


# America And Other Work

The master of controversy brings together his work, old and new, in a retrospective book

 **Andres Serrano is sure to offend. In fact it's probably his mission statement. At a time when a lot of fine-art photography is thoughtful and beautiful, Serrano shoots technically conventional images of controversial subject matter. These then tend to cause adverse reactions from a viewing audience. A case in point is his *Piss Christ*. If you don't know what you are looking at, it feels like a deeply spiritual work. Then you read the title of the piece – 'Piss Christ'. Nothing is more likely to set pulses racing than a bit of blasphemy. When it was displayed in Australia it did**

**just that. The work caused uproar and was vandalised twice.**

Whether you like his work or not, you have to admire Serrano's bravado. He does what art is meant to do – makes you think. The images seem to scream 'since when did art have to be beautiful and stagnant? Many are undeniably magnificent, but there is nothing peaceful about them. Deliberately difficult, they are what make him a true fine-art photographer. Beware – *Piss Christ* is by no means the most offensive image in *America And Other Work*. Serrano's almost brutal look at the history of sex includes fornication with dwarves, bondage and oral sex. Of course it's all done in a very matter-of-fact manner that asks politely, 'Why in the world could you be with upset with this?' *The Morgue* too doesn't shy away from the uncomfortable. The photographer gets his camera right in close to the bodies of those passed. A hand or an eye fills the lens, leaving the onlooker to turn to the title such as *Hacked To Death II* or *Child Abuse*, to tell the story outside the frame of the shot.

His new work *America* takes up the first half of the book. 100 people have been photographed; who he thinks embodies the United States. The series starts gently with a boy scout and a postal worker, but you can sense the building tension, like a finely orchestrated piece of music. There's a distinct humour to the highly conservative studio portraits. Each is



■ *Stephen, slave 2004*

© Andres Serrano



■ *Jewel-Joy Stevens, America's Little Yankee Miss*

shot against a yellow and orange background, hinting at a nation aflame. Street hustlers sit opposite smug investment bankers, cowboys with Indians, and butchers with plastic surgeons.

There is one clear message in Serrano's work. As an artist, he implores us to look at society today. You may not like what you see, but that's not his problem.

## Verdict THE Photographer

**Author:** Andres Serrano, Eleanor Hearney  
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■ Graphic sexual acts are the tip of a very controversial iceberg when you open *America And Other Work*. Be brave and dive in.

