

CARLOS AND JASON SANCHEZ

JAMES D. CAMPBELL



CARLOS and Jason Sanchez have achieved an enviable reputation for the disruptive theatricality of their large-scale photographs. Their works are so psychologically nuanced and astute that they effortlessly win us over to the dark side.

Take a work like *Descent* (2003), in which we see a woman drifting downwards, body slack and almost certainly unconscious, into deep water. What happened? She is not wearing a bathing suit and, we may be sure, like an embryo, is not about to enter this life. She has just left it. Shot from the side, the figure appears to be viewed through the glass of a large aquarium. The water looks deep. We are caught by the horror of it all and held there, heart-in-mouth. Was she murdered? We will never know, yet can never forget the image. It continues to haunt the imagination. In this respect *Descent* is like other Sanchez photographs – impossible to forget. They stake an immediate claim upon you – the cinematography is gripping – yet we need time to fill in the blanks of these viscerally felt fictions. Slow shocks to the system, as it were, they work progressively on the psychology of the viewer.

The Sanchez brothers are superb at inventing anxious images, which hook us and retain their shock value. Rather than cheap, shrill or tawdry, they are usually beguiling, captivating and mysterious, with a powerful virtual angst. They play up the anxious underside of our morality, our institutions and taboos, and do so with a feral, razor-sharp edge. Moreover, the artists are in control of every detail. If the images are hypnotic, it is also because they are brilliantly lit and the palette sumptuous. From construction of the set to final printing, it may be months before an image is finished. Nothing is left to chance. The Sanchez' are meticulous, building their sets hands-on from the ground floor up, insisting on high production values and rejecting anything slipshod that might detract from credibility. Recently, they stepped outside photo work per se to make *Between Life and Death* (2006), in which, with rare gravitas and uncanniness, holographic images of a severely crumpled GMC city bus brings home to the viewer the near-death, out-of-body experience of one of the passengers in the (fictional) accident. Solidly researched, the work lifts the hair on the nape of your neck, and is a true installation spook story.

There are no easy answers in our reading of this or any of their work. Ambiguity reigns supreme. Furthermore, their photographs have no radial edges. Their most disturbing implications are never beveled away, and in this respect the Sanchez' never play it safe. Perhaps this is why we invest ourselves so readily in their images. Once there, it is difficult to remain objective about what we are seeing: the imagination makes leaps in the dark. In many ways their work speaks to the restlessness of the human spirit, reminding us of scenes from David Lynch, where a single image often suggests a world of hurt, fright and shame just outside the frame.

In *The Hurried Child* (2005), for instance, a smiling, radiant little blonde JonBenet Ramsey-like girl, outfitted in full beauty-pageant regalia, is captured poised at the centre of a proscenium stage, her hands clasped in front of her. Why is she hurried? Is she about to urinate onstage? We think of Friedkin's *The Exorcist*. And then in one of their latest images, a remarkable portrait of a quintessential narcissist entitled *John Mark Karr* (2007), the subject is caught looking at himself in a gilt mirror, with an obsessed, troubled expression. Karr, who confessed last year to 'accidentally' killing JonBenet

Ramsey, was all over CNN in the summer of 2006. He subsequently had his confession quashed and was released from custody because his DNA was not found at the scene. He was photographed by Carlos and Jason this year in his Atlanta home.

Brought up in Laval on the outskirts of Montreal, the brothers have taken the photographic world by storm, and had numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout Canada, Europe and the U.S. They are represented by Christopher Cutts in Toronto, TORCH in Amsterdam and Galerie Begona Malone in Madrid, and recently started exhibiting at Caren Golden Fine Art in New York. Following a solo show there in October – November 2007, they held another exhibition at the Houston Center for Photography in November – December 2007.



Opposite: Carlos and Jason Sanchez, *Descent*, 2003. Courtesy: the artists. Above: Carlos and Jason Sanchez, *The Hurried Child*, 2005. Courtesy: the artists.

Like the final pages of a novel so riveting that it keeps us reading way past midnight, a photograph by the Sanchez brothers is impossible to shrug off, at least not easily. We keep on looking, even if, in that single frame, a *dénouement* (tidy or otherwise) is nowhere in sight. Their work is about the dark glamour that certain images have, and, in a world of pure appearances, their enigmas live on inside us.

JAMES D. CAMPBELL IS A WRITER AND CURATOR LIVING AND WORKING IN MONTREAL. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF OVER 100 BOOKS AND CATALOGUES ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ARTISTS