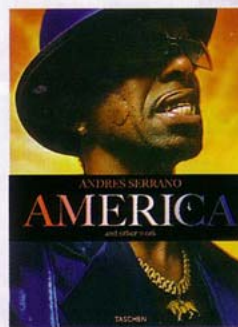


Closeup

BEST BOOKS

ANDRES SERRANO PAYS HOMAGE TO
OUR DIVERSITY AS ONLY HE COULD.**ALL AMERICANS**

Below: Jewel-Joy Stevens, America's Little Yankee Miss. Opposite, from top, left to right: Capt. Tracy Thompson, American Eagle; Stephen, slave; Snoop Dogg; Aya Basemah, a convert to Islam; J.B. Plimp; Ken Cox, set designer; Boy Scout John Schneider; Bishop Mercurius; firefighter John L. Thomasian.

Andres Serrano traces the origin of his new book, *America* (Taschen, \$60), to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In the aftermath, he says, he wanted to make a statement about what America is—or, rather, who America is. Serrano, who became one of contemporary art's big names in the early 1990s when his photograph of a plastic crucifix immersed in his own urine, titled "Piss Christ," ran afoul of Senator Jesse Helms and right-

wing Christian groups, has always used symbols to express his ideas. But in *America*, the symbols are his subjects—from Boy Scouts to Hooters waitresses and an array of celebrities, including George Steinbrenner, Snoop Dogg, and Yoko Ono. The bright color images, each with a specially painted backdrop, capture an arch hyper-reality. Here, Serrano talks with writer Julie Ault about art and about what America means to him.

In *America*, your subjects are diverse, while your use of backdrops and the uniform distance you shot them from put everyone on equal ground.

Isn't that what America is all about? Being on equal ground? Every backdrop was painted especially for one individual. Every individual became part of one picture: *America*.

In your work from the 1980s, you constructed and photographed scenes first conjured up in your imagination and then realized with the help of props and visual strategies. What are you looking for?

I am looking to express my unconscious. In *America*, the props and uniforms are real. Nevertheless, they still feel like figments of my imagination. Even when dealing with reality, I try to make it look like fantasy or theater. That's what makes it art for me.

What criteria do you use when choosing a subject?

It was easy to come up with a cast of characters, starting with some of the more obvious ones—the Boy Scout or airline pilot. Later, some of the people I sought became the embodiment of issues and ideas that represent different aspects of America. My choice of models is a statement in itself: I champion the underdog and unheralded as much as I applaud the normal or original.

You almost invariably use a straight-on, direct point of view. And you don't use digital enhancement or special effects. You don't even crop when printing—all cropping takes place in camera...

Even though I consider myself a conceptual artist, I am a traditionalist when it comes to photography. I like to use film and shoot straight. No gimmicks. Ideas are more important than effects. And effects are always better when they're real.

Do you identify with any photographic traditions such as documentary or street photography?

In *America*, I felt I was reporting the news. I was documenting what I saw. Of course, not everyone sees the same thing, even when they think they do.

Can you talk about your relation to fame and infamy, which seem to be very American ideals?

America loves a hero and an antihero. We are just as fascinated by the bad guys as we are by the good guys. In my own case, there still seems to be a question, in some people's minds, as to whether I'm a good guy or a bad guy. ■

84



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