Darkness Ascends
MUSEUM FOR CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN ART, TORONTO

could have succumbed to Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil.' Organized by MOCCA Director David Liss, "Darkness Ascends" consisted of over 100 works across all media by 25 artists. When evil was addressed it was not the Christian bogeyman, but a deif exploration of its myriad manifestation in today's social, political, and cultural arenas. In Peter Beste's "Norwegian Black Metal" photographs (2002-2004), for example, the ubiquitous inverted cross refers not to Satan but to divesting Norway of Christianity in order to revert to a pristine Nordic Shangri-La. In counterpart was the relentless barrage of apocalyptic imagery in Robert Boyd's excellent video in which authoritarianism — regardless of creed — was exposed as megalomaniacal cults of personality rife with Occipal conflict. Sandwiched between these two extreme thematic registers were a plethora of works that poetically broadened the purview of darkness through metaphor including Anthony Goicoechea's Nail Biter video from 2002. Mesmerizing by virtue of being shot with a special filter which created a sublime darkened florescent environment, Goicoechea portrayed himself erratically devouring his nails to the cacophony of his chattering teeth. Concomitantly disturbing and compelling, compulsion as sexual frustration degraded into auto-cannibalism, possibly a nod to Freud's problematic "vagina dentata".

Equally touching a raw nerve but in a more demure fashion was Carlos and Jason Sanchez's photograph titled Abduction (2004). What drove this mise en scene of potential pedophilia to a whole other level were the normative suburban setting and ensuing familial disquietude evinced in the intimacy and alienation simultaneously shared by male adult and young girl. Also rife tangentially on childhood signifiers was Richard Stipl's series of small, hyperrealist doll-like sculptures titled Block Sabbath (2006). Part Ken & Barbie by way of Madame Tussauds and the Chap- man brothers, the tableau of fig-urines engaged in sadomasochistic rites vacillated between dark humor and horror and sex and death. Whether the works were aggressive or subliminal, straightforward or conceptual, the success of "Darkness Ascends" must also be credited to its design strategy: walls were painted black, white or red; an audio piece by sumn o))) was faintly heard throughout the museum and became an aesthetic Muzak; and the general cathartic nature of the work exhibited was well exploited to curatorial advantage. —Raul Zamudio


October 2006 Flash Art 57