

Ending up in church

The Dalmatian dog, named Luther, is the least Catholic element in a house crammed with religious ornaments, icons, furnishings and fittings. This is the Gothic-American style of the New Yorker Andres Serrano, an eccentric and extremely highly rated artist, who portrays crucifixes, blood and piss.

By Lulu Berton
photos by Joshua Lutz for *Style*

He came to the fore in the late Eighties with *Piss Christ*, a blasphemous image of a plastic crucifix **immersed in urine d'auteur** (his own), now estimated to be worth 160 thousand euro, a work which created a scandal, at the time, after an American senator tore a reproduction of the photograph into pieces in the US Senate. Today Andres Serrano is one of the most important photographers in the world, and his works have unquestionably left their mark. Such as *A History Of Sex*, an explicit exploration of various types of eroticism; *Nomads*, iconic portraits of the homeless, rooted out in the bowels of the New York underground; and *America*, one of the best portrayals of the United States, the protagonists of which were ordinary people.

Serrano, Cuban mother and Honduran father, gets very worked up when his Americanness is questioned. "I get really upset when critics and journalists speak of my origins, saying that I am Afro-Cuban. But when they speak of a white artist, like Richard Prince, Nan Goldin or Cindy Sherman, they never refer to their roots. **I am American, end of story.** Born and raised in New York. And, in my view, this attitude betrays a kind of ghettoisation that has nothing whatever to do with my work".

Serrano's home, located in the heart of Manhattan, just a stone's throw from Union Square, is an expression of the mystical side



of the artist. Your immediate sensation on entering it is that you have stepped into a **deconsecrated church** by mistake. Visitors are welcomed, in the large entrance hall, by saints, Virgin Marys and confessionals, while a sculpture of Christ on the cross dominates the space, inspiring an almost reverential awe in the onlooker. "It comes from Germany, and dates back to the 16th century" explains Serrano, "it was a bargain, although my antique dealer recounts that one day a German priest came into his shop and rebuked him saying: this Christ should not remain in private hands, it should be restored to the church, to Berlin. But, in my opinion, this statue has ended up in the **right place**: my house". To which he welcomes *Style*, together with Luther, the Dalmatian dog that never leaves his side, like a spotted shadow.

But is Mr Serrano a believer? "No, I don't feel the need to be. Even although I had a Catholic upbringing, studied Catechism and received all the sacraments, today I only go to church in pursuit of beauty, but not to seek peace with God. **I see Jesus every day** when I come home. He's hanging on the wall". With your art you have got us used to profane universes, and yet your house seems to express the sacredness of existence.

"You misunderstand me, as many others do. The aim of my art is not to provoke, quite the contrary. Even when I did the *Piss Christ*, I wasn't looking for scandal; it was an investigation on the body of Christ, my attempt to humanise religion. I enter into the tradition of sacred art: like **Caravaggio** and other artists who painted for the church, I glorify God".

Serrano purchased his idea of a dream house ten years ago "after viewing a heap of soulless places". He then began meticulous renovation work on the building, using age-old materials, starting from the walls – entirely made of stone, marble and limestone – and from the floors, covered in chestnut parquet. For the furnishings, he chose objects from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. "My house **abounds with symbols** of the church, sculptures and icons of Christianity, I am attracted by the Catholic aesthetic and by the *Cabala*".



The artist has been collecting Renaissance art for roughly twenty years, including works purchased from Sotheby's, Christie's and from the various antique dealers dotted around the world, although his favourites are still Maurice Margulies in America and Jacqueline Boccador in France. "This house is the perfect place for exhibiting my collection. I like its feeling of antiquity, and the chance to live with museum pieces. I like being able to sit on these pieces of furniture, I like being able to touch them: it's a very pleasant sensation. In a museum, I wouldn't be able to do this, but here no-one says: please don't touch". The **museum pieces** envelop the visitor from the moment he/she crosses the threshold, which is protected by a seventeenth century Flemish Annunciation scene, a copy of a Hieronymus Bosch painting portraying the treatment of madness ("it is so similar to the original in the Prado museum that it was probably painted by one

the staircase leading up to the first floor, we can just make out the house's only contemporary work of art: one of the photos that Serrano took for **The Klan Series**. "I knew the secretary of James Venable, ex leader of the Ku Klux Klan (who died in 1993), and it was she who organised the meeting in Georgia. Two days at a large gathering of the members: as the leader, Venable wore a green tunic. He was very old, almost 80. I photographed another eight of the group; I became friendly with them to loosen them up a bit before taking the shots. They seem just like normal people, but if they put on the outfit, they change".

Between a statue of St Francis of Assisi ("this is the piece I like least, it dates to the eighteenth century. Now I've become a snob – I only want art from the seventeenth century at the very latest") and a sculpture of a saint in prayer ("I got it at an auction of the Joseph E. Levine Foundation, a Hollywood film producer from the sixties"), it's impossible not to notice the **stuffed cat**.

"It's called Sybille because when I bought it I was engaged to Sybille de Saint-Phalle, Niki's niece (*French artist who died in 2002*, editor's note), who worked as PR manager for *Comme des Garçons* in Paris."

Serrano's house is built on three levels. On the ground floor, there is a large Renaissance reception room, with an enormous window overlooking the garden, and a kitchen. In the basement, there is a bedroom, the garden and a bathroom, and on the first floor there is an open space room with the main bathroom.

The bedroom overlooks the garden and, above the early twentieth century bed, there is another of the artist's favourite pieces: a thirteenth century Spanish sculpture of the Virgin Mary. "My room is my office: this is where I answer e-mails, where I work at the computer, and where I conclude deals by phone. It's the place from which I best enjoy relating with the world".

of the Master's students"), a pair of skulls on top of two ancient books and a beheaded St John the Baptist.

Meanwhile, works such as *Master Pain* and *Leo's Fantasy* spring to mind, works that created a scandal in the Nineties for their powerful sado-masochistic iconography. It is still difficult to find a correlation between the sacred furnishings and the provocative art of the owner of the house. It is Andres himself who gives meaning and coherence to this by pointing out that "they are classical pieces and **I consider myself a classical artist**. There is an affinity between me and the religious painters of the past, as I have the conviction that my work will stand the test of time".

When we reach the huge reception room, Andres sits *Style* on a sixteenth century settle which serves as a settee ("it's one of my favourite pieces. Rudolf Nureyev was going to buy it then, but in the end he changed his mind, as he thought the price was too high"). The artist makes himself comfortable inside a confessional "which I bought in London ten months ago, when the Photographer's Gallery invited me to photograph one of my favourite designers, Alexander McQueen".

Just behind the confessional, on the wall of