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IN NY

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ANDRES SERRANO

# In God HE TRUSTS

## ANDRES SERRANO'S TEMPLE OF GRANDEUR

BY DELPHINE BARGUIRDJIAN PHOTOGRAPHED BY DANIELLE LEVITT

**A**ndres Serrano lives in a church in downtown Manhattan. Though you'd never know if you happen to walk by his building. It could almost pass for an NYU dorm with an overly friendly doorman. But past the threshold of Serrano's apartment, everything looks and even smells like a church. Crucifixes, confessionals, church pews and benches, even the sink in the bathroom was fashioned from a holy water urn. The whole two-story apartment is built in Jerusalem limestone and is decorated exclusively with religious artifacts from medieval and Renaissance—nothing past the 17th century. Serrano is passionate and obsessive about his collection of Catholic artifacts, hunting for pieces in London, Amsterdam, Paris, Madrid, at auctions and the local antique shops in Manhattan.

Serrano's immaculate apartment looks nothing like the standard paint-splattered artist studios we are used to seeing, but that is the way Serrano wants it. Though he does all of his photographing in his home with an assistant, Serrano says he is very particular about his space. "I like everything to be neat. I want it to look like a museum, but still be practical," says Serrano, pointing out that the church benches we are sitting on which have been repurposed

to double as storage space.

You wouldn't think the owner of the house is most known as the artist who sparked a storm of controversy with *Piss Christ*—a photo Serrano took in 1987 of a crucifix submerged in his own urine. Controversial as it was, Serrano insists it was not his intention to ruffle as many feathers as he did, though he certainly wasn't going to let that prospect hold him back. "I try to do strong work, what makes sense. I do work that isn't provocative and don't try to be controversial, but I always want to push the subject matter as far as I can."

Though Serrano created *Piss Christ* over 25 years ago, the piece still manages to spark polemic throughout the world. Just last year, Serrano's now infamous photograph was vandalized in a museum in France by a group of fundamentalists. The artist and museum are suing the vandals and a trial date has been set for November. A print of *Piss Christ* has also made its way back to New York, where it will be displayed at the Edward Tyler Nahem Gallery through October as part of a 25-year retrospective of Serrano's work.

"My name wasn't synonymous with controversy until *Piss Christ*, and the label has stuck," says Serrano, "I see myself as an aesthetic investigator, not as controversial. I see, I document, I ►



**“I want the pope to recognize that I am good Christian, to embrace me as a religious artist—I want to work with him.”**

thought represented America after 9/11. The series included portraits of an airline pilot, soldiers, firefighters, celebrities, children on welfare, a pimp, and even a Klu Klux Klan leader. “I don’t judge,” says Serrano of his portrait subjects, “I just try to make them look good.”

No stranger to vandals and critics, Serrano is used to defending his work, telling the French newspaper *Libération* that he has no sympathy for the blasphemous, and that his work has been consistently misinterpreted.

When I ask Serrano if he is a devout Christian, he replies with “Being a Catholic is like being an artist. If you say you’re a good artist or a good Christian, then you are.”

Raised Catholic, Serrano said he stopped practicing after his confirmation when he was 12. “I stopped going to church and stopped thinking about it until I got into my 30s, when Christianity was showing up everywhere in my work,” says Serrano, now 62 years old. “I’m not an anti-Christian bigot,” he says, “I want the pope to recognize that I am good Christian, to embrace me as a religious artist—I want to work with him. Call me the Caravaggio of my time.” Pointing to a photograph he took of what look like silhouettes of the Virgin Mary and Christ, Serrano states “This should go to the Vatican.”

A native New Yorker, Serrano was raised in Brooklyn in the 50s where he studied at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. He purchased the apartment he currently shares with his wife, artist Irina Movmyga, about 10 years ago and has no intention of going anywhere. “Leaving New York is not even an option,” says Serrano, “I’ve been to a lot of places, but I am rooted here.”

I met Serrano just days before he embarked on his trip to Cuba for the Havana Biennial. Though he’d never been to Cuba, Serrano’s mother grew up on the island before she moved to New York in the 40s. Having learned Spanish from his mother, Serrano says he feels Cuban and is visibly excited for the upcoming trip, though he generally doesn’t like to travel unless it is for work.

Serrano donated seven works to the Wifredo Lam Center for Contemporary Art, which organized the Biennale, and gave a lecture while in Cuba. When I met with Serrano, he was still going over the logistics of his trip, making sure everything was in order; “I want to go the right way: through New York, and with a Visa,” says Serrano, who says he is also asking to stay in the executive suite of the historic Hotel Nacional de Cuba. “I want my name on the same list as Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe. I’m not going as a tourist. I’m going as Andres Serrano.” ■

