

# Carlos and Jason Sanchez: Buried Alive and Other Obsessions

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by ASHLEY JOHNSON



A man gazes narcissistically into a mirror. He is John Mark Karr, the self-proclaimed pedophile who confessed to the 1996 murder of 6-year-old beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey. Karr revelled in releasing the details anonymously to Michael Tracey, a documentary filmmaker obsessed with solving the JonBenet Ramsey case. Karr communicated through emails and phone calls from 2002 on, even contacting the Ramsey parents. In 2006 he was finally arrested in Thailand—and then released, as his DNA did not match that taken from the crime scene. His story was all a macabre invention. He was hoping that the actor Johnny Depp would play his part in the eventual film.

Carlos and Jason Sanchez arranged a photo shoot over three days at Karr's residence in Atlanta. He regaled them with emotional details of the crime interspersed by paroxysms of remorse. At the show's opening, Jason remarks that he had doubts about the verity of the emotions expressed.

The image has a very shallow depth of field, so the focal point is Karr's reflection in the mirror. The ornate, gilded rim of the mirror and the back of the subject's head are blurred. Karr wears a neatly buttoned red shirt and his hair is perfectly in place. These are perhaps the only visible signs of an obsessive personality.



Carlos and Jason Sanchez *The Misuse of Youth* 2007

The Sanchez brothers' subject matter is closely linked with mass media obsessions and the movie industry. *The Misuse of Youth* is an image of two soldiers lying one on top of the other in a stressful situation. Has one of them died or been wounded? Is his friend saying goodbye or trying to resuscitate him? Despite the immediacy, it is a staged studio shot. Mounds of sand are heaped up against a blue surface, thus creating the illusion of sand dunes and desert skies. It's an opportunity to invent a story. A viewer comes over to ask Jason what the image represents. Bizarrely, she thinks it might be an act of necrophilia.

The Sanchezes avoid using actors in their works because ordinary people impart a sense of unfamiliarity or angst to the photographs. *Drifter* is a good example. A man stands beside some abandoned railway tracks. The area is fenced off yet an opening has been cut into it. The subject is about to walk, uneasily peering out from under the brim of his cap. He carries bedding and other belongings with him. In actuality, Jason informs me, this man does live close to the headline. The image exudes economic tension and the need to move on, as if moving is the only way left to survive the predations of dominant culture.



Carlos and Jason Sanchez *Masked* 2007

All the works are dramatic. Somebody wearing a ski mask looks at himself in a mirror. Is he preparing to rob a bank? Similarly, in the show's sole installation, *Buried Alive*, a man is breathing his last gasp under a pile of rubble. The piece poignantly echoes the recent earthquake catastrophe in China. Every now and then the man's hand twitches and his mouth emits some vapour that collects on the glass box containing the rubble.

There is a great deal of subtlety in these works, even as they present circumstances that elicit a programmed response. The mass media and movie industry know exactly how to feed the public's voracious capacity for fantasy, and the artists use this human predictability to make us look at ourselves. So much so that one is left wondering whether John Mark Karr really is that far from being Everyman. (21 Morrow Ave., Toronto, ON.)