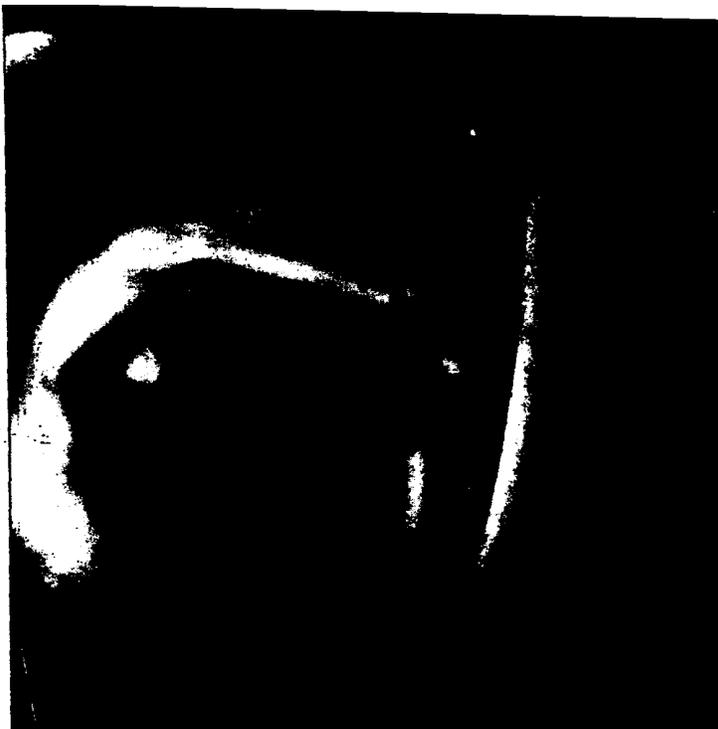


Photo: Doug Hansen



Kirstel (above, left), conducts a critique class. Pictured above is his photo from *Recess*, and another from *Water Babies* (below, right).

# Iconoclast With A Camera

*Nationally-known photographer Richard Kirstel challenges his audience with images sometimes shocking, always disturbing.*

By Christina Rizzo

A small moment of truth came for photographer M. Richard Kirstel on Oct. 29, 1970, as he was arrested by a Towson State College security officer in front of a group of student demonstrators. His offense: attempting to install his controversial exhibition, *Pas de Deux*, in Van Bokkelen Hall's art gallery after the showing was abruptly cancelled without notice to the artist.

His supporters were on the verge of riot, the story goes, as Kirstel refused to move his work from the premises. He defused their anger by persuading them to march nonviolently with his photographs while he went with the police. Peace prevailed, and Kirstel was given a suspended sentence on two counts of trespassing. The Supreme Court turned down his appeal.

If he had it to do over again, the 49-year-old photographer muses now, he would not quell the riot. "I evaded the responsibility for cracked heads," he says. "By modern, middle-class, nonviolent American standards, what I did was right. It was not, however, the action of a leader.

"I should have allowed the riot, and then taken my case all the way up to the Supreme Court where it belonged as a violation of the First Amendment."

Harsh words from an artist whose riot-raising photographs offered a frank and open depiction of lovemaking. Yet from Kirstel, an artist, teacher and philosopher who rarely shuns controversy, such words are not surprising.

Leonine in appearance and iconoclastic in temperament, he has taken a loner's stand in art and education. His demanding standards and penetrating critiques have influenced generations of students at the Maryland Institute, College of Art. And his colleagues swear either by him or at him.

Such reactions are in keeping with his philosophy of art, developed from his mentor, semanticist and critic Kenneth Burke.

Says Kirstel: "It is the function of the artist to shock people. The very essence of the aesthetic is shock. Not just cheap shocks — but to shock by making the demand upon the viewer or the auditor or the reader or whomever that they re-evaluate; that they see something a little bit differently from the way they did before.

"There is no greater shock than asking someone to re-evaluate their reference points."

His works bear witness to this view. Always in serial form, black and white silver print, and very deep in tone, they examine death, alienation, madness and despair through a characteristic set of symbols.

"Nudes, naked, bodies, totems," says Kirstel. "that's what everything comes down to. I spend a lot of time on dolls — what more powerful totem is there?"

A collection of broken, bedraggled, and dismembered Goodwill-vintage dolls clutters his Midtown Belvedere apartment. They have responded with expressions of undisturbed innocence to bizarre events depicted in his work, from *Karen's Party*, on an alienated young girl's fantasy, to *Water Babies*, a death meditation.

The models who appear in works such as his recently completed *Recess* are "naked" rather than nude," Kirstel says. The distinction is important. "The nude is laconic, general, timeless — undraped, and yet clothed in a certain formality," he explains.

"To be naked is to be lacking, vulnerable, stripped, even destitute — I

was naked and ye clothed me,' or as Marianne Moore put it, 'All are naked, none is safe.'"

Likewise, he says, "I don't work with professional models. I don't want perfect bodies. Karen was my last." His models are usually neighbors and friends; his next, he adds, is an older woman on whom he will base an exploration of the Cupid and Psyche myth.

He calls his style "haptic," an original term encompassing composition, intent and effect. Haptic photography, he says, concentrates upon space rather than upon the event depicted; it bears witness rather than merely witnessing; it projects the artist's feelings rather than representing a scene.

"The photographer is required by the very nature of his medium to look through the camera at what is," Kirstel wrote in an introduction to his 1975 exhibition *Extended Realism*. "He must...directly perceive events of existence in order to describe his perceptions in effective visual terms. Thus photography functions as language. It gives meaning and structure to direct perceptions of the world environment..."

"The camera is not just a net to harvest images like a school of fish, but rather a probe to explore the space of our existence."

Complex concepts, complex photographs. Says critic Alan Coleman, a long-time friend and colleague of Kirstel's, "He has been called heavy-handed and melodramatic. But a great many people in photography do not really like to look at pictures. With 90 percent of today's photographers, if you sat people down in front of one of their pictures for one hour, most of them would go stark raving nuts.

"Most photographers don't make pictures to sustain or reward such attention. Richard does. He asks the viewer to step into slow time, and most people aren't using their capacity to do so."

For this and other reasons, says Coleman, Kirstel is "one of the most under-recognized photographers of our time." He is certainly better known outside of Baltimore. *Pas de Deux*, banned in Boston, was acclaimed in France. Kirstel has had solo exhibitions from Chicago to New Orleans, and has been included in shows from San Francisco to Bridgeport, Connecticut. Last year, he was among the artists noted in Naomi Rosenblum's *World History of Photography*.

With only limited exposure in Baltimore, however — including a 1974 exhibition at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, the aborted show at Towson State, and occasional faculty shows at the Maryland Institute — he is currently preparing a major retrospective to appear at Mount Vernon's Roe Gallery in October.

A photographer with a strong sense of theater, Kirstel began his career in an appropriately theatrical manner. As a Navy journalist during the mid-50s, he was ordered by his commanding officer to take over for the regular photographer, who was out sick.

"I told him I didn't even know how to put film in a camera," Kirstel recalls with a chuckle. "He said, I'm not suggesting it; I'm telling you." Kirstel obeyed.

His tour of duty completed, he took off for New York and Chicago to study with prominent photographers Ralph Hatterslev, Minor White, Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan. A short, successful stint as a commercial photographer followed.

"Then I quit," says Kirstel. "I wanted to be something called an artist. I had an idea of what it meant at the time. I resigned my retainer with the ad agency, I packed everything up and moved to New York.

"I gave myself a five-year span — I was about 30 — somehow five years seemed long enough to find out, but not too long to go back to making a living. I went to work in a coffeehouse, worked as a bartender, and I made pictures."

The time was the mid-60s, when only two galleries in the city were devoted to photography, and when a photographer was lucky to make \$50 for a print. The outlook was bleak.

"I had no idea of how to peddle my pictures," he recalls. "And I wasn't even sure what I wanted to

photograph. I really wanted to make pictures, but I didn't know of what."

Luck came to his aid with a commission for a book catalog on a major exhibition of African sculpture. "I became very steeped in African sculpture," he says, "and everything I did changed. I got pretty certain about what I wanted to photograph."

From that project he developed a sculptor's eye for photographic composition, a viewpoint (and accompanying terminology) which he has been refining ever since. He also developed the idea for *Pas de Deux*, which followed soon after.

*Pas de Deux* has served as a cornerstone for Kirstel's career. According to the artist, it was "the first time in the United States that a group of photographs dealing with lovemaking and made by a serious photographer was displayed and published by respectable galleries and publisher."

A *Popular Photography* review hailed it as an "honest, moving celebration of the act of love." The late Diane Arbus called it sentimental, while another critic complained to Kirstel of a lack of sentiment. Eugene ("Bud") Leake, president of the Maryland Institute at the time, said the photographs were

romantic, very tender without sweetness."

Coleman wrote in *Light Readings*: "Kirstel's pictures are of major importance because in them, for the first time...sex is accepted implicitly as a natural act. Nothing is hidden, yet nothing is thrust forward out of defiance or rebellion; at no time is there the slightest hint of embarrassment, shame or guilt. This, in itself, is a considerable though refreshing, shock; it is rarely enough that one encounters a healthy mind. In the presence of one, the rhetorical questions (what is pornography? Where do you draw the line?) do not have meaning."

Kirstel was teaching part-time at the Maryland Institute when *Pas de Deux* was invited to Towson State. About the time the show was cancelled — against the art faculty's wishes, partially because of a panic over a withdrawal of funds — the Institute's photography department chairman, Jaromir Stephany, invited Kirstel onto the full-time staff.

He arrived in the middle of the golden age of the Institute's photography department. Stephany, on the lookout for diverse and experienced faculty, was putting together a group which would include Kirstel and the current

department chairman, Jack Wilgus.

They "clicked," Stephany says: Kirstel with his wide range of information and contacts, Wilgus with his direct, passionate approach, Stephany with his knowledge of photographic history.

"We were able to do an awful lot for a few years," Stephany comments. "Bud Leake was extremely tolerant. I guess he recognized we were doing something right, so he left it alone. We had students, and they were happy, so we could do pretty much what we wanted."

The department was growing by leaps and bounds, and rapidly acquiring a national reputation for quality. Kirstel's New York connections brought photographic notables as speakers for workshops and mini courses. The graduate program began to develop.

Kirstel says, "We had a strong sense of what we were doing, and a certain sense of history, as if the future were rushing toward us. The faculty had a lot of fluidity, a lot of eccentricity."

The attitude of the students was different then as well: less pragmatic, less career-oriented, more idealistic, more interested in knowledge for its own sake.

The golden age ended in 1973, when Stephany left to become chairman of the University of Maryland Baltimore County's photo department. Tom Baird took his place briefly, followed by Jack Wilgus.

In 1975, Kirstel participated with 22 other artists in a photographic survey of Maryland funded by Equitable Trust Company and administered by the Institute. In late December, however, he withdrew his work.

"As (the project) took shape, it became blander and blander," says the artist. "When it turned into two dozen photographers, I was told the reason so many were involved was so that no single point of view would arise. But it seems to me that the whole point of art is to have a single, individual point of view.

"There was nothing to interfere with the view of Maryland as the land of pleasant living — that seemed to me to interfere with the production itself. The duke (or medieval patron) has always had the prerogative of rejecting those works he didn't want. This was taking over the mode and the mood of the project. It wasn't patronage; it was commercialism."

Tom Beck, the curator for the project and a former student of Kirstel's, disagrees. "I was never quite clear about his objections," he says, explaining that the financial and copyright terms under which the photographers worked had been laid out at the beginning in their contracts.

"Each photographer had their own direction: some preferred to go to the far reaches of the state; some preferred to concentrate on Baltimore; some preferred to design their own projects," says Beck. "There were a lot of special projects, with the purpose of showing change in the state, some comfortably achieved, some not so comfortably."

The result of his withdrawal, Kirstel says, has been a long-standing disagreement with current Institute President Fred Lazarus and a local corporate attitude of "He's more trouble than he's worth."

Lazarus comments only, "Richard had conscientious problems concerning parameters of the show; he felt it was compromising to a photographic artist. The other photographers didn't agree."



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# Iconoclast

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Kirstel's antipathy to corporate values also marks his teaching. "The minute a student wonders in class, 'How can I use this in a job?' (he or she might as well get up and walk out," he comments.

He demands that students master technique and form for their own sakes, not just for future use in business; That view seems to clash not only with the outlook of today's students but with the institute itself, whose literature touts preparation for professional work in a business-oriented world.

His students find him demanding and critical. Some are overwhelmed, some stimulated. An Institute graduate who majored in photography says, "I hated him in class... and then I looked back over my work and realized that the best work I'd done had been for him."

"I found him hard to take at first," says another former student, "until I realized that if you were good, he'd rip your work to pieces; if you weren't much, he'd pay you far less attention."

Katherine Gust, who has studied sequential imagery with Kirstel on a graduate level, calls him "a powerful teacher, a powerful personality."

"He can be difficult if you don't know where you stand," she comments. "I had to work out from under his influence. I have more experience now to figure out where I stand." That, says Kirstel, is exactly his intention.

"So many students have a commitment to being overwhelmed," he explains. "One of the most critical features of developing as an artist is to kill the mentor, to struggle out from under the weight of a strong teacher. We don't seem to give much weight today to the teacher; we make a big fuss about programs."

Classically, he adds, great philosophers and artists were identified by their mentors. "I don't feel struggling out from under the weight of a teacher damages a student; I feel that is what forms him. There is a crucible experienced involved; I try to make it hard."

A group of his students, along with his colleague Joyce Baronio, evidently felt strongly enough about him to register a vote of confidence when his three-year contract recently came up for re-evaluation. Kirstel has a collection of letters from grateful graduates, often writing years after studying with him.

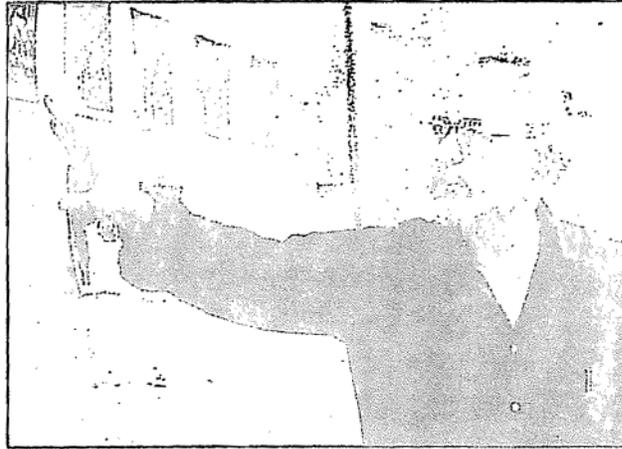


Photo Doug Hansen

**Richard Kirstel considers teaching an important part of his mission in life.**

Nevertheless, his irascible temperament and outspokenly high standards—for both students and faculty—have not fallen in with the teamwork atmosphere of the Maryland Institute's photography department.

"He likes to be obstreperous," said Dean Barbara Price. "He has a philosophy of confrontation, and such a person can create conflict within an institution."

He's a wonderful, brilliant guy, but he can be difficult to work with. I respect him for it, and take issue with him when he gets out of hand."

Kirstel has, in fact, received warnings urging greater discretion in his comments on the school. His response is characteristic: "After 25 years in the field, I have a right to be eccentric. It's all a part of the same man. There's no separation between the pictures I make and the problems with the administration. Not in the sense that anyone would directly, deliberately censor me. But the fact is, it's not work that's going to reaffirm the status quo. It's intended to be so. And anything that questions the zeitgeist is not in the interests of the corporate goal."

"My favorite romantic character in Western literature is Don Quixote," he continues. "As I understand it, Quixote never for a moment that the windmills were really giants. If he'd thought that, he would have been just a crazy old man."

"But he knew they weren't. His goal was not overcoming the windmills, but the gesture of tilting at them, being exalted through the extravagance of the gesture."