



Ron Athey's work has enshrined and lifted to the level of high art all sorts of kinky behaviors: bondage and sadomasochism, bloodletting, mock castration, self-mutilation, branding, flogging and genital stapling.

are long over, but they too reappear transformed in his work: During performances of *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* in the mid- to late '90s, he symbolized this epoch of his life by inserting 30 hypodermic needles into his arm.

So what does it all signify? Does it have artistic merit beyond shock value? And why is Athey compelled to express himself in this way?

"In a culture obsessed with bodily health and beauty, it's particularly shocking to see people cut themselves in the name of art," asserts Andy Lee in *The Human Canvas*, a documentary he directed for the United Kingdom's Channel 4 in 2006. Yet there is a sense in which the sort of bodily modification that Athey and other body artists inhabit on stage is not at all alien to our culture, but is in fact endemic to it, and perhaps today more than ever. Consider the current vogue for plastic surgery that has trickled down from our celebrity gods and goddesses to mere mortals cursed with imperfect features. (Remember the bizarre television show *The Swan* that aired on Fox for two seasons in 2004?) We can find it as well in the world of sports. "I really can't see the difference between going to watch someone get their face bashed in in the boxing ring and sitting in a dungeon and watching someone get pierced," Athey points out. "In the end, that person's in fine health, whereas the boxer is punch-drunk with a broken nose and a couple of teeth missing."

Of course, there is also religion, Christianity in particular, with its iconographies of pain and martyrdom so thoroughly embedded in Western culture. One thinks, naturally, of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, with its protracted, bloody sequences depicting the torture and death of Jesus. Is the film any less brutal or sadomasochistic than the work of Ron Athey? At least in the latter case, the pain inflicted is consensual.

MANY WAYS TO HEAL

"I'm a nihilist who believes in the healing process," Athey says. "I'm not utopian enough to imagine what it would have been like to have savvy, life-loving, queer-friendly parents." His process began at the beginning of the '80s with *Premature Ejaculation*, a collaboration with Rozz Williams of "deathrock" band Christian Death.

There were only a few performances, as venues weren't easy to come by: In one of them, Athey reportedly ate a crucified road-kill cat.

Nothing much appears on Athey's résumé between *Premature Ejaculation* and the early '90s. He did some more theatrical performance work with the bands Christian Death and Nervous Gender, but mostly it was what he terms his "heroin vacation." Not until the beginning of the '90s did his career begin in earnest. He worked as a performer and go-go dancer at Club Fuck!, which he describes as "a sort of queer techno/dance/body modification club" that was an integral part of Los Angeles' hardcore queer scene at the time. In 1992 he began performing *Martyrs and Saints*, the first of his elaborate performance pieces treating the religious themes that would run through his work from that point on, and the first installment of a *Torture Trilogy* that would be followed by *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* and *Deliverance*. In these pieces Athey (mis)appropriates various talismans redolent with Christian significance. For instance, in the guise of a modern-day St. Sebastian of indeterminate gender, he wears a literal crown of thorns that causes blood to drip down his face and onto the floor.

The 1998 feature-length documentary *Hallelujah! Ron Athey: A Story of Deliverance* follows him and his entourage from their 1995 tour of Mexico City through their summer 1997 run in Zagreb, Croatia. (In the wake of the NEA furor, Athey had found venues outside the United States as more accommodating.) Through a mixture of interview and performance footage, we see Athey as the charismatic leader of a cult of queer acolytes who drive forward his "frenzy to make it bigger, make it more." In a vignette called "Nurses' Penance," Athey re-creates the institutional terror of a hospital setting, depicting a patient brutalized by huge drag queen nurses with

sewn-together lips. In another piece we see him writhing naked on one end of a double-sided dildo.

Catherine Opie, a photographer who has worked extensively

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...AND
SITTING
IN A
DUNGEON
AND
WATCHING
SOMEONE
GET
PIERCED."
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