal body.

**Keywords:** Photography; Performance; Amputation; Theatre; Art

### **Article:**

The contemporary photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin are best described as corporeal *tableau-vivants* that showcase body difference, taboo, and abnormality. Critics have characterized Witkin's controversial work as too perverse, too blasphemous, and too grotesque, and for many, his framing of disability is one of his most offensive orchestrations.<sup>1</sup> Many such works feature amputee models and bodies in pieces in excessive and theatrical displays. These images of amputation are most extreme at the site of carnal extremities. In this paper, I explain how Witkin's work with amputees performs amputation, in subject matter, formal techniques, and the theatricality of the models.

Witkin's photographs of amputees, in which he removes limbs photographically or fetishizes the sites of amputation visually, offer a superlative example of how his photographic methods dismember histories of bodily display. Witkin dissects and sutures together multiple visual genres, such as art history, popular culture, pornography, theatre, medical exhibits and photography, and freak show displays. He targets the visual conventions with which these genres display the body and, specifically, how they produce the disabled or -abnormal|| body as spectacle.

Performing amputation to his plates and prints, Witkin manipulates the flesh of his photographs in pseudo-surgical techniques. Witkin —doctors|| the images to pervert the assumed objectivity of photography in general and clinical photography in particular. The camera has been used as an instrument of medicine and of the gaze since its nineteenth-century invention, a history in which Witkin's images intervene. I argue that Witkin's

controversial and excessive photographs disrupt medical models for disability by staging amputees as objects of art, design, and aesthetic magnificence, particularly because of their curious and spectacular, abnormal bodies. Through Witkin's lens, the medical gaze proves to be infected with voyeurism, desire, and repulsion. His blatant and significantly aestheticized objectification of amputee bodies elucidates the more deceptive objectification practices of clinical photography especially, in which amputees and so-called disfigured bodies were frequently represented and medically pathologized. Witkin poignantly pairs the conventions of medical imagery for diagnosing bodily difference with the traditions and motifs of classical art, which serve as a benchmark for ideal physical beauty in Western culture.

I will compare Witkin's images of amputees with classical and neoclassical sculpture, ornamental motifs, the art historical still life, medical exhibits, the early modern freak show, the performative self-portraits of Frida Kahlo, and the work of contemporary disabled artists to elucidate the layers of body representation and exhibitionism in his work. Further, these comparisons frame the many means by which Witkin, his photographs, and his models perform amputation. As stages on which his amputee models perform their corporeal brilliance, the photographs may serve as venues for progressive self-exhibition and unashamed parading of bodily difference from the norm.

Witkin's works foreground notions of photography as performative. From the 19th century to the present, photography has functioned to document performative media such as body art, installation, process and conceptual art, happenings, and oral poetry. Performance theorist Peggy Phelan (35-37) argues that all photography is performative, as subjects perform before the camera and perform the scenes they imagine the photographer is seeing or desires to see for the end image. Theorist Roland Barthes states that photography is essentially theatrical. Both Phelan and Barthes discuss the complicated dynamics of presence and absence of the body/self in photography. For Phelan, photography implicates the -real through the presence of live bodies and, like performance, orchestrates an exchange of gazes between the viewer and the body depicted. However, Phelan points out that representations are always mediated and conceal more about their subject than they reveal, such that photography depicts only the surface of the body/self in its depiction of a staged, performative image. Barthes states that photography has an indexical relationship to its subject, containing the presence or trace of body in the image; however, because photographs bear only this deceptive trace, and never fulfill the real presence of the body (for example, of a loved one), Barthes theorizes that photographs embody absence and loss.

Performance theorist Rebecca Schneider describes this -live aspect of performance and photography as engaging an explicit body - a literal, material body that complicates purely symbolic associations. The corporeal bodies of Witkin's amputees similarly disrupt symbolic associations of fragmentation; their absence of limbs is -real and yet gratuitously fictionalized by the photographs' excessive displays. These works frame Barthes's notion that photographs are always fragmented, amputated, already partial, and inevitably -unwhole. For Barthes, photography's withholding, -lack of whole narratives, and inevitable absences create intrigue, mystery, and excitement and make all photographs infinitely sensual and abundant with meaning. Further, Barthes states that photographs are oversignified because they defy divisional categories, crossing contexts and genres. Performance theorist Henry Sayre likewise characterizes photography as oversignified. Sayre (59-60) uses the phrase -exceeds the frame to describe contemporary photography's, especially portraiture's, characteristic of implying or projecting meaning that goes beyond the image— beyond language, facts, and narrative, and into viewer's subjective, interpretive space. Witkin's photographs, in their excessive and explicit displays, exceed their own frames. Sayre states (264): -The (film) still, the photograph, the fragment all reject the finality of \_meaning'. The amputee bodies Witkin features reject any closed or fixed interpretation of seeing and representing the body, particularly the amputee body, in visual culture.

### **Exceeding the Frame**

Joel-Peter Witkin's photograph *Humor and Fear* (1999) (Figure 1) stages a female amputee model in a theatrical, pseudo-antique scene. The image crosses and combines multiple genres for body display: artistic, theatrical, medical, and freakish. She is posed nude on a pedestal or chest that resembles a classical sarcophagus

with a figurative sculptural. She leans on one arm and hip, with her other arm raised to display a small bowl. Her posture is unnatural for a portrait subject, as her body becomes embedded in an allegorical program, like the ones carved in relief her pedestal. Surrounded by vegetal props that resemble a Greek entablature motif, the model is framed within a curved, darkened background that creates a proscenium arch—the symbol of Greek theatre. This background, printed in painterly, heavy inks, contrasts with the glaring whites of her marble-like skin and sets off her illuminated body as a decorative sculptural, architectural, or still life object. The marks Witkin has applied to the plate and the sepia washes over the print give the photograph an additional antique aesthetic. The model resembles a generic art historical nude, yet the photograph emphasizes the tangible materiality of her graphically naked, explicit body. The photographic medium highlights the texture of her flesh and pubic hair, which surpasses the illusion of marble and purely symbolic connotations; with scientific accuracy, the photograph emphasizes the tactility of the scene. The folds in her skin pair visually with the folds in an animated drapery that surrounds her body, climbs over one arm, and seems to have a life of its own, again contrasting with and highlighting the static, inanimate pose of the model.

The qualities of –humor|| and –fear|| articulated by the title allude to the many paradoxes. The photographic frame and the numerous ambiguous details contribute to a multi-genre and infinitely suggestive tableau. The model dons a bra made of plastic cones that is translucent to reveal her erect nipples, emphasizing the materiality of her eroticized body. As a female body on display, partially nude to emphasize her nakedness, she is sexually objectified. However, the artificiality and excessive details, bordering on ridiculous, subtract this scene from a history of complicit and/or alluring female bodies on display for the viewer’s consumption. Her profile displays a pointy costume nose, another common feature that is broken in antique sculpture, yet here looks more like a Halloween mask, paired with Mickey Mouse ears. The humor of the scene is combined with its elements of fear, as the hybrid image juxtaposes seeming opposites. This title raises many questions, including whose –humor and fear|| surround this body and its excessive photographic display—the model’s, the viewers’, and/or Witkin’s?

Despite the plethora of visual detail, the viewer’s eyes are drawn to the sites of the model’s impairments. The amputated stumps and –deformed|| hands become objectified, like other parts of her costumed body, or fetishized, a theme which scholars have found to be characteristic of photographs of disabled bodies (Garland- Thomson, –Seeing the Disabled||). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson maintains that such fetishization of the body, derived from medical models, serves to eclipse the multidimensional nature of disabled subjects, constructing disability as social spectacle. In these frameworks, the image’s –offering|| is an opportunity to gaze/stare at the amputee. The photograph’s narration in a book of Witkin’s works satisfies the viewer’s consequential desire to know what happened to make the body abnormal. The diagnostic text paired with the photograph states that the model lost her limbs as a young woman, due to toxic shock syndrome incurred from the use of a tampon (Parry 115). She has been amputated by medical procedures and as a consequence of using an implement marketed to women. Medicine has impaired her, as does this constructed image of her body. The scientific rendering of her body in photographic detail adds to her role as a medical specimen, subjected to a diagnostic gaze/stare. However, Witkin’s compositions refuse conformity to such predictable implications in their displays of the disabled body.

The image exceeds medical discourses in its blatant theatricality, and the artist’s personal touch on the photographic plate disrupts the illusion that photography produces and reproduces its subject scientifically. Witkin blows up the negatives of representation, so to speak, as he serves up the disabled body on a platter. In this and all of Witkin’s work, the fetishization of the body is fully sensationalized and made into a theatrical spectacle—fetishized bodies are spotlighted, placed on pedestals, and framed in excessive stage sets, which further exaggerates how all photography may be said to solicit a stare. Perhaps problematically, she is not posed to stare back at the viewer, which further objectifies her. In the image, her face is only half exposed as she turns away from the viewer’s gaze and stares beyond the frames of the image, perhaps in refusal of unlimited voyeuristic access to her body or to protect herself from a diagnostic stare. Or perhaps she turns away in shame for her bodily –tragedy|| or from the perverse exploitation and objectification of her body in the photograph and in visual traditions throughout history. And yet the caption also introduces the model as a former gymnast and nude dancer—identifications and professions intensely centered on displaying the body. The model therefore may be quite comfortable in settings of bodily display and has indeed elected to pose for the artist. Witkin has said that the model responded to the finished photograph with pride, expressing that it made her feel beautiful.<sup>2</sup> The excessive image frames how the amputee model’s body exceeds classifications and conventions of visual

genres. The photograph intervenes in what the viewer may think they know about representation and about the disabled body. It strategically fools the eye. Her stumps appear photographically amputated in the image, as if Witkin has surgically removed them, causing the viewer to do a double take. The image becomes a performance of amputation, on the parts of the model and the artist.

The classical aesthetic Witkin employs and subverts has been similarly invoked by other contemporary artists. Like Witkin's work with his models, the collaboration between artist Alison Lapper and sculptor Marc Quinn resulted in Quinn's 13-foot, 12-ton marble statue that portrays Lapper's full body in all her glory—seated nude and calmly displaying her armless torso, foreshortened legs, and rounded belly, seven months pregnant. Installed in the public tourist space of London's Trafalgar Square and surrounded poignantly by statues of famous naval captains, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005) (Figure 2) serves as a public performance of amputation. The work calls for re-examination of art and society's ideals and notions of –whole|| versus –broken|| bodies. Quinn's work is specifically a quotation of 18th- and 19th-century neoclassicism, which taught lessons on heroism and moral virtue, often by depicting the deeds of great and powerful men. Neoclassicism and its classical heritage communicate philosophical and political ideals through constructed body aesthetics. In Western culture from the Renaissance to today, this neoclassical form is characteristically employed for public statues of religious and political heroes, such as the military captains in Trafalgar Square. Quinn subverts the signification of neoclassical form as the ideal –whole|| in this work and in his series of life-size marble sculptures of real amputees, *The Complete Marbles* (2002). By using many high-profile disabled models, such as artist Peter Hull and the confrontational –freak|| performer and punk rock musician Matt Fraser, Quinn produces depictions of recognizable subjects and celebrities. Titled with the subjects' proper names, these works challenge how the viewer perceives the body in art, as well as in everyday life.

Lapper's own self-portrait body art, in the forms of photography, sculpture, and installation, also employs a classical aesthetic to emphasize her unique corporeal beauty. At the University of Brighton, an opinionated viewer challenged the nature of Lapper's figurative work of non-disabled bodies, as was the common practice in her art school, by suggesting that perhaps Lapper had not fully accepted her own body. This moment became a turning point for Lapper, as she began envisioning her own body as a work of art. Her inspiration was a photograph of the classical statue, the *Venus de Milo*, in which she saw her own likeness. Lapper began casting her body for plaster sculptures and photographing herself in Venus-like poses, as she took on the *Venus de Milo*, the goddess of love and beauty, as her body image. For example, Lapper's *Untitled* (2000) (Figure 3) features three views of her nude body in Venus-like, s-curve poses. As in Witkin's work, the photographic medium articulates her musculature, flesh, and curve of the breast, while aestheticizing equally her upper-arm –stumps.|| The strong contrasts of the black background with the marble whiteness of her skin create a photographic sculpture in the round. In installations of her work, Lapper has paired such imagery and casts of her body parts with snapshots from her childhood, as well as many clinical photographs that have been taken by her doctors to document her –deformity.|| In juxtaposition with her softer, rounder, sexier, sensual images of herself, these photographs seem even more cold, sanitized, and dehumanized. Performing amputation specifically by posing as the *Venus de Milo*, Lapper's works resemble the live performances of artist Mary Duffy, who displays her armless body naked while delivering impassioned speech about her objectification by society and the medical profession in particular. Duffy displays her body to combat a pervasive medical gaze that has made her into a social spectacle. Lapper, Duffy, and Witkin's amputee models perform amputation through self-exhibition, interrupting and disempowering the pervasive medical gaze at disability.

### **Medical Curiosities**

Witkin appropriates a conventional medical gaze. He draws much of his subject matter, particularly bodies and body fragments, from medical laboratories and has pursued long-term interest in and artistic influence from historical medical exhibits, particularly ophthalmologist Stanley B. Burns' collection of early medical photographs,<sup>3</sup> from which I will draw specific comparisons to Witkin's own photographs. Witkin's work shares many qualities with early medical images including: themes of photography and medicine as scientifically –objective|| and/or objectifying, especially as constructed through aesthetic form; imagery of death (*Teatro de Morte* 1989) and illness (*John Herring: Person with AIDS Posed as Flora with Lover* 1992); themes of dissection (*Still Life with Mirror* 1998 and *Anna Akhmatova* 1998) and other surgical practices and medical devices (Un

Santo Oscuro 1987); representation of skeletal anatomy (Who Naked Is 1996); display of fetuses (Hermes 1981), particularly with fatal intra-uterine anomalies; and display of what may be termed living human curiosities or pathological cases, many of which may be considered disabled (such as in numerous Witkin images of amputees). The body forms characteristically featured in medical exhibits, clinical photography, and Witkin's contemporary photography are bodies marked as curious by birthmarks, atypical anatomical growths (Art Deco Lamp 1986), deformities (Abundance 1997), or evidence of disease; homosexuals (Queer Saint 1999); so-called hysterics and the insane; and bodies staged as monsters and freaks in curiosity cabinets, festivals, public markets (Portrait of a Dwarf 1987), and freak show displays (Melvin Burkhart, Human Oddity 1985). These subjects, in the context of medicine and other spectacle displays, are framed as medical curiosities, united only by their excessive corporealities and abnormal transgressions from the norm.

Witkin's photographs, through their performative exaggerations and excesses, call attention to the deceptively sanitized voyeurism of the medical gaze. Human –anomalies and curiosities“ have fascinated medicine for centuries; they have been exhibited in medical texts and collections, in two-dimensional forms, and in live presentations, and therefore serve as a precedent for modern medical performances. Renaissance physician Ambroise Paré's iconic *On Monsters and Marvels*, an illustrated example of collected case studies and diagnoses (many supernatural) of abnormal bodies, fantastical creatures, and other environmental natural phenomena, reads like a natural history text and has been cited by scholars as precedence for the modern freak show and other medical displays (Fiedler). Similarly to Paré's text, 19th-century physicians George Gould and Walter Pyle's *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* (contemporary with early medical photography such as Burns' collection, as well as the 19th- and early 20th-century heyday of the freak show) is a medical text that illustrates convergences of empiricism and voyeurism, reality and myth, and clinical explanation and mythology. It struggles to classify its diverse –anomalies and curiosities,“ and becomes a survey of menagerie –others.“<sup>4</sup> Numerous case studies in this volume were popular freak show performers; it provides minimal diagnosis, and seems rather preoccupied by exhibitionism and freakishness.

Early medical photography likewise often turned its gaze on freak show performers, a widely popular form of entertainment in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the US and Europe (approximately 1830s-1930s) (Lucia Zarate, the Mexican Lilliputian c. 1880), and illustrated promotional materials to establish wondrous freaks as real and believable for paying customers. Perhaps ironically, the medical models which pathologized such bodies contributed to the demise of the freak show as an acceptable form of public entertainment. The freak show provides a strong example of representational collisions between art, science, and popular entertainment in performances of the disabled body, qualities shared with Witkin's staging of amputees particularly. Witkin's work shares with medicine a preoccupation with curious or abnormal bodies, and his medical gaze is likewise voyeuristic and theatrical. Witkin's camera is also attracted to freaks (Melvin Burkhart, *Human Oddity* 1985), today relegated to subcultural venues such as Coney Island, but highlights their wondrous bodies as spectacular and performative rather than medically legitimate. Whereas medicine gazed at curiosities as examples against which to define and medically administer the preferred state of a –normal“ or healthy body, Witkin celebrates bodily deviance from the norm.

Witkin's hybrid images, like *Humor and Fear*, compare thematically with historical medical theatres, which combined genres of visual and performing arts, science, and popular entertainment in their staging of the body as spectacle. Further, the discourses on the body and bodily representations produced by medical theatres served as a legacy for the conventions of representing the body in art, science, and the freak show. Flourishing in the Renaissance and continuing to modern times, public dissections and anatomy studies are at the heart of figurative art historically, influencing how the body has been depicted in painting, sculpture, and photography.<sup>5</sup> In addition, these medical spectacles strongly influenced modern notions of –normal“ versus –abnormal,“ or pathological, anatomy, which was conceived of specifically in opposition to the classical ideal (Stafford, 107-8). Such designations then served in the ranking of society and individuals, creating hierarchies of individual and social bodies. Witkin's photographs traffic in these intersections of visual culture and the consequences of representation for real social subjects, particularly by juxtaposing the medically –abnormal|| with the classical ideal.

## Dissecting Norms and Conventions

Witkin's subjects challenge notions of ideal versus anti-ideal bodies. Disability studies theorist Lennard J. Davis traces the concept of normal historically, and its implication for disabled people, arguing that normal is a culturally-specific social construct that privileges homogeneity and stigmatizes those with physical differences. Normal is distinctively abstract, disembodied, and defined only in opposition to the intensely embodied and spectacularized abnormal body. Davis insists that normal, from the 19th century to the present, designates an ideal body image; whereas deviation from the norm, such as disability embodies, becomes deviant. Further, Davis draws parallels between modern notions of normal and earlier, classical ideals for the body. These classical models were most clearly expressed in the 450 BCE Canon of Polykleitis, which established an ideal body type, derived from mathematical proportions and the most aesthetic parts drawn from different individuals. Polykleitis's prescription for the ideal corresponded to a sculptural figure that embodied geometric precision and ratiō and conveyed wholeness through symmetry and balance. Such rigid parameters continue to serve as the benchmark for corporeal beauty in art and, as Davis argues, influence social standards for appearance to the present day. The elevation of normal as a physical ideal in the 19th century resulted from a constellation of social discourses in literature, statistics, eugenics, and social Darwinism, Davis maintains, and this construction of normal posited disability as the pathological opposite to be cured or eliminated from the population. Davis's theories provide a means to equate social and artistic conventions for bodies when interpreting Witkin's photographs, while Witkin's photographs illuminate the leading role of photography in Davis's arguments.

Photography is indeed the additional coordinate to Davis's historiography of normal versus abnormal. Photography's presumed depiction of objective reality equates the medium with scientific accuracy and medical precision (see, for example, Barthes, Tagg, and Solomon-Godeau). Innovations in photography have enabled graphic depiction of the corporeal body and have increased visual access to it. Early photographers were considered technicians rather than artists, and many clinical photographers were in fact physicians. Clinical photographs in the 19th century produced visual images of pathology and deviance, both corporeal and moral, against which mainstream society could assure its own normality (Sekula). These photographs contributed to the diagnosing of, and gave a visual image to, abnormality. One of the first uses of photography in the 19th century was for documentation of patients for medical records, education, and media publication. Clinical portraits of patients, such as World War I Soldier with Amputated Leg (Figure 4), functioned historically not only to document but also to legitimize the still somewhat suspect medical profession in the 19th century for potential patients, or society at large. The association of photography with science was a key attribute in constructing the public image and legitimacy of modern medicine. As photography was considered objective in its depiction of reality and establishment of evidence, these photographs presented supposedly objective and true representations of the body.

Clinical photographs performed these scientific discourses specifically by conforming to strict visual conventions. The images characteristically capture live human bodies with an aesthetic and discursive detachment, by framing a frontal or profile image of the face or full body against a generally indistinguishable backdrop. This kind of voided background, like a natural history illustration, symbolizes a void of context or lack of personal information about the subject portrayed. Often, handwritten identification numbers referring to hospital records and brief clinical diagnoses served as textual landscapes in the photographs. A few inanimate objects, or props, were sometimes included in more formal portrait-like compositions, to present further classification of the patient by social class and diagnosis. The subject was in general classified according to pathology: disease, impairment, or other curious feature. These images, through composition and technique, composed a whole or unified image of pathology. Such photographs established medical authority over the body and constructed an image of medicine and of the pathologized, medical body for the public.

World War I Soldier with Amputated Leg stages a medical performance. The amputee veteran poses according to the conventions for depicting veterans, who were characteristically afforded more dignity and portrait-like distinction than other subjects in order to represent their historical status as national heroes (Fox and Lawrence; also Burns, *Early Medical Photography*). Centered in the frame, he stands alone in his identifying uniform, as the photograph is devoid of other elements that could distinguish him. Poignantly, the uniform is fragmented on the so-called fragmented man, who is naked from the waist down, revealing much more than his one amputated leg. In a different medium, his static body would resemble classical sculpture. In the photograph he becomes

medicalized, specimen-like, and objectified, similar to the stilled life of a stiff life composition, a look which is characteristic of 19th-century photographic techniques, as lengthy exposure time, for example, and other technological elements contributed to the appearance of bodies themselves as inanimate objects. Life is here stilled (immobilized), in posture and discursive framing. The half-naked soldier with an amputated leg then becomes an –amputee or, further, a de-humanized personification of amputation. Extending from Garland-Thomson’s theory of the social gaze/stare as diagnostic and directly informed by medical models for disability, bodies and people without limbs or with partial extremities are often perceived in society today as symbols of accident, injury, war, or congenital mistake. The soldier is here a de-personalized manifestation of pathology or tragedy, despite being more than metaphorically and illusionistically alive. In contrast to many clinical subjects whose eyes were blocked or shielded, this soldier’s face is uncovered and his eyes revealed to meet the viewer’s and physician’s gazes; nonetheless, he is objectively revealed for examination and diagnosis as a possession of science—both his unsightly, amputated stump and his penis exposed for view. The soldier, despite his display of virility, is emasculated photographically.

Many clinical images objectified their subjects by blocking their eyes, a technique which Witkin’s images subvert specifically as he subverts the assumed neutrality of the medical gaze. Technicians (many of whom were physicians) blocked the eyes when developing the image, or covered the face of the subject with a veil or blindfold, making the body anonymous for the benefit of the patient and the physician or other viewer, such that the subject could be examined with objective, impersonal disinterest. The shielding of the eyes was seen more in especially freakish or curious subjects and those of lower socio-economic status.<sup>6</sup> However, this technique provided far more protection for the viewer of the photograph than the subject. Blocking of the eyes, meant to maintain the patients’ dignity, functioned rather to impose shame and impeded a returned gaze, preventing the patients’ agency as individuals to transcend the medical frame. Witkin subverts the blocking of the eyes with his subjects who wear masks, such as in *Humor and Fear*, and in images in which he scratches over the subject’s eyes on the photographic plate, such as in *Hermes*, a horrific photograph of a decaying corpse playing the role of the Greek messenger god in a specific quotation of a famous sculpture by Praxiteles (Praxiteles, *Hermes and the Infant Dionysus*, 4th century BCE). In Witkin’s photographic version, the corporeality of the decomposing corpse and the worn look created with photographic alteration visually denote classical ruin. In *Hermes*, Witkin has blocked the body’s eyes with heavy inking and removed the corpse’s limbs. By altering the flesh of the body through the skin of the photograph, Witkin assumes the role of a surgeon. He intervenes in a so-called scientific gaze at the dismembered body, again by engaging and dissecting medical and classical iconography.

Like *Hermes*, Witkin’s *Portrait of Greg Vaughan* (2004) (Figure 5) manipulates medical and classical figurative traditions, by engaging a contemporary amputee subject. The nude model stands in static pose against a black and weathered-looking backdrop, similarly to the veteran featured in the clinical photograph. His delicate body has the characteristic look of the adolescent or androgynous physique that was particularly idealized in classical statuary. The early Greek ideal kouros (meaning young man) figures portrayed gods, warriors, and athletes in static poses derived from Egyptian statues, which conveyed nobility and heroism. Unlike the soldier (also a hero), this modern day kouros in *Portrait of Greg Vaughan* is entirely nude (as the unclothed body is considered in art) and/or naked (as it is considered in medical imagery). He turns slightly to the left, in a subtle contrapposto—a curved pose developed by the Canon of Polykleitis to best display a perfect balance of weight-bearing and relaxed limbs and ideal physical proportions; for Greg Vaughan, this pose best displays the site of his amputation. His right arm, which is missing in contrast to the artistic canon of wholeness, resembles the familiar breakage of antique marble statues.

The photographic medium creates and simultaneously disrupts such an illusion. Like Quinn’s *The Complete Marbles*, the model here embodies an historical shift in classical sculpture from earlier portrayals of the gods to later, Hellenistic sculptures of mortal life, specifically in expressions of high drama. The image is performative. Witkin brings classical sculpture to life, with photographic depiction of mortal flesh.

The photograph’s *trompe l’oeil* effect, the –fooling of the eye in art historical vocabulary, is theatrically exaggerated by the pasty whiteness of the model’s skin, which makes Greg Vaughan look as though he were being cast in plaster—a material that crosses art and medical use. In addition, he is seemingly attached to the

pedestal behind him. This kind of merging of the body with a marble support is characteristic of Roman copies of Greek hollow-cast bronzes (like Praxiteles' Hermes). It also recalls Greek statues that are architectural remains, like the figures –in antis (figures that served as pillars), such that the body was originally part of and embedded in an antique temple or mausoleum. By quoting the look of a body that has been cut out, or amputated, from a larger architectural program—emphasized in the photograph by the crown molding edges of the pedestal and its rougher, rocky top—the photograph, like *Humor and Fear*, plays with visions of bodies with and as ornamental objects. The image also recalls impressionist work by Auguste Rodin, who was known for adopting classical imagery such as bodily fragmentation and the inclusion of supports, in his quite modern work in which, like Witkin, he incorporated finger marks as the artist's personal, impressionistic touch. In *Portrait of Greg Vaughan*, the berries depicted like a crown on the body's head, a still life element included also in *Humor and Fear*, hint at associations with Dionysus (as he was known to the Greeks) or Bacchus (to the Romans), the god of wine who symbolizes, from ancient to contemporary culture, the celebration of earthly and bodily pleasures. This crown may also refer to the laurel wreaths characteristic of figures of Apollo specifically and athletes in general to signify victory, suggesting Greg Vaughan's limber finesse. The photograph subverts classical representations of the body and the productions of –ideal and –normal bodies in artistic and medical images. Witkin has designated the image as a portrait of a specific man: this is –Greg Vaughan, not just a generic kouros or anonymous soldier. The image strategically creates perceptual confusions between the portrait subject and the symbolic object, between flesh and marble.

Witkin's images of classicized amputees intervene in how a viewer reads so-called objective representations of the body in scientific rendering, as well as in the ideals of art. Placing photographs such as *Humor and Fear* and *Portrait of Greg Vaughan* alongside the naked amputee veteran in *World War I Soldier with Amputated Leg* provides a poignant comparison that prompts the viewer to look again, and differently, at the soldier's body. The visual pairing in the medical photograph of an amputated stump next to an anatomical symbol of masculine potency allows the lauded soldier to escape emasculation—amputation is visually differentiated from castration. He becomes a disabled hero, rather than a gross specimen or victim. The clinical image mediates the body and its social status. He raises his uniform, enhancing his nakedness and proudly displaying his virility—he is half-exposed, half-objectified, perhaps like Greg Vaughan in corporeal fusing with an object pedestal. The soldier's body is constructed in the clinical photograph as half normal and half broken. The soldier is half erotically concealed and half revealed, pornographically, through medical exposure.<sup>7</sup> The halves are not lacking in these images, but in juxtaposition exceed the meanings of a so-called unified, cohesive, or –whole image. The soldier stands firm on his one leg, its stability and fortitude highlighted in the photograph. This photograph now not only represents but performs amputation similarly to *Humor and Fear* and *Portrait of Greg Vaughan*, not as a surgical and disarming act of removing limbs, but rather as an embodied performance of identity.

Witkin's photographic performances of amputation dissect the inherent contradictions, supposed neutrality, and integrity of the medical gaze and medical imagery. He defies medical traditions by manipulating photographic conventions specifically. Scholars of photography have argued that such specific conventions produced a portrait image of pathology in society,<sup>8</sup> thus contributing to racist, classicist, and sexist ideologies (Smith). I would add ableist to this list. These prejudices and definitions of pathology, and the social systems that upheld them, were justified through the photographs, whose supposed –neutrality and integrity were actually mechanically constructed. Adherence to the strict rules of convention in early photographs secured the truth conveyed in documentation. Departing from convention could undermine the –truths about the body they were meant to convey. Consequentially, irregularities in photographic conventions and techniques (abnormalities or deviance of the image itself in comparison with other clinical images) were strategically altered to produce a unified look of pathology and deviance. Consequently, photographers purposefully subtracted any trace of chance circumstance, the artist's imprint, or personal touch, to avoid deviation from convention and therefore to make their images more scientific and believable (Tagg).

Witkin's careful altering to achieve the look of 19th-century photography affiliates his work with early scientific images, ironically. In contrast to the seemingly sanitized or unified appearance of medical images to convey –pathology, Witkin's hands-on techniques and personal touch make his images decidedly unscientific, subjective, even theatrical. He executes intensive and laborious alterations to his plates and images, including

scratching into the surface, printing over areas of the body, working tediously with encaustic beeswax, hand polishing, bleaching, and hand-painting of the print. He sometimes literally dissects and sutures negatives with an exacto knife. Sepia washes in particular make the images appear yellowed and worn, as in *Humor and Fear*, replicating the photographic practices and look of 19th-century photography. Many of Witkin's photographs resemble daguerreotypes and other forms of early photography, or, significantly, how they appear reprinted for today's audience of viewers. In these processes, he dissects the conventions of and distinctions between art and scientific representation and undermines the authority of images to mediate the body through its conventional and aesthetic display. The images call attention to the contradictions inherent to clinical imagery by revealing their strategic spectacularization of so-called abnormal bodies. Witkin makes vivid how bodies are never neutral in representation, but always altered mechanically through his surgical practices and visual dismemberment.

### **Fragmented and Fetishized Bodies**

For many viewers, Witkin's acts of fragmentation are disarming, even violent, for he fragments the body and visual history. The fragmented body in representation conventionally portrays a –broken or deficient body and, in contemporary art in particular, often symbolizes psychic or societal fragmentation through corporeal defect. Witkin, by contrast, produces excessive compositions that provide excesses of meaning and potentials for interpretation. The visual fragment is not forever lacking in Witkin's fetishizing frames but, rather, oversignified, specifically in the already fragmented, already oversignified medium of photography.

Mexican painter Frida Kahlo's visual and symbolic fragmentation, or fetishization, of her disabled body illuminates the significances of Witkin's work, particularly by adding perspectives of disability. Kahlo's use of bodily elements, particularly blood and interior female anatomy, was influenced by medical illustration (Lomas 5-19), such that her work shares Witkin's fascination with medical imagery. The prominent presence of dismembered feet in her work, as well as her many images of her body in pieces, equate with Witkin's imagery further. In Kahlo's paintings, feet bear especially multivalent references to Mexican votive symbols (milagros, or objects that embody and evoke miracles), such as a dismembered hand-shaped earring she models in *Self-Portrait* (1940). These feet also reference her own personal history, particularly her physical impairments, including an early limp from polio and injuries from a debilitating accident at the age of 18, the results of which she struggled with for the rest of her life, eventually resulting in the loss of one foot.

Kahlo's *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) (Figure 6) frames the artist's gaze at herself fragmented in the bathtub. The viewer, through Kahlo's eyes, sees the story of her life and her art floating around prominent images of her legs, which are dismembered by the top frame of the painting. A collage of visual fragments drawn from her many paintings (consisting primarily of autobiographical portraits and still life scenes), the composition is a visual reflection of Kahlo's body and a mental reflection on her life, as well as her identity as a biracial, bisexual, and disabled woman. Surrounding veiled semblances of Kahlo's outstretched legs, numerous images rise to the surface of and sink in her murky bathwater. A lesbian, mixed-race couple lounge in sexual play on a sponge (a scene featured in Kahlo's *Two Nudes in a Forest* 1939). Portraits of her parents (her German-American father and Mexican-Indian mother) from their wedding photograph emerge, as does a disembodied Mexican-Tehuana peasant dress Kahlo frequently wore and often modeled in her self portraits. A conch shell lies broken and leaking, perhaps symbolizing flawed fertility and Kahlo's inability to bear children to term—a symbol she included in gruesome paintings of her numerous miscarriages, such as *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932). An erupting phallic skyscraper seen here is drawn from Kahlo's early 1930s work, specifically paintings inspired by her visits to urban U.S. cities (New York and Detroit) while her husband, Diego Rivera, worked on famous mural commissions. Other images include a tiny, animated skeleton from popular Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations for spiritual ancestors, as well as a body representing death in a broader sense; a dead bird; and erotic flowers. A connecting cord, perhaps umbilical, strings together these floating metaphors, creating connections between Kahlo's body in pieces and pieces of her life history, memory, and fantasy.

Fragmented in the water—the fluid of life—Kahlo's body and this painted expression of it are pregnant with meaning, specifically in fluid, unfixed symbols with irresolvable signification. All the images surfacing in the water are tied to the fragmented body and touch upon, but do not completely dissolve into, Kahlo's identity as disabled. Her impairments are vividly represented at the top of the composition in two feet, only half emerging

above the surface of the water; the right foot is bleeding, apparently wounded (Kahlo's own feet caused her continuous pain), and both feet mirror themselves in the water to create surrealistic illusions of double-sided, anamorphic forms. In a different tone, Kahlo illustrated dismembered feet with sprouting roots in her diary, with the hand-written caption: —Feet, what do I need them for when I have wings to fly|| (1953). In Kahlo's work and in comparisons with photographs of the body in pieces discussed in this paper, feet prove impossible to contain in symbolic connotation, particularly in the conventions of art and science. These feet are oversignified fetishes, fetishized by Kahlo's performative compositions.

Witkin's prominent inclusions and exclusions of feet also invoke the symbolism of the foot as fetish, playing with the contexts (art, science, and, in addition, pornography) for viewing the body. The fetish, derived from Freudian psychoanalysis, already operates as a paradoxical concept as a phallic symbol whose presence points to phallic absence or, more specifically, castration. Further, feet as sexual fetishes bear infinite cultural signification. Surrealist writer Georges Bataille has written that feet vary radically in reception and symbolism across cultures and time periods. Regarding the sexual allure of the foot, it is a titillating symbol that embodies sin and deviance. Bataille proposes that because the foot is closer to the earth, it connotes the fall of man and his morality, as well as his mortality, and is therefore a symbol of death (20-23). Finally, feet elicit humor and horror, or perhaps their absence may elicit these responses from Witkin's *Humor and Fear*, for example. Witkin's photographs *Feast of Fools* (1990) (Figure 7), *Still Life, Mexico* (1992), and *Still Life with Mirror* (1998) showcase dismembered feet, which are actual body parts Witkin has collected from medical morgues. They are medical specimens, which Witkin again perverts in excessive art historical display as animated, still life fetish objects. Witkin stages these feet in multi-referential and contradictory compositions of carnality, hedonism, consumption, and fragmentation.

Witkin's use of the foot weds artistic and medical imagery. His still lifes with dismembered feet bear visual similarities to the photograph that graces the cover and provides the title of Stanley Burns' photography book, *A Morning's Work* (1856) (Figure 8), a clinical image that features a pile of feet, amputated from soldiers by physician Reed B. Bontecou, on a plate. The title of the photograph hints at the characteristic detachment or disinterest of the medical gaze, despite the horror and reminders of human loss and war it elicits. The tactility of the parts, captured through the medium of photography, make the scene graphic, both visually and emotionally. Witkin capitalizes on this ability of photography and combines life-like yet dismembered feet with still life and fantastical props (such as a squid, rotting and sliced-open fruit, and a fetal corpse in *Feast of Fools*), also captured in vivid, even entrancing detail. *A Morning's Work* and *Feast of Fools* juxtapose art and medical imagery, both desirable and repulsive, and they solicit strong and conflicting reactions from the viewer, raising countless symbolic and visceral associations.

Witkin's themes of feet and the amputation of them, like Kahlo's painted imagery, imbue the body in pieces—the fragmented body—with an excess of symbolism. Further, like all provocative performances, they elicit embodied, subjective reactions from the viewer. Bodily fragmentation and themes of amputation in these works offer up body images that resist representational closure and reject the idea of symbolic –wholes,|| as the fragment serves to embody infinite potentials. All representation, especially photographic, may be characterized as fragmentary, as pictures offer a moment or body stilled, a time or scene already passed away, manipulated, and dramatized through the very act of making it an image. Representations always fail to capture the –whole,|| for always, beyond the frame, there exists an excess that the viewers' eyes cannot see. Witkin's photographs frame his viewers' simultaneous desire for and exclusion from the image, specifically through his excessive bodily displays, in which –more is more.|| They leave the viewer gorged, and yet insatiate.

The argument that Witkin pushes the envelope too far is a strong one, as he perverts so-called photographic objectivity into a blatant and unashamed objectification of his own. Witkin's work has been largely criticized for tasteless display and exploitation of bodies for shock value. Witkin's camera is said to fetishize, capitalize on, and even contribute to human suffering (see, for example, Kozloff, Chris, and Villaseñor). He makes a strong statement about artistic traditions and the exhibitionism of medicine, yet at what costs? Witkin partakes in the historical exploitation and may practice his own form of dehumanization, particularly of disabled bodies. A problematic photograph in this vein is *Leo* (1976), part of the *Evidences of Anonymous Atrocities* series, which features an amputee man whose head is blurred over (a clinical reference?), appearing like a black leather

mask. His suspenders resemble bondage straps, and he sits in cage-like armature. The body is not only framed as a non-human, inanimate object but, further, as a feral beast. Such display of the racialized, as well as the disabled, body as animalistic has roots also in the freak show, in the examples of developmentally disabled –missing links and presentations of individuals with limb impairments or other disfigurements, such as the –Lobster Boy or the –Elephant Man.‘‘ The photograph’s shadowing makes Leo’s skin appear darker, suggesting he is an eroticized and subjugated image of a racial –other, or perhaps articulating, even mocking, the social stereotypes that –dark men are criminal and violent. These dark overtones are accentuated by the fact that Leo has no legs, a characteristic of deviance or abnormality that Witkin capitalizes on to make the portrait ambiguously sadomasochistic or eerie. Leo might be a subject of social oppression, articulated by Witkin’s photograph, yet does the image further oppress this man, or the woman in *Humor and Fear* for that matter? Do these representations of amputees as objects problematically aestheticize disability, as a marginalized identity, and reinstate the representation of the disabled body as freakish –other?

The use of a classical, Western aesthetic may literally whitewash the various politics of representation. This charge has been laid against the late photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, whose classicized photographs of a black man in *Ajitto* (four portraits from 1981) (Figure 9), like Witkin’s, fetishize socially marked and exploited bodies. The crouched and curled, almost fetal-like pose of the model in the *Ajitto* series, photographed from all sides like a specimen, recalls the figure’s pose in a neoclassical painting: Jean Hippolyte Flandrin’s *Young Man Sitting by the Seashore* (1836). Significantly, this pose was repeated in a composition entitled *Cain* (1900) by photographer Wilhelm von Gloedon, who specialized in classical-themed, homoerotic pornography, as well as by photographer Fred Holland Day in *Negro Nude* (1900). The pose therefore bears a deep history tied to visually sexualized and racialized male bodies. Mapplethorpe’s contemporary version, a series of homoerotic, pseudo-pornographic art photographs, make the black male body into a sculptural object (in pose and lack of returned gaze), which problematically aestheticizes the model’s exploitation (Phelan). The black body is photographically articulated—glistening against a completely white, or voided, background and sculptural pedestal. The photographs may confirm the normality of whiteness by fetishizing the black male body and therefore making it into an aesthetic object for possession. Peggy Phelan argues how these images reinstate the stereotype of the violent and virile –stud, derived from slavery and minstrel traditions, particularly in Mapplethorpe’s fetishization of the penis. The racist depiction of black men as animalistic, driven by their untamed sexuality, pervades visual culture. In light of these influences, classical conventions in Mapplethorpe’s works –civilize the naked black body, as well as the objectifying act of the photographer. Witkin’s images of classicized amputees may similarly engage Eurocentric and ableist conventions that effectively erase the power dynamics of the gaze/stare and deceptively mask his own photographic acts of exploitation.

Witkin’s *Art Deco Lamp* (1985) (Figure 10) serves as a rich example for interrogating his aesthetic acts, particularly with disfigured bodies. Here, the body of a woman with a hunchback kneels in a profile view and wraps her exceptionally arabesque body and elongated arm around a globe light. Her face is covered in a black mask, like Leo’s, which raises images of prowlers and terrorists, yet here a clock face covers her human face to mask her gaze. The image duplicates an object from the period of art deco, an art, design, and decorative arts movement in Europe and later the U.S. from the turn of the century to the 1930s and 1940s, characterized by excessive patterning and ornament. The photograph recreates a popular art deco tradition of fusing a clock or table lamp, often with such a globe light, with sculptural nude statues, particularly graceful, elongated dancers or curvy neoclassical nymphettes. Such pieces stage the female body in and as functional, domestic objects, wherein the body becomes an eroticized and aestheticized object for display. Witkin’s witty take on this tradition may objectify this woman’s body and disempower her, but he chose a design motif associated with excess and decadence specifically. The darkened background, treated with splashes of hand-applied wash and scratch marks, sets off her spotlighted torso, where the camera articulates her rounded breast, rib cage, and muscular arm and shoulder, behind which an unusual and shadowed concave area of the body curves into the bulge of her mythic, fabulous hump. The profile view best shows off this site of her disfigurement, which associates her with one of the most famously stigmatized and enfreaked figures of all time, Quasimodo. Quasimodo has become literature’s and pop culture’s quintessential deformed and ugly grotesque, a persona which Witkin’s image of a hunchback contradicts. The hunchback here becomes as aesthetic and opulent object because her graceful body deviates from the mundane norm. This model contacted Witkin and asked to be photographed, specifically in the nude. In her staging as a curious, indeed queer, beauty, what role does Witkin play in what some viewers

would call her aesthetic enfreakment?

### **Freakish Displays**

The performance of amputees as freaks has a long history that precedes and pervades Witkin's frames. In addition to documenting, diagnosing, and securing the legitimacy of –human curiosities, photographs also became souvenir portraits and marketing materials purchased by freak show patrons. One of the most collectible photographs was of the famous –Armless Wonder Charles Tripp (1855-1939) (Figure 11), who began exhibiting himself in P.T. Barnum's shows at age 17. Cartes de visites of Tripp visibly articulated his constructed persona as an –armless wonder--- freakish, yet admirable—by presenting the most domestic tasks and mundane pastime activities as extraordinary because of how he accomplished them with his visually fetishized feet. Tripp's performances consisted of particularly dexterous tasks, which highlighted his extraordinary ability to adapt or –overcome his impairments. Historian Robert Bogdan describes Tripp's freak appearances:

Tripp's performance during his more than fifty years as an exhibit did not change much. He neither sang nor played a musical instrument but merely showed his patrons what he could do with his feet: carpentry, penmanship, portrait painting, paper cutting, and the like. At the turn of the century he took up photography. (220)

An 1885 photograph of Tripp by Eisenmann presents a conventionalized portrait of a proper Victorian gentleman wearing a distinguished suit, sitting upright on a pedestal surface, in the act of taking tea. This is an almost normal portrait for the period, except that the toes of his bare foot grasp the delicate china cup. Photographic portraits of –normal Victorian men, like many clinical images, conventionally included props indicating their trade and status; Tripp's props symbolize the content of his extraordinary performances, and here such props function to perform an ambivalent identity for a so-called proper, yet disabled, man. A comb and brush set indicate that Tripp could miraculously groom and care for himself, making him efficient at specifically feminized tasks. The scissors, with which Tripp might cut out paper dolls (not exactly a –normal task for a Victorian man), further feminized him as an amputee, an almost, half, or damaged man like the World War I veteran in the clinical image, emasculated by his disabled, amputated body.

Tripp's creative acts were sentimentalized and trivialized, a theme which contrasts sharply with Witkin's freakish imagery. Tripp was known for writing, as evidenced by the inclusion of a pen and sample letter in the carte composition, and he engaged in additional creative acts—portrait painting and photography. At the turn of the century Tripp was billed as the –Armless Photographer,“ suggesting his extra-sensory creative skills. However, in the freak show Tripp's body was the voyeuristic attraction, not his photographs. A compliment regarding how well he could write would have referred to how he manipulated a pen, not the quality of his prose. Tripp's photographs did not capture attention beyond the freak show audience's interest in his body; his abnormal body and its abnormal means of handling the camera attracted viewers' condescending patronage. Tripp's performance of specifically everyday, mundane, and domestic tasks allowed viewers to identify with him while his undeniably abnormal body assured distance between the normal, non-disabled spectators and the disabled spectacle. In contrast, Witkin's images of amputees and other disfigured individuals do not ask for sentimentalized identification, or for pity. No attempts are made for his amputee models to masquerade as –normal, and certainly not in the performance of everyday life skills or tasks. On the contrary, the performances of amputees and amputation are excessively dramatic and even paranormal in Witkin's frames. The disfigured body becomes a work of art and source of creative powers.

The freak show indeed provides a historical precedent for contemporary disability theatre and performance art, a legacy present in Witkin's photographs. For example, Witkin's Gambler (1986) (Figure 12) includes another fantastical and theatrical –amputee wearing a tuxedo, the white gloves of a magician, and a mask composed of five playing cards --- perhaps a poker hand. He raises his left stump, uncovered by his shortened pants, as again Witkin's image provides a blatant opportunity to gaze/stare at his impaired body, offered up for the viewer. His other leg appears to be normal, although intense bleaching and scratching at the bottom left of the photograph restricts full scrutiny of it. Near his right shoulder stands a bleached and scratched, framed object that morphs between a window pane and a mirror—collapsing two allegories of artistic representation as either a privileged

sight into another world and/ or a false reflection of reality. The mirror suggests also vanity, superficiality, and the duplicity of both the subject on display and the act of representation itself. This illusion that fools the eye in the photograph comments on the nature of representation as allusive, illusive, and even delusional. The body dominates the composition, posed against a backdrop covered with an intensely geometric pattern, whose seeming lack of overall design program and enigmatic, disjunctive form sets the stage for visual mystery and interpretive riddle.

This composition has been compared to a tarot card image, making the disabled body clairvoyant and remarking on the various historical discourses of the abnormal body. Prior to the increasing medicalization of such bodies in the 18th and 19th centuries, monsters, or children born with physical defects such as congenital amputation, were said to be evidence of supernatural warnings, embodiments of divine intervention, or phenomena caused by the powers of the imagination (see Huet; also Paré). Often they were given the status of marvels and prodigies and placed on display as wondrous performers (Daston and Park; Fiedler; Bogdan; Garland-Thomson, Freakery; Adams). Such displays are intrinsic to the legacy and theatrical programs of the modern day freak show, such as the venues that exhibited Tripp. This gambler incarnates his glamorous and deeply historical reputation as a trickster and risk taker. A gambler in a present day casino setting is on display for his wondrous dexterity at shuffling, dealing, and performing card tricks that fool the eye, in stark contrast to Tripp's mundane, debased -tricks. Both images stage the acts of amputee bodies as miraculous, yet in Witkin's image, the gambler is supernatural, and perhaps his -hands-onll practices make a witty reference to Witkin's own miraculous photographic displays. Witkin's Gambler embodies a contemporary character known for its voyeuristic appeal, as Witkin plays upon the disabled body as spectacle. His objectification of such bodies comments on their historical objectification as bodies on display, albeit ambiguously. Witkin's photographs contribute to objectification of bodies (they are neither portraits of individuals nor social documentary images); they tell us little about these people's lives, and he claims his hired actors become depersonalized, still life icons or corporeal symbols of artistic emotions when photographed. They are symbolic bodies made graphically -reall and material by photography, here emphasized as a hybrid of artistic fiction and science that takes such themes to an excessive level. Witkin's images take risks, embodied here by the Gambler himself. The Gambler character and the amputee actor show off. This amputee takes risks by the nature of his gambling role within the frame, as well as by the act of the model taking on this role—of posing in the photograph, which is perhaps a form of self-objectification.

The magical qualities of Gambler, and Witkin's photographic alchemy, defy scientific and logical explanation. Staged by Witkin as theatrical, amputee bodies seduce and ultimately reject a diagnostic gaze—the causes of impairment for the model in Gambler are not revealed in the photograph. Rather, Gambler and other amputee subjects deliver performances that solicit the gaze and embodied viewer responses through self-exhibition of their own extraordinariness. The Gambler exercises his power to maintain partial invisibility to withhold from the viewer as the image withholds his personal identity and diagnosis—symbolized by his theatrical mask. The mask signifies that the model is as an actor playing a role. The mask, in another ironic twist on a clinical blocking of the eyes, enables the Gambler to return a gaze that is seductively concealed. Again, as a reference to a tarot card, the composition privileges the anti-scientific realms of magic, mystery, and the supernatural.

Genealogies of disability often suggest that the medical model, based in Enlightenment values and scientific emphasis, worked to eclipse premodern discourses of anomaly or human curiosities as supernatural. Indeed, the 19th century saw the establishment of teratology, the science of monsters, which classified many disabled bodies as monstrous -others, diagnosed them, and attempted to eradicate anomaly from the population. However, discourses of disability as wondrous, spectacular, even supernatural or divinely heroic have continued on in freak shows, special interest media stories, popular culture (largely film), fine art, and daily social values. Witkin began photographing 1970s sideshow performers at Coney Island and elsewhere, such as Melvin

Burkhart, whose talents included driving nails up his nose (an act captured in Witkin's portrait Melvin Burkhart, *Human Oddity* 1985) (Figure 13). Photographer Diane Arbus also turned her camera to these sideshows of the 1960s and 1970s. Photographing performers that many would call the dying breed of freaks, although others would call them the next generation, Witkin's and Arbus's photographs document how the freak show has lived on.

Witkin's images bring all these discourses and representations of –abnormality‖ to the fore, albeit fantastically. His images reveal how different contexts and conventions of representation operate in interpretations of his photographs and judgments on the bodies they display. These discursive connotations are never –wholly‖ liberating or derogatory for the social construction of disability, in material culture and everyday life, and certainly not in Witkin's often controversial work. However, Witkin never claims to present a –whole‖ and unified work that can be contextualized or contained in one discursive frame. As I have illustrated here with images of dissection and amputation, Witkin's work is unapologetically –unwhole‖ in specific rejection of notions of –whole‖ as preferable.

One closing performance of an amputee draws together various discursive fragments and representations of the disabled, specifically amputee body in visual culture. In Witkin's *Abundance* (1997) (Figure 14) we see a –human torsol‖ or an amputee woman with no legs and deformed hands, not as an object of scientific study or a freak attraction, but instead as an eroticized sculptural object of beauty, placed on an urn, and crowned with an offering of succulent fruit. The vignetted corners of the frame give the image an antique quality and, further, make it theatrical rather than medical. The darkened background sets off her white, marble-like skin and the contours of her bare breasts. Witkin presents this amputee as a hybridized, ornamental still life object reminiscent of garden statuary in rococo design, particularly in the erotic and playful productions of painters Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Antoine Watteau. These 18th-century artists' decorative, anthropomorphic fountains and urns spew and collect the source of life, in art historical programs (namely, rococo) that have been gendered female due to their bodily, imaginary, and decorative excesses. *Abundance* again resembles a neoclassical sculpture and critiques classical notions of the body as art. *Abundance* is a theatrical performance of an amputee, transplanted from a pejorative notion of undesirable abnormality to a fruit from the garden of earthly delights.

Witkin's *Abundance* subtracts the amputee from an everyday social realm in which she might be considered, in colloquial terms, deformed or disabled, due to her deviation from norms. Witkin places her on stage and perhaps problematically immobilizes her on an urn. The body is here objectified as an ornamental object— another theatrical prop or metaphorical symbol like the abundant fruit. However, in Witkin's tableau her embodied, multi-dimensional, multi-referential—indeed abundant—significance overpowers her physical immobilization, as the amputee performs as an allegory of abundance in a context of sensual pleasures and excessive erotic play. She is an aesthetic object tangibly embodied, as the photographic medium again articulates the materiality of her flesh, here overflowing and fecund. Like the urn, Witkin's framing fails to contain this extraordinary body. Fused with the urn, she is posed as a spectacular, hybridized body showcased in a hybridized photograph— one that fuses and confuses the bodily displays of science and art.

### **Dismembering Images**

Witkin's images are intricately dangerous, yet raise profoundly provocative issues regarding historical representation of disability. What is the status of the disabled body in the context of Witkin's preoccupations with the taboo, the macabre, the confrontational, and the infinitely freakish, as well as in the context of classical traditions? With art historical references in particular, Witkin engages disabled bodies in dramas of myth, violence, monstrosity, and the supernatural, calling attention to their historical inclusion in such frames, yet simultaneously repeating some of the precarious subtexts that such legacies embody. Witkin's work raises weighty questions about the framing of bodies across genres of visual culture. His images showcase bodies that exceed conventional frames for representation, as they cross the boundaries between depicting the body as a representational metaphor and depicting the body as human flesh. Witkin's models are unashamedly excessive and curious; they are photographically showcased as bodies without legislation, as they cannot be contained within social classifications and norms for bodies, genres of visual culture, or even Witkin's photographic frames. The images create a counter-aesthetic, beyond designations of normal and abnormal; further, they provide a stage for amputee actors to parade their corporealities, unashamedly, and to perform with their fantastical bodies.

One may ask whether Witkin's models benefit at all from self-objectification. Early medical photography often

represented low income, immigrant, or otherwise –underprivileged subjects to convey medicine as improving society. It often solicited models or patients who would place their bodies on public display, like still life objects and the possessions of science, in exchange for medical services (Stoecklem and White 111). In an intriguing shuffle, Witkin’s subjects are models and actors hired for performing crafts that might be considered forms of exhibitionism. Self-display hereby provides a service and financial, at least, and perhaps professional gain for the subjects. Particularly in the case of sideshow performers, Witkin’s actors are already involved in self-display before they meet his camera. One wonders how many opportunities for other work some have, whether involving exhibitionism or not, when faced with social ideals for public bodies and the accessibility of public spaces. Amputee models, for example, collaborate with Quinn in attempts to reframe the vision of their bodies in society with the legacy of classical beauty, for more personal gains. Witkin’s photography may serve as a venue for certain subjects’ employment and public visibility.

Witkin’s formal look of early photography performs subversively; he appropriates medical photography’s conventions for displaying bodies and redefines the terms of objectification. His antique aesthetic also brings into a contemporary setting the representation of the body circulated by early medical photography, reminding us that the framing of bodies as medical cases is neither fixed in the past nor confined to the realm of photography. In Witkin’s world, abnormal individuals, like the actors he hires, continue to confront a history of being medicalized and constructed in opposition to whatever society deems is physically preferable. The normal body today is viewed as improvable through medical –progress, “ standardized, and regulated through self- disciplinary actions and restrictions (diet and exercise, for example). The ideal market by popular culture may be approached only through chemical and surgical alteration; aging and disability are to be avoided at all costs. Comparatively, bodies that will forever fail to fit the mold, such as the excessive, unclassifiable, and amputated bodies Witkin features, become exemplary of wrong or abnormal bodies—worthy of pity and scorn. However, Witkin’s camera eroticizes, animates, and aestheticizes them. They become classical, immortal beauties.

Much of Witkin’s work is disarming, as it solicits and holds the gaze/stare in fascination, humor, and fear. It demands that one questions why and how it is disturbing. Witkin’s work is most often characterized as portraying human violence, tragedy, shame, and ultimately death, but I see much of it remarking on the most fundamental issues of life and vitality: hedonism, exhibitionism, sensuality, desire, eroticism, the body in pain, and the scope of corporeal diversity. Witkin’s work challenges cultural assumptions and judgments of bodies, what they do, and what should bring them pleasure. It forces us to confront our greatest fears, anxieties, and inhibitions about our own bodies, morality, and inevitable mortality. His work asks us to see bodies on display in conventional and unconventional contexts, as it interrogates the interactions of scientific, artistic, and social gazes. Witkin’s photographs are visually sumptuous and excessive, dynamic, yet timeless. In these unsettling configurations of the body and arrangements of body parts, Witkin’s photographs showcase the inevitable eroticism of the flesh and exhibit how the –abnormal may be infinitely desirable.

## Notes

[1] My summaries of other critics’ views on Witkin’s work are drawn from Chris, SchnelleSchneyder, Adams, Kozloff (–Contention, “ –Stilled Lives), Cravens, Celant, Villaseñor, Heartney, Berry, Dermer, Schwenger, and Wood.

[2] Quoted from a discussion in September 2004 with Sarah Hasted, Director of Photography at the Ricco-Maresca Gallery, now Director of the Hasted-Hunt Gallery, New York.

[3] Witkin edited a volume for Burns: Masterpieces of Medical Photography: Selections from the Burns Archive. He also curated the exhibit from which the following catalogue was published: Harms Way: Lust & Madness, Murder & Mayhem: A Book of Photographs.

[4] One particularly illuminating example in Gould and Pyle is the section titled –Physiological and Functional Anomalies, “ which includes (among random others): anomalies of body fluids, fetishism, juggling, fire worship, ventriloquism, strong men (modern Hercules), chronic opium eating, divers, runners, spontaneous combustion of the body, contortionism, acrobats, tight rope walkers, morbid desire for pain, bulimia, death from joy and laughter (used as arguments for rational, unemotional behavior), cannibals, artificial manufacture of –wild boys, “ magnetic, phosphorescent, and electric anomalies, deafness (Helen Keller included), blindness, and the –extraordinary compensation of other senses in affect.

[5] For many examples of the themes and functions of anatomical and surgical displays in art history, see Kemp et al. In her discussion of dissection and art, Barbara Maria Stafford writes that the Renaissance flowering of artistic and scientific studies of anatomy and classical philosophies reached a zenith in the Enlightenment and emerged in art theory and practices, including physiognomic studies, portraiture, and still life. In addition, dissection practices and metaphors, according to Stafford, informed visual displays of bodies in medical and freak venues and other forms of vernacular culture. Anatomy lessons, dissection, and sketching from live and wax models and from medical illustrations were prominent in academic painting instruction from the Renaissance. In addition, Lynda Nead has argued that such art training initially focused on medical displays of male bodies and shifted to females in the 19th century.

[6] Burns (Early Medical Photography 1262) writes that the higher the social status of the patient, the more likely they were to be draped, and patients who were photographed over time to document their treatments were generally clothed in continuously improving styles to indicate their –progress to rehabilitation or cure. In relation, military officers were most often photographed in their uniforms to indicate rank, whereas enlisted men wore close to nothing in their medical photographs.

[7] Such differentiations between the erotic and the pornographic are made, for example, by Barthes.

[8] Gilman argues that photography constructs and informs histories of mental illness, disability, asylums, institutionalization, and evolution.

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