

Darkness Ascends

MUSEUM FOR CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN ART, TORONTO



"Darkness Ascends" was the atypical summer exhibition; primarily because of its proposal that the dark side of the human psyche is intrinsic to consciousness. The symbiosis of darkness and light as analogous to other dichotomous couplings including evil/good, carnality/spirituality and body/mind; in short, the Hegelian self/other dialectic gave the exhibition a discursive sophistication that in lesser curatorial hands

could have succumbed to Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil.' Organized by MOCCA Director David Liss, "Darkness Ascends" consisted of over 100 works across all media by 25 artists.

When evil was addressed it was not the Christian bogeyman, but a deft exploration of its myriad manifestation in today's social, political, and cultural arenas. In Peter Beste's "Norwegian Black Metal" photographs (2002-2004), for example, the ubiquitous inverted cross refers not to Satan but to divesting Norway of Christianity in order to revert to a pristine Nordic Shangri-la. In counterpoint was the relentless barrage of apocalyptic imagery in Robert Boyd's excellent video in which authoritarianism — regardless of creed — was exposed as megalomaniacal cults of personality rife with Oedipal conflict. Sandwiched between these two extreme thematic registers were a plethora of works that poetically broadened the purview of darkness through metaphor including Anthony Goicolea's *Nail Biter* video

from 2002. Mesmerizing by virtue of being shot with a special filter which created a sublime darkened florescent environment, Goicolea portrayed himself erratically devouring his nails to the cacophony of his chattering teeth. Concomitantly disturbing and compelling, compulsion as sexual frustration degraded into auto-cannibalism; possibly a nod to Freud's problematic 'vagina dentata'?

Equally touching a raw nerve but in a more demure fashion was Carlos and Jason Sanchez's photograph titled *Abduction* (2004). What drove this *mise en scène* of potential pedophilia to a whole other level were the normative suburban setting and ensuing familial disquietude evinced in the intimacy and alienation simultaneously shared by male adult and young girl. Also riffing tangentially on childhood signifiers was Richard Stipl's series of small, hyperrealist doll-like sculptures titled *Block Sabbath* (2006). Part Ken & Barbie by way of Madame Tussauds and the Chapman brothers, the tableau of fig-

urines engaged in sadomasochistic rites vacillated between dark humor and horror, and sex and death. Whether the works were aggressive or subliminal, straightforward or conceptual, the success of "Darkness Ascends" must also be credited to its design strategy: walls were painted black, white or red; an audio piece by sunn 0))) was faintly heard throughout the museum and became an aesthetic Muzak; and the general cathartic nature of the work exhibited was well exploited to curatorial advantage. —*Raul Zamudio*

Peter Beste. *Nattefrost of Carpathian Forest Covered in His Own Shit*, Oslo, Norway, 2004. Digital C-print, 41 x 51 cm. Photo: Walter Willems. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto. Left: Anthony Goicolea, *Nail Biter*, 2002. Video still. Collection Sean D'andrade & Gwendolyn Healey, Toronto. Courtesy Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver/Toronto.

