

Virtual Angst

The Photoworks of
**Carlos and
Jason Sanchez**

James D. Campbell





Overflowing Sink, 2002,
C-Print, 40 x 49".

preceding pages, left:
The Abduction, set
construction, 2004.

right: *The Abduction*, 2004,
Digital C-Print, 72 x 88".
All photographs courtesy
Christopher Cutts Gallery,
Toronto, and the artists.

I am on the set of *The Abduction*, a work-in-progress by Carlos and Jason Sanchez in their studio located in an anonymous industrial building in Lachine, some 15 minutes from downtown Montreal. Their stripped-down studio space with its set already well advanced is the perfect setting for a long conversation about the work. The brothers have established an enviable reputation for the edgy, uncompromising and in-your-face character of their outsized photoworks and for the hallucinatory clarity of those cinematic images. They have developed a definite pathology of the image—call it a nightside of Eden plague scenario *à la* Artaud—in which subjectivity and abjection are seamlessly wed and anxiety always holds sway.

Carlos, 27, crouches over the camera while his 23-year-old brother Jason sits on the bed, on the set, demonstrating the pose he wants the young subject to assume in the actual shot. The work will depict a “parental abduction” scenario all too familiar from today’s newspapers and TV reports but rendered particularly harrowing, if consummately subtle, here. “Subtle” because, for those unaware of their intent, the content is wide open to other and even darker interpretations.

Their reputation as the bad boys of contemporary photopractice in this country got a decisive kick-start from their recent exhibition at Dazibao in Montreal. It included many of their now-quintessential core images and dealt with childhood as an angst-ridden baptism by fire (and water) life-stage on the dark side of suburbia. It is as though they had essayed a new and even more harrowing version of *The Lord of the Flies* but this one at home in their native Laval.

Right now, they are showing off, with a carpenter’s pride, the custom wood floor they have just stained and laid down, slat by slat, on the set. A refurbished bureau, a night table with a lamp and a windup toy, a narrow child’s bed,



a suitcase hastily tucked under the bed, and a child's backpack thrown on the floor. Jason's hands are flung out before him, giving me a sense of how the seven-year-old girl will be posed in the actual shot. As I write this, they have just found the ideal player.

The brothers build all their own sets, hands-on and from the ground up. They construct them painstakingly, sometimes over a period of months. They inhabit them as the work progresses, sleeping and eating in them. They make them their own. There is nothing happenstance, nothing arbitrary or makeshift about their contents. Which is not to say that they are without serendipity. But each and every object has been explicitly chosen to dovetail with all the others and with the operative concept. If an object seems obtrusive or out of synch with the rest of the set, it is removed. Colouration, lighting, framing are all meticulously treated. Take the pink paint and drab domestic wallpaper on adjacent walls in *The Abduction*. They add to the atmosphere of the room as a meant-to-be-comforting, hastily assembled holding cell. Scale is important. When building the set for their last image entitled *The Gatherer*, 2004, they were almost squeezed outside the physical precincts of their own studio by the dense artefactual layering in the foreground.

Carlos says, "We are really constructing each image from within our own heads, in real space. Everything is under our control. We don't leave anything to chance. I would rather build a set than stumble across an ideal one. When you build it with your own hands and invest yourself in it, it brings you closer to the image itself. Constructing an image is a long process. And it can be an arduous one."

The Gatherer, 2004,
Digital C-Print,
70 x 88".

The idea for the image develops—and deepens appreciably—as they work on the set. “It literally becomes our room and thus we can bend it to our will. We establish a casual authority over the set to the point where it can be made to speak, where it has a parallel authenticity, a sort of life....” They reach the threshold when it is painted, dressed with props and prepared for the subject(s).

The cast on a Sanchez set includes sundry friends and extended family members. They do not use professional actors. “We identify something in the people we know that will make them good for the role. They just have to be themselves. We are not asking anyone to pretend. That would not be to the point.” Although they know the actors, they prefer the anonymity of their cast in terms of a wider public and they trust in the natural integrity of their subjects.

“Stanley Kubrick, in casting *A Clockwork Orange*, used a lot of people who were not well known (Malcolm McDowell being the signature exception),” Carlos told me. “If you associate an actor with a certain kind of role or performance, you import or associate behaviour and meanings with him or her that might not be useful. Better not to be distracted by the presence of a professional actor and the baggage he or she brings along. This somehow increases for us the authenticity of the whole scenario.”

The reference to Kubrick is no accident. The brothers name directors David Lynch, Kubrick and P.T. Anderson as cardinal influences. “[Kubrick] knew the importance of collaboration with others, specifically with the writers, the art department and with his director of photography,” says Jason.

The brothers talk about the father’s projected presence in *The Abduction*—his beseeching, imploring gesture to the child. It is my sense that it’s somewhere between the father’s outstretched arms, where he kneels on the floor near the bed, and the girl’s disconsolate pose with listless hands at the bed’s edge, that the punctum will be—precisely at that point where the shot will speak to the viewer about power, disruption—and nameless dread.

This anxiety, this dread, infiltrates the experience of most Sanchez photoworks. It is insidious and moves like slow, perceptual molasses, as the meanings and implications of the work take shape inside our own heads. Unlike molasses, however, there is no sweet coating here. Or better, call the sugar coating

The Baptism, 2003.
Digital C-Print,
46 x 72”.





the technical virtuosity alone, because everything else drives a sharp shank knife well up under the skin. Our visceral and psychological engagement with a given work is shaped, then, by what could usefully be described as “virtual angst.” This angst is induced by a particularly effective methodology of disruption within the image.

Even when we get what we think is the true nature of the narrative, continued viewing offers new revelations. Jason Sanchez has pointed out that the work is open to interpretation and once it is “up on the wall,” the brothers are comfortable with leaving the imagination of the observer to fill in the blanks. Sarah Kember wrote in her feminist, cyborgian tract *Virtual Anxiety: Photography, New Technologies and Subjectivity* (Great Britain: Manchester University Press, 1998) that “Virtual hell” is where the mind will be able to inhabit a reality entirely of its own making. Carlos and Jason kindly furnish us with the signposts for our own descent into that maelstrom.

In their work, which I think is truly subversive, they tear down the walls between the fictional and the real, the imaginary and the meant, and in the process induce an anxiety in us that most other work intends to ward off. This is where the pathology of the image comes in and defines the content. The Sanchez brothers attempt to channel this anxiety. Their work, therefore, necessarily focusses on pathologies of the margin. In this respect, they remind me of the analyst Julia Kristeva speaks of as counting among the rare witnesses to our fractured, abject state. The question is: is it possible for him or her to x-ray horror without making capital from its power? Probably not and the Sanchez brothers do make capital from its power. Still, they x-ray domestic and social horror stories with remarkable sensitivity and finesse, and the perverse jouissance of their own bearing witness to the human dilemma is always implicit and preserved intact in their seductive, cinematic surfaces—and as first-level perceptual information there. It gives the work its edginess.

Easter Party, 2003,
Digital C-Print,
46 x 72".

The Gatherer, their last such psychological x-ray work (which was featured in Marie Fraser's "Fabulation" exhibition at VOX in Montreal this past summer), is a case in point. A man stands alone in a darkened room. He is wearing a short-sleeved blue shirt, which has a stigma of the hospital about it. One hand reaches for the light switch. Is he about to turn the lights on or off? Behind him, illumination from what seems a walk-in closet full of clothes seeps into the backdrop, but not enough to fully light the foreground. Everything is in shadow. The man holds his other hand to the side of his head, as though under mental pressure or duress. He does seem to be in real jeopardy, somehow "in extremis" like the subject of their earlier work, *Descent*. This gesture and his facial expression are redolent of an abjection that animates the scene. The room in which he is standing is weighted with an immense array of objects. I think here of the room Catherine Millet speaks of so eloquently in *The Sexual Life of Catherine M*, describing the filthy hovel of one of her lovers, the rooms fraught with detritus.

Interestingly, *The Gatherer* was inspired by someone the Sanchez brothers actually met. As Carlos relates: "We met a guy very much like that when we showed in France. What struck us was the way someone's obsession could take over their whole life. What we saw at his house was simply incredible. He could no longer bathe because the bathtub and shower stall were jampacked with artefacts. He had so much stuff on the bed he had to sleep on the floor. We re-

alized we had the kernel for an image. *The Gatherer* is perhaps taking a last look before bedtime at all his possessions, all his gatherings, which mean so much to him but which are essentially detritus. I mean, just so much junk to another human being. We see him as having been taken hostage by the objects and they are holding a proverbial gun to his head."

This individual is pictured there, in that room, in that hectic conflation of hoarded objects, with an accretion that

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has staked a potent claim on him. He can't escape; the objects are his. There is no suggestion in the work that he is being mocked, no moral judgement on the part of the artists. There never is, in this work.

The fading light in the room, as it goes towards the dark, suggests the full weight of passing time, the passing stages of a life. Memories lose their colour and their lustre, and occupy a monochrome enclosure relieved of all tonal nuance. This is the twilight thoughtscape of *The Gatherer*.

In their recent works, the Sanchez brothers have looked at abjection unflinchingly—offering us the gift of the void, as Kristeva called it, both theirs and ours. They have methodically examined it in terms of the mechanism of subjectivity and their own pathology of the image, for there are, after all, very seldom any apparently normal or healthy circumstances depicted in their photoworks. In one image, a young boy is about to murder a cat. In another, a young woman is sinking into very deep water, life breath quickly vacating her lungs. At a baptism, holy water poured on an infant's head becomes carmine.

Darkness moves across the surface of these images with tremendous fluidity and in the most recent works, we have stunning glimpses into the abyss. These artists expose the underpinnings of our society—our real and imagined horrors, our waywardness, our defilement—and their version of the apocalypse is rooted on that fragile borderland where identities are compromised.

We feel this abjection and the anxiety that accompanies it authentically in and through the body because the photoworks possess a rare power of affect. There is also the issue of scale. The *mise en scène* they present is body scale; we could literally walk into these works.

We might cite, in this regard, Roland Barthes's discussion of affect in his seminal book *Camera Lucida*. In bracketing out all classificatory and theoretical considerations, he asked, "What does my body know of Photography?" The answer? Much. Because Barthes felt the truth of the photographic image resonate in his very being, and this introsusception of the image meant everything to him. This is similar to how we experience the Sanchez photoworks. At the most basic level, it is non-verbal. We experience the work in the body first and then emotionally. The visceral effect can be intense. Our thoughts then lead us even further astray.

Whether Barthes's punctum is a hand held to the side of a man's head, the listless hands of a young girl, the imploring outstretched arms of a man, or the slack pose of a young woman's body as she makes her perilous descent underwater, in these works we have an encounter with abjection itself. It is a testament to their formal power and affective strength that these works capture the moment at which the abject achieves a tremulous beauty.

The moment of rupture, the instant of disruption, is the moment of anarchy. The interruption opens a gap into which we plunge head first. In that gap, we are both voyeur and subject. The genius of the Sanchez brothers is not only to inflict wounds in time, in their images, but to suture them with solicited emotions that effectively measure our own damage. ■

Descent, 2003, Digital
C-Print, 48 x 60".

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