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Born in Montreal and growing up in the suburbs, Carlos Sanchez (b. 1976) and Jason Sanchez (b. 1981) began collaborating in 2001 shortly before they received their first grant from the Du Maurier Arts Council. A second Du Maurier grant allowed them to end their respective studies at Concordia University in Montreal in 2003 and work “seven days a week” on their art. Actually, the collaboration began earlier with Carlos behind the camera and Jason and his friends serving as models for a series of staged color works. But the works for which they have become known and which are exhibited now at the Houston Center for Photography began when both moved behind the lens. There Their first solo exhibition was in 2002 and they’ve produced and exhibited steadily since, publishing their second book in 2007.

They spend several months in pre-execution: researching the topic, refining the concept, planning and building sets, acquiring or building props, hiring necessary technical staff, and carefully determining the color palette of each scene. Their models are largely family and friends. Shooting a picture can take hours. Mostly, they shoot exteriors or build sets in their studio, which requires many skills other than those necessary for the photographs, including set designing, carpentry, lighting, stage directing, etc. Post-production is done digitally. Each image is produced in contemporary sizes – 42” x 74”, 24” x 96”, 60” x 76” – and limited editions of five or six. [Interview by Anne Wilkens Tucker](#)

Reality Interrupted: Carlos and Jason Sanchez



Carlos and Jason Sanchez
Principles
Montréal, 2002, C-Print
40" x 49"

Anne Tucker: Do you sketch a scene, create a preliminary sketch in a computer, or is the “stage” also your sketchpad?

Carlos: Neither of us is very good with drawing When we are planning a set we like to go into the studio and take out our 4 x 8’ panels and place them how we think the room should look. This is much simpler for us because a drawing might look nice on paper, but in the end, it might not convey the “reality” we seek. So, placing the panels in our studio and making a rough room design is what we find most affective.

Jason: We sometimes use elements from various reference shots found in external sources to help conceptualize and visualize our scenes.

Interior sets are constructed in your studio, which is located in your uncle’s warehouse. For instance, once you had found the right desk for the picture *Principles*, did you put that specific desk into an existing sketch or do you actually put each prop as it is acquired into place on the evolving set?

CS: *Principles* was shot in a building belonging to McGill University in Montreal. All that was there was the painting and the wood wall. We went to prop houses and got everything else that was needed to create that set.

You spoke of multiple versions of the “lamb” piñata in *Easter Party* (2003). I presume matters of scale relative to the room and to the young man swinging the bat are as much of a concern as having the piñata bleed when struck?

CS: We had a back up piñata made in case the main one was damaged. We also thought that we would change the piñata before each image was taken, but in the end, we let the piñata “bleed” for 5 or 6 takes before having to re-fill it with new blood.

JS: There were many logistical concerns when making a solid piñata that wouldn’t break after multiple beatings from the children as well as one that would bleed to our liking. *Easter Party* was the first of many shoots that involved working with a special effects company in Montreal called *Cineffects*.

Occasionally, such as with *Motive for Change* (2004), you create the final image from multiple negatives, but usually, there is one basic shot that may then be modified in the camera. This greatly increases the pre-production work and the exactitude of your staging. What considerations drive that decision to make the event happen, i.e. blood pooling below the piñata, rather than create it digitally?

CS: For the blood from the piñata, the thought of creating it digitally never crossed our minds. Wherever possible, we create the desired action in camera. We have never really *created* anything digitally. Digital tools are mostly used to bring multiple pieces together seamlessly or tweak colors, contrast etc...



Carlos and
Jason Sanchez
Easter Party
Montréal, 2003
Digital C-Print
46" x 72"

JS: It can be risky business to leave too many elements to be adjusted in the post-production stage. Photoshop is an amazing tool, but it definitely has its limitations. The rewarding aspect of creating images comes from getting our hands dirty, figuring out what is needed, and getting it done.

Catherine Somzé wrote "inspiration draws on stories passed on by word of mouth, items found in the news or personally lived experiences." Has the weight of those sources shifted in the time you've been making these photographs?

CS: These days my inspirations come mostly from what's going on around me. It can also come through the news, the radio, Internet, a book, etc. Anything that catches my attention and continues to interest me might become the source of an image.

JS: I'm still pulling inspiration from my surroundings – things I see, feel, hear, and read.

We are only talking about seven years of work, but it seems to me your earlier works largely center on young people and that frequently a child or an adolescent is afraid or in some kind of physical or developmental risk. In *Pink Bathroom* (2001), a wet, naked boy anxiously peers around a pink tile wall with the torn shower curtain to his left. This is one of your earliest works. What was its source of inspiration? Was it an event or a feeling?

CS: When we started making the early images, our process was more freestyle. We would often find interesting locations, and then find a way to construct an image in them. In the case of *Pink Bathroom*, we were looking for a location to shoot another image when we came across this actual pink bathroom. We liked the space and created a scenario that would work well with the location.

JS: In our early work we were very interested in creating images that could have been considered as film stills. We liked the idea of creating a fragment of a longer narrative, allowing the viewers to fill in the gaps and create storylines in their minds. We no longer think about our work the same way we used to, although some people may feel that our images do resemble film stills. Instead, we focus the content of our images to portray the emotional and psychological sides of the subjects we work with.

Two of the most often reproduced of your pictures are *Easter Party* (2003) and *The Baptism* (2004), both of which feature family moments, religious themes, and a disconcerting appearance of blood where none was expected or is even seemingly perceived by the adults. Do you discuss symbolism?

JS: The blood in both images is symbolic. In *Easter Party*, the young protagonist is participating in a tradition in which the children of his family symbolically sacrifice a lamb to God by making a lamb shaped piñata and hitting it with a wooden axe until it tears open and expels its candy filled insides. In biblical times the actual sacrifice of a lamb was performed to obtain forgiveness for the sins of the families who performed the act. The boy in our image is aware of the underlying spider webs of truth that exist within his family and is acting for their wellbeing by imagining that he is sacrificing an actual lamb.

In *The Baptism*, I feel the blood foreshadows the child's future. We, the viewers, are privileged to catch a glimpse of this moment while his entourage marvels at the baby's initiation into the Christian faith.

Often there are multiple possible meanings. As Catherine Somzé observes, "In *The Baptism*, is it the contact with the crown of the child that causes the water to change into blood? (Is the child cleansed of his original sin?) Or is it, on the contrary, the water running down his crown that wounds him and brings the blood gushing forth? (Would sin here then be the true act of baptism?)"

Do you discuss issues such as these? Are you pleased or indifferent to speculations such as these?

CS: I am always pleased when people make up their own stories about the images and about their meanings. I actually find it most interesting when their take on it differs from mine.



above: Carlos and Jason Sanchez
A Motive For Change, Montréal,
2004, Digital C-Print, 60" x 75"

right: Carlos and Jason Sanchez
Pink Bathroom
0000, Digital C-Print, 00" x 00"



JS: It is not important for me to discuss and give my interpretation on every element of my work. I prefer leaving certain things ambiguous allowing room for interpretation. It is more important to me that the viewer has their own experience when looking at our images and not one influenced about what we think that they should think or feel.

In the newest works, the focus is less adolescence in the familial realm and more situated in a broader societal context. In *Masked* (2007), we can't know the age of the young man admiring his newly created stocking mask, with the scissors that cut the eyeholes dropped on the rug. In fact there is less and less that we can know in these new pictures. In *Identification* (2007), we ask: Who is dead? Why are these people in a morgue? What is their relationship? I can think of a host of other questions. Are you intentionally pushing ambiguity?

CS: We like to be subtle, but give clues that are not necessarily in your face. I find an image to be much more powerful when it doesn't spell out the whole meaning for you.



Carlos and Jason Sanchez
Identification Between Life and Death
0000, Digital C-Print, 00" x 00"



JS: It is important to create images that don't reveal too much upon first viewing. Like any good movie or music album, the more you focus on the material the more you get out of it. It is our aim to create work that has a similar effect.


Given the parallels to cinema in your work, it is not surprising that you made *Between Life and Death* (2006), an installation that places a holographic video of a woman's near-death experience inside the carcass of a bus that actually crashed. Are you planning more installations and use of moving images?

CS: We have talked about it and have ideas about what we would do, so yes, I believe that we will definitely use moving images again.



JS: I feel that film is one of the strongest and most powerful mediums of expression, one that I am definitely interested in pursuing.

AT: Your titles are important. Sometimes, it may state the obvious, such as *Overflowing Sink* (2002), but in this case "overflowing" is an understatement. Deluge might be a more accurate description. Sometimes, words are directive, such as *The Hurried Child* (2005), which actually refers to psychologist David Elkins book of the same title. The subtitle of the book is *Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, and your photograph of the child in tart's make-up reminds most viewers of Jon Benet Ramsey. In the case of *Principles*, the title plays with meanings in similarly sounding words as the scene portrays a school principal, sitting with whiskey and a cigar and a student-age girl roughing his hair. At what stage do titles enter the process? Is one of you better than the other with words? Do titles morph as the project evolves?

CS: I would say that most the time the title of the piece is often known before we shoot the work. If during the pre-production or production stage when a title is not yet determined, we will use a working title while we are making it. For example, we referred to *Identification* as the morgue shot. Usually, the title is finalized during post-production. As for who makes up the titles, if one of us comes up with a better name, we use it, and that usually is how it works. 



above: Carlos and Jason Sanchez
The Baptism
Montréal, 2003
Digital C-Print
40" x 49"

left: Carlos and Jason Sanchez
Masked
Montréal, 2007
Digital C-Print
00" x 00"

right, top: Carlos and Jason Sanchez
Overflowing Sink
Montréal, 2002
Digital C-Print
40" x 49"

right: Carlos and Jason Sanchez
The Hurried Child
Montréal, 2005
Digital C-Print, 2005
60" x 76"