



Courtesy of artists and the Christopher Cutts Gallery

# Beauty in terror?

## Or terror in beauty?

Montreal photographers Carlos and Jason Sanchez find strangely pleasing ways to articulate disturbing questions

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The McGill Daily

Beauty covers all manner of sin. The Parisian Laundry gallery in St. Henri is a breathtaking space: expansive, well-lit, sexy. It smells of old wood, but the steely floorboards and the white panelling ensure an unmistakably modern look. It made me feel like slipping into high heels and a black cocktail dress. It's so easy to forget the pathos of gentrification when it can look so damn good.

The exhibit on display – part of this month's *Le Mois de la Photo* photography festival – is similarly glossy, but the pieces themselves foreground the darkness that lies beneath them. The photographs are a meditation on the aesthetic and the dangers implicit in our recognition of beauty; on the desire that beauty elicits and the dangers of succumbing unquestioningly to its seductive pull.

It's not a widely publicized aspect of the Sanchez brothers' work. These Concordia grads' claim to fame is the cinematic quality of their photography. They work solely on sets assembled by hand, and it can take them months to get just one photo right. They hire actors to pose for the shots, they scour the city for just the right props, and the lighting is painstakingly adjusted to capture the sought-after effect. Each work gestures toward a story that the viewer is invited to craft according to her imaginative bent.

Certainly, the brothers' work is inflected with a Lynchian aesthetic

and narrative sensibility. But while the filmic elements in the brothers' photos are salient and impeccably executed, I didn't find their relationship to cinema and narrative as compelling as their meditation on beauty. Not on beauty as light, but on beauty as darkness, as the underbelly of innocence.

In one photo, a little girl sits on a wrought-iron bed with a balloon-print comforter. Beside her are two wrapped birthday gifts and she holds a card in her hand that seems to absorb her. A middle-aged man leans on the night-table by her bed, staring at her with a seemingly paternal gaze. When I first saw the photo, I assumed it was her father. I imagined he was divorced from the little girl's mother, and visited her a few times a year because he didn't really care to involve himself in his child's life. On her birthday, he would feel guilty about his *laissez-faire* parenting strategy, and shower her with gifts. I read her look as accepting of the situation – as children will be – but baffled by it at the same time.

But then I read the title of the piece: "Abduction." The word that accompanies the photograph intervenes as a narrative guide, adding a thick layer of tragedy to the work. It floored me, and forced me to radically revise my reading, particularly my understanding of the abductor's gaze on his victim. At first, the man's look is mildly benevolent. But after absorbing the implication of the title, it became significantly more sexual, predatory, even malevolent. There's no clear indication in the piece that the man is a pedophile, but the sexually charged quality of the brothers' photographs in general does make the association inevitable. For me, pedophilia immediately became a part of the story beyond the picture.

In conjunction with the title, the photo suggests a critique of the aestheticizing gaze, particularly when it isn't conscious of its own role in

creating beauty. The man's naïve aestheticization of the girl forms his justification: it makes her a seductress, rather than a child he sexualizes. The failure to acknowledge that beauty truly *is* in the eye of the beholder can thus be a self-exculpating act, because it allows us to entertain the illusion of our own innocence. It makes Nabokovian narrators of us all.

The ultimate irony, though, is that the photograph is beautiful in itself. It presents a disturbing scenario whose very moral dilemma I finally overlooked in favour of contemplating the perfection of the piece's composition. It seduced me, but the difference is that the photograph makes this aestheticization a self-conscious process. It doesn't mean we're liberated from the implications of allowing ourselves to be seduced, but it does ask us to acknowledge our complicity.

The Sanchez brothers drive this point home in their faux-realist pieces. Take "Rescue Effort," for example. It depicts men from the waist down trying to drag another man out of the mud. They look like coal-miners, and I got the feeling the fallen man was well beyond rescuing. The piece is reminiscent of photojournalism, but it's just as carefully staged as "Abduction." This paradox draws attention to the supposed innocence of realism, which pretends not to extend an aestheticizing gaze on reality while doing just that.

I don't think that the brothers are unilaterally condemning the aestheticizing gaze, since they as artists are necessarily prone to aestheticizing reality and derive pleasure from this act. What they are suggesting, however, is that we can't be naïve about it.

*The exhibit runs through Oct. 21 at Parisian Laundry (3550 St. Antoine O.). For more information on Le Mois de la Photo, visit moisdelaphoto.com. Check out their listings for exhibit spaces and public art installations throughout the city.*