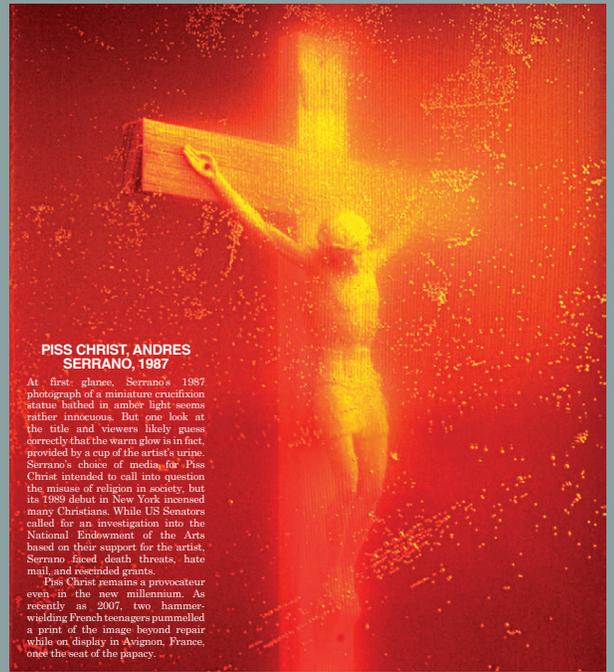


Top 10 Controversial
Depictions of

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JESUS
BY
ALLISON
BARKER



PISS CHRIST, ANDRES SERRANO, 1987

At first glance, Serrano's 1987 photograph of a miniature crucifixion statue bathed in amber light seems rather innocuous. But one look at the title and viewers likely guess correctly that the warm glow is in fact provided by a cup of the artist's urine. Serrano's choice of media for *Piss Christ* intended to call into question the misuse of religion in society, but its 1989 debut in New York incensed many Christians. While US Senators called for an investigation into the National Endowment of the Arts based on their support for the artist, Serrano faced death threats, hate mail, and severed grants.

Piss Christ remains a provocateur even in the new millennium. As recently as 2007, two hammer-wielding French teenagers pummelled a print of the image beyond repair while on display in Avignon, France, once the seat of the papacy.



HOMELESS JESUS, TIMOTHY P. SCHMALZ, 2013

A life size bronze sculpture of Jesus depicted as a sleeping vagrant spooked the upscale community in Davidson, North Carolina this February. Installed on a park bench near Saint Albans Episcopal Church, the work by Canadian artist Timothy Schmalz incited at least one neighborhood woman to call the police. "She thought it was an actual homeless person," reports David Boraks, editor of DavidsonNews.net.

But relief over the inanimate nature of the apparent hobo quickly gave way to general

dismay as residents realized the more permanent nature of homeless Jesus' residency in the park. Given to Saint Albans in loving memory of a progressive parishioner, it's unlikely the sculpture will be easily shooed away.

Although many community members still hope to see the work removed, Reverend David Buck, the liberal rector of Saint Albans, continues to encourage the community to embrace Schmalz' message. "This is a relatively affluent church, to be honest, and we need to be reminded ourselves that our faith expresses itself in active concern for the marginalized of society." Right on, Reverend.



^ AMERICAN JESUS, DAVID LACHAPPELLE, 2009

Unveiled in during the synonymous exhibition at Paul Kasmin Gallery in 2010, LaChapelle's *American Jesus* triptych depicts Michael Jackson as a modern day martyr. Referring to the child molestation scandal which, permanently sullied Jackson's reputation despite his court ruled innocence, LaChapelle reported to *NOVNESS* in 2010, "Michael Jackson was destroyed. Like no other person in our times."

Quite a literal image, *American Jesus*: Hold me, carry me boldly, pictures a handsome Jesus wearing a ripped denim ensemble, while cradling Jackson's dead body in his lap. In staging the image like a homoerotic piece, LaChapelle places Jesus in the traditional role of Mary, while MJ takes on the role of Christ. Early, the image seems to have predicted the pop icon's demise. LaChapelle began working on the series long before Jackson's untimely death in 2009.

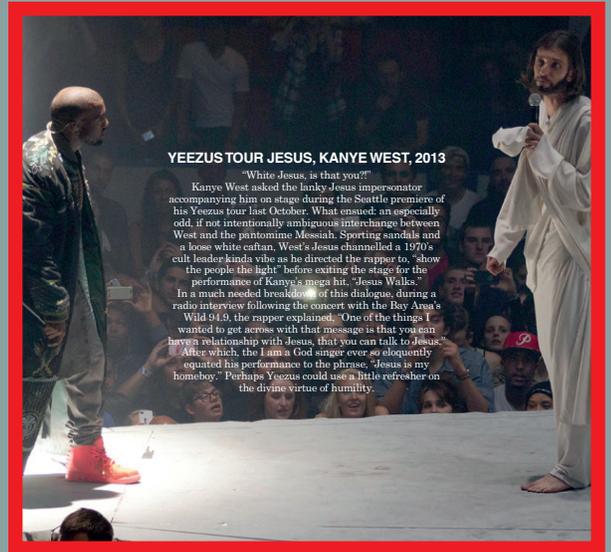
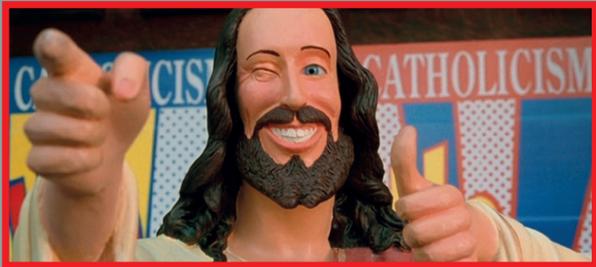
v BUDDY CHRIST, FROM THE FILM DOGMA, DIRECTED BY KEVIN SMITH, 1999

Dogma, the satirical critique of Catholicism directed by Kevin Smith spurred mass protest and world-wide debate when released in 1999. The film follows two fallen angels, played by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, who have devised a plan to wessel their way back into heavens through a loophole in Catholic scripture. To do so, they will have to sneak into the rededication ceremony of an old Church in New Jersey, headed up by Cardinal Glick (George Carlin). It is Cardinal Glick who introduces us to Buddy Christ. In an effort to make Catholicism more accessible, the Cardinal has replaced the stodgy crucifixion image with this caricatured version of Jesus as part of his "Catholicism Now" campaign.

Carlin announces at the Buddy Christ unveiling, "The crucifix... while it has been a time honoured symbol of our faith, Holy Mother Church has decided to retire this highly recognizable, yet wholly depressing image of our Lord crucified... Christ didn't come to Earth to give us the willies. He came to help us out, and it is with that take on our Lord in mind that we came up with... the Buddy Christ."

Although the film was meant as a playful parody, a lot of religious experts took *Dogma* very seriously. While in post-production, word spread to the religious community about the film's controversial message. Over 30,000 pieces of handwritten hate mail found their way to Smith. Naturally, death threats followed.

Today, Duddy Christ's enduring legacy lives on as the official image of the humorous @jesus Twitter handle (at time of print).



YEEZUS TOUR JESUS, KANYE WEST, 2013

"White Jesus, is that you?" Kanye West asked the lanky Jesus impersonator accompanying him on stage during the Seattle premiere of his *Yeezus* tour last October. What ensued: an especially odd, if not intentionally ambiguous interchange between West and the pantomime Messiah. Sporting sandals and a loose white caftan, West's Jesus channelled a 1970's cult leader kinda vibe as he directed the rapper to, "show the people this light" before exiting the stage for the performance of Kanye's mega hit, "Jesus Walks." In a much needed breakdown of this dialogue, during a radio interview following the concert with the *Bay Area's* Willi 91.9, the rapper explained: "One of the things I wanted to get across with that message is that you can have a relationship with Jesus, that you can talk to Jesus." After which, the *I am a God* singer ever so eloquently squatted his performance to the phrase, "Jesus is my homeboy." Perhaps *Yeezus* could use a little refresh on the divine virtue of humility.

< HEAD OF CHRIST, REMBRANDT, 1648

Rembrandt's studies for "Head of Christ" perhaps appear the most "normal" images of Jesus on this list, but in the context of 17th century Holland, they mark a vital turning point in the trajectory of Christian art. For centuries prior, artists relied on strict prototypes as they endeavoured to represent Jesus in all of his divine glory. Rembrandt, however, who insisted on the importance of painting from life, made no exceptions in his portrayal of Jesus. As a way of reviving historical truth and representing Jesus' humanity, art historians believe the rebellious painter employed a young Sephardic Jew from his neighbourhood in Amsterdam to pose as his model. The seven studies constituting *Head of Christ*, represent both the first humanistic and the first ethnographically accurate representations of Jesus in art history.



^ ECCE HOMO, ELIAS GARCIA MARTINEZ (1930), CECILIA GIMÉNEZ (2012)

When the descendants of 19th century artist Elias Garcia Martinez donated funds to restore the Church which housed their ancestors aging fresco, they soon discovered the work had already been done, gratis.

As it turned out, over the course of several afternoons during August 2012, an elderly Spanish woman and apparent mural enthusiast, Cecilia Giménez, had taken it upon herself, to "restore" Martinez' Ecco Homo fresco in Sanctuary of Mercy, a small Roman Catholic church in northern Spain. The result: the original depiction of Christ moments before his crucifixion now resembles what's been accurately described as "crayon sketch of a very hairy monkey in an ill-fitting tunic." Since, the botched restoration has become a local tourist attraction so popular that the town started charging an admission fee.

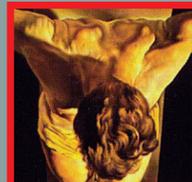
The rogue restorer now wants a cut.

> CHAGALL'S IMAGES OF JESUS THROUGHOUT HIS OEUVRE

Better known for his whimsical depictions of winged fish, angels, flowers, and fiddles, Russian-French artist Marc Chagall's subversive images of the crucifixion challenge the often over simplified view of his oeuvre. Although Jewish himself, from an early age Chagall admired the Christian image of the crucifixion, which he saw in Orthodox Churches around his hometown in Belarus. He developed the idea that the crucifixion represented the ultimate portrayal of a Jewish martyr.

Years later, as Hitler rose to power in Europe, Chagall began to incorporate depictions of Jesus into his work. This motif developed steadily throughout the war, evolving as the tragedies mounted against his people.

At the time, critics dismissed the work as naive, but looking back, by using a Christian image to symbolize the suffering of the Jews, many now believe Chagall intended to captivate both Jews and Christians alike, confronting the widest possible audience with the horrifying reality of the Holocaust.



> DALI, CHRIST OF SAINT JOHN ON THE CROSS, 1951

Inspired by a "somnia" dream, Dalí's Christ of Saint John on the Cross lacks the traditional trappings of most crucifixion scenes. Convinced all the nails, blood, and thorns would mar his depiction of Christ, the moustached maestro omitted these more conventional aspects from his 1951 interpretation of the crucifixion. Further distinguishing his version of events, Dalí depicts the scene from a bird's eye view. In this way, the artist emphasizes the pain inflicted by the body's own weight during crucifixion while simultaneously eschewing the need to render any ordinarily clichéd facial expressions required by a full frontal perspective.

When shown in 1961 at the Kevlingrove Art Gallery in Glasgow, Dalí's artistic liberties incited outrage. Armed in the fashion of early man, one gallery goer became so incensed he attacked the painting with a stone and his bare hands.

Time seems to have softened opinion across the pond and in 2009, Guardian art critic, Jonathan Jones, remarked that the work is "far better or worse, probably the most enduring vision of the crucifixion painted in the 20th century."

^ FIRE IN MY BELLY, DAVID WOJNAROWICZ, 1987

It's no surprise that Wojnarowicz' 1987 short film sparked heated debate when Smithsonian curators included the work in the National Portrait Gallery's 2010 exhibition "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture." A poignant metaphor for the horrors of AIDS on the human body Fire in my Belly suggests the innocence of AIDS victims in a scene that portrays a restrained son of God swarmed by giant ants.

As an examination of representations of homosexuality in American portraiture, Hide/Seek generally offended conservative groups; but Christian lobbyists specifically targeted Wojnarowicz' work when they called on the government to investigate the Smithsonian's use of public funds in displaying an "insult" to Christian values. Although the show itself was privately funded, the National Portrait Gallery buckled under the pressure. In an effort to avoid closing the entire exhibition, Fire in my Belly became the first work of art ever removed from a Smithsonian exhibition due to public outcry. ■

