

3 ARTS FEATURE

9/11 seconds of light

Controversial photo artist Andres Serrano was in his element documenting post-9/11 America, writes **Helen Murray**

EVER since the Republican Jesse Helms condemned him in the Senate in 1989, Andres Serrano has been at the forefront of American photographic art. Sometimes all a good artist needs is a little public furore.

It was the image entitled 'Piss Christ', a photograph of a crucifix submerged in a jar of Serrano's own urine, that sparked the incendiary war of words between the art world and the political establishment over public funding for artists. Serrano was condemned as an attention-seeking heretic and his work torn to shreds at public demonstrations by outraged Republicans. He has never looked back since.

Despite the vociferous criticism from certain corners, Serrano is considered one of America's finest contemporary photographers, and acclaimed publishers Taschen have put together a collection of his work which is due to be published at the end of this month.

America and Other Work is a journey across the United States. The landmarks captured in Serrano's pictures are an illustration of the landscape, its people and the events which have shaped recent history. The chapter devoted to his 'Bodily Fluids' series is a reflection of America's reaction to the Aids epidemic in the early to mid 1980s.

Similarly the collection entitled, 'America', a series of portraits from firefighters to 'Miss Pre-teen' is an illustration of American nationalism post-11 September.

While 'America' has the same arresting quality as Serrano's previous work, it does not have the shock value provoked by his earlier pieces that were often violently graphic and sexually explicit. Serrano admits much of his work is reliant upon the reaction of the viewer to achieve its full potential.

"I have never thought about selling work and I never thought I would sell much as an artist and so my agenda as an audience has never been to sell, it has always been to show," explained Serrano from his home in downtown New York.

"Criticism will always attract attention so although I am sometimes hurt by those who dismiss my work; that kind of commentary inevitably brings you a greater audience and I am always happy when my work attracts spectators from outside the art world."

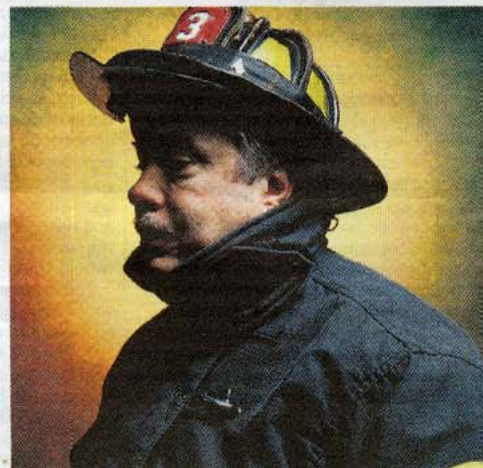
Serrano describes 'America' as "a show which began on 11 September". His portrait of a solemn firefighter warily eyeing the camera following the image of ominous, hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan portrays an increasingly disparate nation at odds with itself and suspicious of the world outside.

Serrano was determined to represent as many American walks of life as possible, and as a New Yorker of Caribbean descent, his pursuit of the Klu Klux Klan partly represented his own personal fascination with the separatist cult.

"I wanted to take pictures of the Klan but I had no desire to picture them without their masks or identify them in any way. I met them with their masks off and they were very disappointing, a lot of the time they were very poor and quite uneducated. I had no interest in them, but once they put their hoods and masks on they assumed a power and an aura they didn't have ordinarily."

Certain elements within the art world have criticised Serrano for this image and accused him of not subjecting the Klansmen to the same caustic treatment given to the crucifix steeped in urine or the Japanese geisha-like girls bound with rope.

Despite the imposing nature of the Klansmen picture created by Serrano, he is assuming



Serrano portraits of Aya Basemah, Covert to Islam and firefighter John L. Thomasian

'I met the Klan with their masks off and they were a big let down'

the viewer possesses a critical eye and is willingly suggestible. Perhaps he just has a high opinion of his audience?

"I never feel as though my work is finished until it has an audience," admits Serrano. "There are some who feel this book traces the maturing of my work

and I suppose you could say it has softened in some aspects. I'm just glad to have come through it because the experience has left me with a sense of empowerment. I feel as though I have put myself inside the lion's head and come out alive."

'America' was a three-year project, and Serrano believes that particular journey is over.

"I feel I have gone as far as I can go with that particular type of work – portraits. I'd like to try the moving image and concentrate on a film perhaps."

"After all the criticism and outrage that has been heaped upon me in recent years there is one thing I have learned: stay true to your instincts."