



Play frère

Fraternal Quebecois photographers Carlos and Jason Sanchez turn the conceptual into the natural at CONTACT

BY DAVID BALZER

"Conceptual? What isn't conceptual?" asks Jason Sanchez, jokingly dismantling the artspeak sometimes used to describe the large-format, semi-hallucinatory photographs he makes with his older brother Carlos. "I mean, a work of art has to be conceived somewhere. It doesn't just show up on the negative by itself!"

Duly noted, and the sentiment might equally be applied to the theme of this year's CONTACT photography festival, "The Constructed Image." Indeed, what media-based image isn't, to a certain extent, constructed? For the CONTACT flacks and curators at least, "constructed" probably boils down to intention: it's certainly true that contemporary-art photography is increasingly engaged in the mannered retooling of reality.

For the Montreal-based Sanchezes, this doesn't just mean shooting things and then altering them in post-production; it frequently means fabricating entire incidents, placing figures and sets strategically into the frame as a film director would. The brothers' contributions to CONTACT — a new exhibit at Christopher Cutts Gallery, a major public installation at MOCCA and the cover of the festival's catalogue and posters — prove that such constructions can be highly varied, and can yield an emotional intensity equal to, and in some cases surpassing, that found in documentary work.

"We're creating the moment," says Jason Sanchez. "But it's based on real life. The inspiration comes from real life. It looks like real life. It's just that the way we work is different. The meanings still come across, though."

The Sanchezes are openly concerned with the big questions: usually, their work captures moments of violence that, through weird concentrations of physical and psychological energy, result in destruction, or seemingly miraculous resuscitations. The new photographs at Christopher Cutts are, as the Sanchezes point out, not part of a series (the brothers don't work in this way), but relate distinctly to forms of death.

One photo, "Rescue Effort," evokes the strapping Romanticism of Gericault and Delacroix, and shows a man being pulled out of the mud, presumably after a natural disaster. Another, "Crematorium," is, according to Jason, "one of the straightest shots" they've ever done, and is entirely free of figures, instead homing in on the relationship between an old, isolated crematorium and an adjacent forest, both of which are covered in mid-winter snow.

"Rescue Effort" and "Crematorium" typify the brothers' two-pronged approach: Carlos is partial to poppy, in-your-face tableaux, Jason to subtler, more austere studies. The Sanchezes share this approach with Vancouverite Jeff Wall, a pioneer of contemporary photo-conceptualism whose body of work can largely be divided into the figure- and landscape-based. However, while Wall is an important, inexorable influence on them, the Sanchezes claim not to aspire to the same kinds of art-historical and structural allusiveness that Wall is best known for.

"I think our images attract us on more of a gut level," says Jason, when asked to compare "Crematorium" to

Wall works like "Still Creek, Vancouver, winter 2003."

"It's a very emotional process," he explains. "For 'Crematorium,' there is a formal connection between the chimney stacks and the forest, yes, but I'm more interested in the message that that creates — what the chimney stacks symbolize next to the forest: the reciprocal relationship between life and death, and the continuation of everything."

This very reachable theme is also present in the Sanchezes' amazing installation at MOCCA, *Between Life and Death* (seen on the opposite page). Originally exhibited last year in their hometown of Laval, Québec, the installation places a video piece in the back of an actual bus. The bus has been made to look as if it's been through an accident, and the video inside, produced using state-of-the-art holographic technology, shows a female passenger confronting what appears to be her own soul. *Between Life and Death* is based on interviews the Sanchezes held with people who have had similar near-death experiences, though it also seems a *précis* on, or an allegory for, the ability of the constructed image to attain an almost supernatural, or ultra-natural, degree of authenticity.

"What was interesting about the hologram technique was that the main woman we interviewed described what she saw as resembling a hologram," says Jason. "So, the technology itself, the very look of it, allowed her to relate something that, for her, was true."

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