

SANCHEZ BROS.

Photographs are as unreal as real gets



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In "Buried Alive," four spectacular photos by Carlos and Jason Sanchez at the Christopher Cutts Gallery loom as large as billboards and are as brazenly theatrical as any Hollywood action flick.

This makes them seem as unreal as real can get. Take *John Mark Karr* (2007), an unsettling portrait of the very real John Mark Karr, now living in Atlanta, whose false confession to the 1996 murder of JonBenét Ramsey established his scary reputation as a world-class weirdo. (The FBI didn't find Karr's DNA at the scene in Boulder, Col., where the 6-year-old child beauty pageant princess was murdered.)

The Sanchez Bros.' pop-gothic sensibility has its roots in Vancouver photographer Jeff Wall's elaborately staged photo shoots and the creepy aesthetic of early David Lynch. From this, the brothers have created a fantasy-based body of work that commands very substantial prices — as one of five prints, *Karr* is listed as \$16,000 — while it finds its way into many A-list museums.

"Buried Alive," which also riffs on the themes of terrorism and the Afghan war, is set in a new fantasy world for the Sanchezes, one of media fame and image overkill.



Karr's Ken doll mirror image, painstakingly coiffed and dressed, is shown in a mirror fitted into an elaborately carved picture frame painted gold. This man in the mirror, with his large head and compact body, is staring woodenly at himself outside the mirror. But only the reflection seems clear.

Karr's celebrity — and celebrity itself — tweaked the brothers' imagination. "What first attracted us to Karr were the pictures of him being arrested in Bangkok (in 2006)," says Carlos Sanchez, who at 31 is the older brother by four years. "His eyes struck us. They looked so dead, yet there he was in the huge sea of chaos."

Karr's interest in his own celebrity — he emails the frères Sanchez on occasion to track the whereabouts of his image — likely made it possible for the brothers to photograph him last September in the Atlanta home he shares with his father.

"Technically it wasn't a huge leap for us to shoot him at his home," Jason says. "Although we were working on location, there were still a lot of staged elements — the studio lighting, the placement of things. There are always certain things we like to control."

Although much of the brothers' technique is "borrowed from the film world," as Jason says, the potency of their photographic tableaux comes from the tension that comes with its refusal to do what film does best: provide a beginning, middle and end.

In *Masked* (2007), a young man seated with a hood over his head on the side of a bed looking into a mirror in a cheap hotel room is a nocturnal scene suggestive of Caravaggio's *Narcissus*. Is boy/man wondering if he looks cool in the mask? Or is he for real, and is checking to make sure he can't be identified?



Left: The Sanchez Bros.' unsettling portrait of John Mark Karr, the publicity hound who claimed to have murdered child beauty queen JonBenét Ramsey. Above: Two soldiers engage in a deadly/erotic struggle in *The Misuse of Youth*.

If this was cinema — the figure is positioned as it would be in a film — we'd soon find out, just as we would discover the outcome of the deadly/erotic struggle between two soldiers in the desert in *The Misuse of Youth* (2007).

No wonder the show shares its title with one of its installations, a daunting sculptural piece enclosed in a large-scale vitrine. It offers a tiny glimpse here and there of bits of a human figure buried in rock, with a foot "twitching" every so often due to a hidden mechanism.

Like the buried figure — forever a second or so away from death, it would seem — any Sanchez photo suggests film-like movement that never comes.

"Buried Alive," at Christopher Cutts Gallery, 21 Morrow Ave., has been extended to June 28. Work by Carlos and Jason Sanchez is also on display at the Quebec Triennial at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, to Sept. 7.