

'America' puts controversial artist back into perspective

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Photographer Andres Serrano joined an ever-growing list of maligned and misunderstood artists when his notorious "Piss Christ" was singled out in 1989 by U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms as proof that the artist was "taunting the American people."

More than 15 years later, Serrano stands among the most venerable artists of our time. His stunning new book, "Andres Serrano: America and Other Work," shows us why.

Following the events of Sept. 11, 2001, Serrano set out to capture his view of America as a country of true diversity — one made up not of stereotypes or clichés, but of individuals.

He said, "I want to enlist in the war effort as an artist."

Instead of bullets, Serrano began shooting images — beautiful, intensely colored images of a remarkable range of people, representing "My America. Without apology or prejudice."

In each case, he photographed his subjects from an angle slightly below eye level. As viewers, we are therefore unconsciously looking up at them. Subtle as it is, this approach encourages us to see Serrano's subjects as people who are suspended in an esteemed position, regardless of whether he or she is a bishop or a porn star, a neo-Nazi or a Holocaust survivor, a federal judge or a heroin addict.

The series of more than 100 works also features celebrities — often controversial ones: Hollywood stars (Anna Nicole Smith), literary figures (Brett Easton Ellis), artists (Yoko Ono) and musicians (Snoop Dogg), strongly suggesting that the quirkiness of stardom is quintessential to American culture. Occupying about a third of

Andres Serrano: America and Other Work

Edited by Dian Hanson. Taschen, 368 pp., \$59.99.

the book, Serrano's "America" series serves as a powerful negation of the artist's reputation as a gadfly. As with other controversial artists of the past 20 years (Robert Mapplethorpe, Karen Finley and Chris Ofili), his name was brought to public awareness through a political brouhaha over public funding for the arts. A single work by Serrano ("Piss Christ") was removed from the context of his body of work and described to the general public in the crudest possible terms. Word spread like a rumor among high school kids that Serrano, using taxpayer's money, had dunked a crucifix in a bottle of urine and called it art. Few even knew that the work was a photograph. Even fewer understood that it was one in a series of works intended to challenge taboos, which included images of similarly submerged figurines ranging from The Thinker to Satan.

The irony is that the controversy made Serrano a celebrity. Like those featured in "America," he is both the victim and the benefactor of a society that is contradictory, especially in regard to notions of morality. Vividly illustrating more than a dozen bodies of work produced over more than 20 years, "America and Other Work" legitimizes Serrano as an artist of profound substance, indelible vision and enduring integrity.

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