

VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW

A hair-raising portrait of the man in the mirror



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CARLOS AND JASON SANCHEZ
AT CHRISTOPHER CUTTS
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Until June 21,
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It's a difficult, troubled face, this handsome, nearly movie-star visage, so unfortunate a synthesis of narcissism and self-doubt, of desire and defeat, of restlessness and resolve.

It's the face of John Mark Karr, the self-confessed "killer" of six-year-old beauty-pageant princess, JonBenet Ramsey. You probably recall the circumstances of the case: how Karr was arrested in Bangkok on August 16, 2006, for JonBenet's murder and then, when DNA testing failed to implicate him, released ("He's a pedophile, not a murderer," proclaimed Karr family friend, George McCrary, valiantly attempting to put a better face on the whole sordid business).

This searching portrait of John Mark Karr is one of four large-scale photographs (and one sculpture-installation work) making up *Buried Alive*, an exhibition by Montreal-based artists Carlos and Jason Sanchez, now at Toronto's Christopher Cutts Gallery. The Sanchez brothers, while still quite young (Carlos is 32, Jason is 28), have been exhibiting together since 2001 and are rapidly becoming a pretty big deal on the international art scene.

They make photographs which, like Canadian art super-



The portrait John Mark Karr (2007) is one of four large-scale works by brothers Carlos and Jason Sanchez.

star Jeff Wall and American photographer Gregory Crewdson (to name two of the best-known figures working within the genre), they construct – laboriously building each photo as a set, casting it as if they were making a film, carefully lighting it, directing their chosen actors (many of whom are family members or friends) and, in the end, digitally defining and tuning the photo's effects in a process akin to a film director's sojourn in the editing suite.

Three of the mise-en-scène photos in the Cutts show work this way. In *Masked* (2007), a young man – one of the Sanchez's cousins – sitting on the

bed in a cheap hotel room and wearing a woollen mask, gazes at himself in a hand-held mirror. In *The Misuse of Youth*, (2007) (the Sanchezes are terrific at understatement), two young soldiers wrestle violently in the desert sand (a desert built entirely in the artists' studio). And in the very affecting *Drifter*, a long-haired loner (whom the Sanchezes met while doing volunteer work at a local food bank) walks disconsolately beside a length of truncated railway track which now reads pointedly as an image of thwarted progress and a defeated future.

These works are rather filmic in feeling, though it would be

fair to say that the Sanchezes seem far more concerned with the momentarily uncanny than they do with whatever might conceivably come before or after any of their staged moments.

This is not the case, however, with the *John Mark Karr* portrait (2007). The brothers became fascinated with Karr's face (and the story behind it) watching him on CNN. Their determination to meet him and photograph him eventually resulted in their being invited to Atlanta (where Karr lives with his father) to hang out with Karr, listen to his stories (which apparently included long, grisly retellings of

his alleged murder of JonBenet), and to accept his participation in their staging of his portrait (he donned the red shirt he was wearing when arrested just for the photo).

And it was Karr who suggested he be photographed in a mirror – which the Sanchez brothers managed to turn into a hair-raising episode in no-win self-analysis. (Note how cunningly the ornate frame of the mirror is made to contain only half of the rectangle, so that Karr is simultaneously controlled and freed by his dark self-scrutinizing.)

The Sanchez work that is not a photograph is a new installation piece called *Buried Alive* – a creepy, Edgar Allen Poe-ish work which consists of a huge glass vitrine filled with crumbled clay in which has been deposited a human body (you can glimpse bits of him through holes in the clay).

I call the work Poe-like because, as so frequently happens in the tales of the macabre maestro, this character has been buried alive. Look closely at a portion of its hand pressing against the glass, and (gasp!) you'll see it move slightly.

And the Sanchez boys otherwise seem so pleasant!