

The Sanchez Brothers

Themes and ideas can come full circle in art, as with life. Two years after making their fictionalised image *The Hurried Child*, showing a dolled-up girl in a pristine white dress on a gold stage, Carlos and Jason Sanchez have made a portrait of John Mark Karr. Karr confessed to the killing of six-year-old beauty pageant queen JonBenet Ramsey in Bangkok in August 2006, but the case against him was abandoned two months later after DNA tests failed to link him to her murder. The finding of JonBenet's beaten and strangled body in the basement of her family home in 1996 created an international media sensation, which was enhanced by her participation in beauty pageants at such a young age.

The Sanchez brothers' portrait of Karr shows him staring sternly at his reflection in a gilt mirror, a cold, detached expression on his face. He is wearing the same red shirt as on the day of his arrest.

"He said he hadn't worn it since then, so it was quite fitting," says Carlos. "It was the best choice of colour out of his wardrobe, and the red plays off the gold of the mirror. It wasn't just for historical significance; it was also a stylistic choice."

The brothers often draw inspiration for their works from news stories reported in the media. On this occasion, they contacted Michael Tracey, the journalism professor who had alerted the police to the possibility of Karr's involvement in JonBenet's murder after receiving a series of emails from him discussing the case. "We told him [Tracey] that we found the case fascinating and wanted to photograph John Mark, and that the image would be in museums and galleries. John Mark gave his permission for Tracey to give us his email address, and a week later we were at his house doing the shoot."

What the brothers hadn't been prepared for was Karr's suggestion to visit JonBenet's grave. "He came straight to our hotel room when we arrived in Atlanta and asked us if we wanted to go and visit JonBenet's grave. The graveyard was closed and we were looking through the fence; she's buried next to her mother. It was a pretty intense moment. He sort of broke down and started to cry, saying he was sorry."

The Sanchez brothers' interest was originally peaked by how Karr appeared so calm on the day







of his arrest. "His eyes, which were dead and empty, and the calmness of his posture, were what attracted us to him and his situation. He was saying that when he got arrested he was so calm that his heart wasn't beating."

The challenge was presenting Karr in a unique, private way that would contrast with the widely diffused press images. The brothers spent several days at Karr's house, where he lives with his father, designing the *mise-en-scène*. "He said that he often looks at himself in the mirror and that nobody knows how to capture him as he sees himself during those moments," Carlos continues. "So we decided to work off that. He actually said, 'I'm looking at my demons; I'm facing what I've done.'"

Carlos and Jason Sanchez, aged 31 and 26 respectively, are the rising stars of Canada's art scene. The sons of Spanish immigrants, they are based in Montréal and have already had solo shows in the US, Spain and the Netherlands as well as throughout Canada. Their large-scale images are conceptualized works that usually take several months to make, from the instant when an idea germinates, to its eventual crystallization through detailed set design, the development and casting of a character, the conveyance of a particular mood, and then the post-production finishing touches. The brothers concentrate on making individual works that stand on their own. An undercurrent of unease often permeates, relating to the violence, abuse and malaise in contemporary society. "There's often an uneasy feeling," says Jason, "even in a calm image there's still something that we're trying to put across. It's showing a situation that is uncomfortable and exploring people living in an uncomfortable situation."

Their latest works are less dramatic than earlier images such as *The Baptism* (2003), which shows water being poured onto a baby's head turning blood red upon touching its body. This kind of theatricality has been put to one side in favour of creating works that are more closely linked to reality.

The portrait of Karr is one of four new images made this year along with *Mask*, *Identification* and *Drifter*. The latter three can all be described as

fictional, in that they portray scenarios that are the fruit of the brothers' imagination. *Mask* shows a young man (he happens to be Carlos's and Jason's cousin) sitting on a bed in a hotel room, looking at his reflection in a hand-held mirror. He is wearing a brown woollen mask on his head; a pair of scissors, used to cut holes in the mask for his eyes, lies on the carpet. The idea stemmed from the photographs of the Palestinian terrorists, associated with the Black September organization that killed 11 Israeli athletes during the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972. Rather than evoke a terror scene, the brothers have focused on the "preparatory stage".

As Carlos says, "There are a few famous photographs of these terrorists with these masks on and that's where the idea came from: somebody trying to disguise themselves for a terrorist act or a high-school massacre. We wanted to portray the guy looking at himself and seeing how he will be perceived by his victims. It could be that he travelled a certain distance to get somewhere and is preparing himself in a cheap hotel room. We scouted a lot of hotel rooms and built that room in our studio."

As with much of the brothers' work, the image is suggestive and anticipatory while leaving several questions unanswered, such as whether or not there is a weapon inside the sports bag. This ambiguity contributes to the disquieting mood. Similarly, in *Identification*—shot at a morgue—we see a middle-aged man weeping but cannot guess whose body he has identified, or his relationship to the woman trying to console him. The professional nonchalance of the nurse in the adjacent room adds a dimension of ordinariness to the man's desolation. "Identifying a loved one is a pretty intense and very personal moment that you can never look forward to dealing with," says Carlos. "For this image we needed an actual actor, someone who could cry on call, because it's a very emotional shot."

The brothers return to familiar themes of solitude and identity in *Drifter*, in which a shabbily dressed man, carrying a bag and sleeping bag, is walking next to a disused railway track in a forest clearing. The hole in the barbed wire fence implies



he might be sleeping rough in the woods. It's a heavy, psychologically loaded image, weighted with the character's disappointment with life that is translated through his downcast eyes and the slowness of his gait.

"The idea of old industry was important for this image, and it's definitely an image where we're looking for a heavy feeling," agrees Carlos. The character is somebody that the brothers met whilst doing charity work. "During Christmas, Jason and I volunteer our time to a local food bank and deliver food baskets to the poor people, and this guy works for this non-profit organization which hires people who are on welfare. When this image came up, he seemed the perfect person for the job. At first he was saying, 'I'm not a drifter, that's not the kind of zone I want to be in or that I want to project onto people.' But we made him see that he'd be acting a part, but the part was very much like him. Those are all his own clothes and we didn't have to direct him much. When the image was shown in Montréal, apparently he'd come and stare at it for half an hour at a time. So I guess that he likes it and that it strikes a chord with him."

Striking a chord through creating imagined situations that run in parallel to the actuality of society is what the Sanchez brothers' work is all about.—ANNA SANSOM



Reality Interrupted: The Cinematic Work of the Sanchez Brothers is at the Houston Center for Photography until 23 December 2007.
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