



Narratives OF NASTINESS

The Sanchez brothers do what they do best at the
Mois de la Photo de Montréal 2007 *cover story* Isa Tousignant

It's as if the Mois de la Photo had been tailored to the Sanchez brothers this year. Marie Frasier, the curator behind the recent critically acclaimed exhibition by Quebec artists in Ottawa, Making Real, was in charge of organizing the 2007 edition of the photo fest, so she picked a theme she's long been interested in: the narrative. Storytelling is as old as man, and it's an undeniable issue in contemporary photography. How much can one tell in an image? Or, conversely, how little?

The Sanchez brothers, known separately as Carlos and Jason, are among Montreal's hottest artistic exports despite their young ages of, respectively, 31 and 26. Their work was noticed in the early 2000s for its immense communicative power – these guys are storytellers par excellence. In a style often described as cinematic, their gloriously aesthetic large-scale photos capture a frozen moment in time, usually just as something is about to happen to inspire a sense of drama, tension, or simply too many unknown outcomes to be reassuring. A few of their favourite subjects are the perversion of youth, death, danger, loneliness, abandonment – heavy stuff, but examined so sensitively that you're left wanting more.

At the Mois, the brothers will be showing a selection of their recent photographic work at the beautiful Parisian Laundry space, but they'll also be moving out of the bounds of two-dimensional imagery. From Sept. 6 to 9, and then again Oct. 4 to 7, their 2006 work *Between Life and Death* will be projected outside the space. The work was designed to be shown outdoors, and illustrates, using holographic technology, a bus accident in an effort to represent the experience of death in three dimensions. As always, the brothers researched the piece intensively; they interviewed people who survived brushes with death. Some of their photos take up to six months to prepare, since for every shot they construct a scenario from scratch, including casting, set designing, building... ergo the comparisons to film.

Though born and raised in nearby Laval, it's always a coup to catch the brothers, since they don't sit still for two seconds – they've jet-setted to Europe twice to inaugurate exhibitions over the last couple months, in Nice and in Madrid, and are looking forward to both a Houston and a New York show in the fall. I caught them after a hard day spent printing their latest work, in a conference call as they drove their separate ways to various other appointments. Phew!

Hour This Mois de la Photo, titled *Replaying Narrative*, couldn't have been more appropriate for you guys, eh?

Jason Narrative is definitely part of the work. I feel that each image has a story within it. It's probably different for everybody, it probably varies between viewers, but if I look at any photo, whether it's a snapshot or something that's staged, I can always formulate some type of storyline. For me, there's always more than just the moment that's presented. It can take me somewhere.

Carlos And I think it's stronger with staged stuff, because you're not just capturing something that's already there, you're actually creating something. So there's thinking behind it. The story's already there and you're trying to recreate that story and put it on film.

Hour An interesting aspect of your work is that it's sometimes super personal – like when you guys cast family members or stage scenes in your grandma's house, for example – but it never feels autobiographical. It's always got a real universal feel.

Carlos I think that's what attracts people to our work; it's not a personal piece...

Jason But it is! It's just not personal in the sense that only we could get it.

Carlos That's what I mean. It's something that's accessible to a lot of people. Some work is just too introverted, where you're like, "What's he trying to say?" you know?

Hour You guys always strive for clarity, then.

Jason Yeah, I think that's part of what takes so long in creating an image. You have essentially one frame to get your idea across, and part of what takes so long is trying to reject all the ideas that just don't make the point you're trying to make.

Hour Do you think the comparison to cinema that's made in relation to your work is as valid as ever?

Carlos I guess it's valid because we sort of work like cinema works. Casting actors, lighting the scene, building sets, wardrobe, all that – I think it's relevant just because it's the same work procedures. But it can also be compared to a painting, because we start from the ground up and create what's in front of the lens.

Hour Last time I spoke to you guys you'd just made *The Descent* [a photograph of a woman drowning, taken underwater], which sounded like an incredibly complex shoot. Have you guys surpassed yourselves since in terms of crazy setups?

Carlos Building the set for *Rescue Effort* [a shot of a man face down in a mud pile, about to be pulled out by two men flanking him] was really complex, because we had to haul in the dirt by hand...

Hour Hey, and I was wondering, how did the guy in the mud not suffocate?

Jason It was a stuntman.

Carlos He was initially trained as a deep-sea diver, so he's very comfortable in and around water, and he would submerge his head in the mud, and we would do our shot, and then he'd come out. Back and forth, back and forth. But underneath him we'd wired up a hot water tank to a serpentine track tubing that warmed the mud. Because that's just the kind of guys we are.

Hour So you basically gave your stuntman a spa experience.

Jason Yeah, his skin never looked so good after all that mud!

Carlos He should have paid us, for God's sake.

Hour It must be amazing for you to work with all these people, since you have such big, varied crews. I mean, stuntmen are fucking cool.

Carlos We always end up with characters.

Jason It's a good part of the job, because you're always seeking different things, and you never know what you're going to find.

Hour It's pretty impressive to have watched you guys from moment one – you just kind of bust onto the scene, and today you've got more success than the average 50-year-old artist can dream of. Why do you think happened? Is there anyone you credit with having pointed you in the right direction? Where did you get your golden touch?

Jason I don't think it's the golden touch – it's hard work! But we were fortunate to meet gallery owners early on who we got along with and who liked our work. Basically at one Scope, the art fair in Miami, we met Christopher Cuts [from Toronto] and Adrian from Torch Gallery in Amsterdam, and we just hit it off. We have the same type of character and we got along, which I think is one of the most important things, before somebody liking your work.

Carlos It's also meeting people, you know, being at these art fairs, having drinks with people, laughing, partying with people. I think that's really important. I think a lot more artists should do that.

Jason There's a very human element to success. It's not just about business or work, there has to be more of a personal connection for things to work.

Carlos For sure.

**CARLOS AND
JASON SANCHEZ**

At Parisian Laundry (3550 St-Antoine W.),

Sept. 6 to Oct. 21

Vernissage Sept. 6 at 6 p.m.

www.moisdelaphoto.com

OTHER LOCAL LUMINARIES

The Sanchez brothers stand tall among the admirable selection of local artists at the Mois this year. Obviously, part of the thrill of this sort of international festival is to see art from around the world (this edition brings exciting guests like Finland's Salla Tykkä, France's Eric Baudelaire and Americans Eve Sussman and The Rufus Corporation), but I'm always one for praising the jewels we may not have noticed in our own backyard.

Swiss Montrealer **Thomas Kneubühler** has a great project called *Access Denied*, a series of larger-than-life portraits of local security guards in their places of work that will be posted outdoors, on building walls in St-Henri, near Parisian Laundry (3550 St-Antoine W.). The project, which launches Sept. 7 at 7:30 p.m., deepens his investigation of the North American obsession with security.

Marisa Portiolese brings her sophisticated approach to portraiture and her desire to uncover the intricacies of human vulnerability to the exterior walls of Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (84 Ste-Catherine W.). Come inaugurate it on Sept. 7 at 8 p.m.

On Sept. 13 at 6 p.m., Taiwanese Montrealer **Chih-Chien Wang** launches his installation *Le Nid* at Dare-Dare, in the unnamed park at Clark and Van Horne. He muses on the innumerable unseen traces each of us leaves behind throughout our urban migrations in his installation, which features noise-detection technology and a bridge.

Bettina Hoffmann, a Montrealer born in Germany, continues her fascinating exploration of absence of action with two new video works, *Décalage* and *Momentum*, presented at Dazibao (4001 Berri). The exhibition opens Sept. 8 at 7 p.m.

And over at Concordia's Ellen Gallery (1400 De Maisonneuve W.), **Adad Hannah** analyses, mimics and modifies art-historical approaches to narrative conventions. The series *Museum Stills* creates museum-themed tableaux vivants, while *Recast* and *Reshoot* reimagines Rödin's work *Les Bourgeois de Calais*. Celebrate its vernissage on Sept. 7 at 5:30 p.m.