



The Sanchez Brothers

Bloody Bed, 2002, C. Print, 40 x 49" Edition of 6 / 2 AP

Digital backdrops and drop-outs of daily life

As one walks by Carlos and Jason Sanchez' billboard-size images, one feels as though confronted with daddy's forbidden family album or some unfinished tales of alienation - the backdrops and drop-outs of daily life. By creating such images, the Canadian, Montreal-based brothers want people to TALK - to talk about things they would not otherwise. These two second generation Spanish immigrants take up as their own the youngest generation's task to promote dialogue and reflection on issues about identity, class and gender that remain sanctioned by silence. With their careful mises-en-scène, they seize the challenge to give body to the taboos and tensions that structure communities and individual psyches. In doing so, they hope that each of their works will turn into the initial design of renewed thinking patterns - that of the viewer and that of their own.

Carlos (28) is the first to have become interested in photography. Back to his teenager's times, he would make records of his trips and friends with his black-white camera. A few years later, as he was finalizing his photography studies at the Concordia University, Jason (24) came into the picture, metaphorically and literally.

Carlos would shoot his younger brother and friends performing some underground scenario - though in colour this time. Since then, they have left behind their gangster outfits as Jason moved from being in front of the camera to sharing the lens with Carlos.

Together they have developed a personal visual economy that relies on a long and logistically demanding process of invention. As a result of their concern for reducing any chance for the intervention of unexpected factors, Carlos and Jason prefer working in studio and perform a full-scale digital post-production on the images themselves. With preparation sometimes taking up to four months for one single day of shooting, the Sanchez Brothers orchestrate film-like crews, build sets and give instructions for roles they couldn't play. Afterwards, sitting in front of computer screens, they will compose a unique piece out of chosen fragments of ALL the pictures taken during the single photo session. Even their most naturalistic-looking pieces result from this digital jigsaw work that enables them to seek perfection in translating their initial idea into visuals. Though they alloy multiple and diverse cultural references, their pictures are always seamless and display the

ideal perfection of fantasies. Borrowing from Christian iconography or playing with the idiom of homemade pictures, their works function as platforms within which other "texts" can find resonance. Sometimes compared to film stills, the Sanchez Brothers' imagery opens doors to uncertain narratives, the closure of which will only depend upon their casual encounter with the viewer's own memories and background. They say that they do not want to impose a definite meaning or moral upon the viewers - they want only to make them speak.

Catherine Somzé: What is photography for you?

Jason Sanchez: Photography is the challenge to express an idea in one single frame. It's a conjunction of different elements that work together and create that very single moment in which an idea finds its expression.

Carlos Sanchez: For me photography is a medium that allows us to capture a precise vision that we usually take months to let mature in our minds. Our photography is comparable to painting by the way we start with an empty canvas. Little by little we fill that

canvas with layers of meaning to finally gather an ensemble that is ready to be exposed to film.

CS: How does an idea for a picture crystallize?

Carlos: It comes from my surroundings, for instance, something that I read or saw on television. But it can as well be a theme that I am interested in, and how to visually express it, I try not to make it too up front, try to keep it subtle. It comes from pretty much anything. Whatever gets my attention and keeps it for a while.

Jason: My perception is always on. Something even apparently irrelevant happens and for some reason I pay attention to that bit of reality. Even my own emotions, how I am feeling one day or for the course of a little while can help to inspire me to start thinking in a certain direction or to repeat in my mind what I've just seen over and over again.

CS: Does this idea change during the production process?



After the Fire, Digital C. Print, 60 x 83" Edition of 5 / 2AP

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CS: Does this idea change during the production process?

Jason: It can, for sure. But generally we have a determined idea about what we want to do before we start producing it. We like to work in studio to be able to control as much as we can. We have an idea and then we get the actors that we like, clothes, all these things. But while we are working on those elements, things always come up that we hadn't thought of that could help make it better.

Carlos: Things always change on the day of the shoot, mainly as a result of working with other people as the actors and whoever else is on the set at that moment

Jason: It's really interesting how the energies of the people come together and create something we hadn't foreseen.

Carlos: What we know when we go into the shoot is the composition of the shot, the lighting. But when the actors come in, though it's not a free-for-all, there is really an exchange that happens.

Jason: Like in "John". Initially we had another character in mind, a woman, who had an interesting appearance. But when we went and met John, the taxidermist himself, in his studio, we thought he was perfect playing his own role. We just told him "don't shave, just grow your beard a little bit!"

Carlos: And don't wash your hair!

Jason: ...but not that he would have anyways! Initially, we had foreseen him working on an animal but then when we looked at the Polaroid we had casually taken to test the light, we saw he naturally

had taken the position, the attitude we had been looking for. This Polaroid had captured his emotional energy. It was an image in which he was showing his true self and not posing or acting for the camera.

CS: So, there is something documentary about your images.

Jason: We are more interested in creating a moment. We don't usually shoot on location.

Carlos: Even when we do, like for "Bloody Bed", in our grandmother's bedroom, we take our time to mould the space towards what we need. And then, there is a post-production, all the scanning, the computer work. It's a long process.

CS: So, are all your pictures computer manipulated?

Jason: Most of them. A good example would be "A Motive for Change" which is comprised of three different negatives: one for the person, one for the street and one for the trees. This technology enables us to have a much greater control on each single piece of the image. Thanks to this tool we are even able to create improbable contrasts in focuses between the different elements in the picture. It really helps us to get our final idea across though it ends up being seamless.

CS: Are there any major themes that you are especially interested in?

Carlos: I like themes that have an edge to them, that are uncomfortable, that provoke thoughts and questions. This is the kind of art that I like. It doesn't matter whether it's photography or painting, for instance. I don't like things that are "pretty". I like art that makes me question the artist's intentions. That's what touches me and that's what I am trying to do.

Jason: It's never specifically one theme. I am definitely interested in trying to portray elements of human behaviour that either I am myself trying to learn about or that I feel people need perhaps to face or discuss more openly. With the image "Descent", I was exploring my own emotions, that I tried to symbolically represent with the image of the girl being pulled into the black pool surrounding her in the blackness. This image portrays a heaviness and



Principles, 2002, C. Print, 40 x 49" edition of 6 / 2AP

a solitude towards the girl and a feeling of being suffocated. The themes can be related to things that jar us, which affect us to an extent that we think about it, like in "Principles". In high school a friend of ours used to drink whisky with her principal when she was quite young. Behind closed doors these kinds of things happen on a daily basis without anybody being aware of or really facing them. Our take on it was to describe the abuse of power.

Carlos: What we were trying to do was to portray the psychological emotion of that moment, we were trying to go inside the head of the subject, of this uncertain space.

Jason: For that, we basically rely on the relation between elements in the picture like the characters amongst themselves and with the objects surrounding them. That's our way to make things visible that are purely mental, invisible.

Carlos: We've never really worked on a series of ten images on one theme. I just get bored doing two images that have the same theme. What I like is the work of Jeff Wall. All of his images have different themes. There is an underlying current that is all in his work but it is very varied. Each work stands on its own. Next image, next thought.

CS: There seem, however, to be a couple of recurring themes in your pictures like children's sacrifice to adults and individuals as victims of their own obsessions.

Jason: Individuals as victims of their own obsessions is definitely a theme. Evidently in "John" and "The Gatherer". The latter is somebody we had visited in Strasburg. He invited us to his house but we could barely sit. It was unbelievably crowded with his belongings. However, he could still "function" and be happy. That experience stayed with us for a while. We wanted to show how this man's comfort, his safety was to live amongst all these objects, all these memories around him. In "Easter Party", we actually refer to a piece of our own childhood's memory. For Easter, we used to have a party like the one portrayed in the photograph. With our French Canadian grandparents, we would make a piñata, fill it with candy, and then break it. This Spanish popular tradition has its roots in Christian ideas of sacrifice and the child in that image is performing a ritual sacrifice for the continuation and the betterment of the family. He is aware of the webs of truths and lies that are hidden or filtered for the children. A family needs the younger generation to take control of taboos and myths and discuss them in order to rid the family of them and make changes for once and for all. This child is aware of what is going on and his sacrifice is

symbolic for his desire to clean the slates of his family members so that they all can continue a little more honestly – lovingly. In "Abduction", there is a feeling of sacrificing innocence.

Carlos: That's the story of children aging too fast, forced to grow up.

CS: So did you yourself grow up too fast?

Jason: Actually, no. We've had a well-nurtured childhood, caring and encouraging.

CS: Your pictures are rich in cultural references. How do you embed them in the pictures?

Jason: Using these cultural references is not necessarily the driving factor for an image. If the idea or theme we are working on requires the inclusion of these elements to get its meaning across, then we'll make use of them.

CS: In "Easter Party", the Christian iconographical references help to construct the meaning, but it also helps to create a familiar feel to the picture.

Carlos: It gives a starting point. It helps to situate the scene, its direction of understanding. That's why



The Hurried Child, 2005, Digital C. Print, 60 x 76" Edition of 5 / 2AP

people can usually interpret our works because what we do is something that is familiar to them also. What we are doing is not a personal project.

CS: You said that you would like to confront the viewer with some taboo issues. However, you still give aesthetic pleasure to the viewer while drawing on these confronting matters.

Carlos: The viewers can be the voyeurs looking into this situation but they can step back. They can live it, but don't have to live with it. There is a certain sense of being comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time, because our main aim is not to shock.

Jason: Something successful is that you could keep scraping off elements for the appreciation of it. I guess that's pleasurable, when you have an interaction that keeps coming back to you.

CS: What are your artistic influences?

Carlos: Jeff Wall has probably been the main influence. Just in terms of how he creates so many layers in his images. The subtlety in which he works. How meticulous he can be...

Jason: ...you just don't look at it and get everything from one sitting. It's just something that keeps coming back at you the more you keep looking at it.

Carlos: It's at the same time layered, but seamless.

Jason: It's the very process of making the image. If you have an idea, it should keep on existing as much as you cut away at it. Like Stanley Kubrick's master shots. Their analysis has helped me shape my own meticulous visual economy.

CS: Your works have been compared to film stills. How do you feel about that?

Jason: I don't want the images to be seen as a frame in which people find a beginning and an ending. I am far more interested in representing a moment and how this moment speaks to you. If you were to think of it in the sense of a film, it would be the narrative that unfolds in each spectator's mind as a result of the interaction between our images and his or her personal experiences and associations.

CS: Were there people shocked by your work?

Carlos: We do not want to "shock". If you're shocked you'd rather not think about it and that's exactly the

opposite of what we are trying to do. The images should touch you and make you want to speak about them, not make you want to run away from them.

Jason: Shock is an intense reaction that happens as fast as it fades out. We want our images to live with the viewer, to become an enduring feeling.

Carlos: The most fulfilling thing for me is having someone look at our work and say something totally different from what I have perceived. It is having people interact with the images and talk about them. That's what really matters, their input.

TEXT BY CATHERINE SOMZE

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