Taboo Icons: The Bodily Photography of Andres Serrano

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Abstract

Andres Serrano’s photography is often dismissed as being shocking for the sake of being shocking. His infamous photograph *Piss Christ* (1987) is the oft-cited example at the center of the National Endowment for the Arts controversies during the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s. I return to *Piss Christ* as a way to expand the interpretative scope of Serrano’s early photographs, which I call “taboo icons” because of their ambiguity and ability to crisscross symbolic boundaries in the unstable space between sacred and profane, thus making his images both powerful and potentially dangerous. Building upon previous scholarship that draws connections between modern and early modern aesthetic practices, I look to the material practices of Christianity in medieval Europe characterized by a sophisticated visual culture that mixed both the physical and the spiritual. The intensifying rejection and reverence of matter resulted in divergent responses, yet the contradictory nature of matter remained central to the ideological beliefs of Christianity where the doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection are at its core. Serrano’s visceral photographs are emphatically material and can productively be read vis-à-vis medieval visual culture. In doing so, this reading changes the narrow perception of Serrano’s early photographs and provides an alternative understanding of his artistic project that reinserts religion into contemporary American art discourse.

Keywords

photography; icon; Culture Wars; medieval; Christianity

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