



REALER THAN REEL

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The Sanchez Brothers use film techniques to create a creepy hyperreality in their photos.

The subjects and settings in Carlos and Jason Sanchez's photoworks live beyond the framed world they inhabit...they've even appeared in my dreams, leaving me wheeling the next day. These images, which are so large-scaled that you feel you could step right into them, have a hallucinatory, "larger-than-life" quality that disrupts reality in the subtlest ways. What you witness in them resides in you and, in some cases, haunts you for days like an especially unsettling nightmare.

With upcoming exhibits in Europe and the US, the Sanchez brothers are quickly becoming known worldwide for the film-like quality of their images, a quality which is attained through meticulous art direction. The process involved in their preparation to shoot resembles a careful development of a film's mise-en-scene; prior to several of their shoots, these photographers built sets from scratch, going to the extent of wallpapering, and even installing custom hardwood flooring.

Carlos, the elder of this brotherly duo, explains why he moved from more impromptu shooting to this highly staged photography: "back in my college days, I was doing a lot of black and white photography. It was very documentary style, like Danny Lyon or Robert Frank, taken during various road trips and outings with friends. A few years later, as I was finalizing my photography studies at Concordia University, I was getting tired of looking for things to shoot, so I started making up scenarios. Most of the early shoots involved my friends in underworld-style roles." In the infancy of their career, Jason began as one of Carlos' models: "he was inexpensive and didn't demand his own motor home as most of the other models I worked with did," Carlos jokes, "and little by little, Jason and I became more serious about photography and making art together, so he stepped out from in front of the camera and we became full-time collaborators behind the lens.

Because of the filmic qualities of these photos, each Sanchez work resonates with a subtly implied narrative. However, these stories play out in possibilities beyond our understanding, and their tendency to cultivate ambiguity is what is so unsettling about their images. In this vein, Jason describes how the director David Lynch serves as one of their inspirations, as Jason explains: "I am drawn to the tensions he creates between his characters and those created from his environments. His work continues to produce goose bumps and questions from his viewers."

Considering the fact that they use many film techniques in the staging and shooting of their photographs, one might wonder why the Sanchez brothers chose stills as their medium, rather than making motion pictures. Despite the easy comparison made between film and staged photograph, it's difficult, according to Jason, to make clear-cut distinctions between the two mediums: "the work that we put into the preparation and the shooting of one of our images can be compared to the work that goes into the creation of certain scenes for films. However, the nature of photography is more suggestive and evocative. There are often multiple meanings and interpretations of a photographic image. The initial interpretation of an image is based in the viewer's experiences and his perception of the world, and from there his imagination creates a story and an understanding. Although the power of suggestion can be very strong in a film as well, in most narrative-based films, there is a clear beginning, middle and end to the story."

There are some reoccurring motifs the Sanchez portfolio. Water, for example, is one that almost functions as a character in some of their works: "In *Overflowing Sink*," Jason elaborates, "we used the element to portray the tension and angst that can exist between family members sharing a household. Also, in *Descent*," the overwhelming magnitude and darkness of the water surrounding the sinking girl helped to translate my feelings of solitude and loneliness. She is being pulled down and suffocated by her surrounding, something that maybe we have all felt at some time in our lives.

Blood is also closely related to water in Sanchez imagery. The *Baptism*, for example, shows holy water turned to blood as it comes in contact with the infant's fragile head. In *Bloody Bed*," pools of blood cast reflections like puddles of rainwater. Here a pair of disembodied feet propped awkwardly against the bed disrupts the comfort of a bedroom full of kitsch décor. These elements break down the barrier between the real and imaginary, between dreaming and waking life.

Indeed, blood is thicker than water, and the Sanchez brothers are definitely preoccupied with the theme of family. In certain images, there is an underlying violence that is ascribed to families as well as the religion that binds them. An example Jason provides is *"Easter Party,"* in which a boy is hitting a piñata that looks like the bloody carcass of a lamb,

while his family gleefully cheers him on. "In an attempt to preserve the innocence of the younger generations, older family members offer a filtered experience of their family's dynamic. Secrets are kept as roles are played. The symbolism of the blood in our image was inspired from the Bible in which Jesus, the Lamb of God, was killed for the sins of man. In our story our protagonist is aware of his family's secrets and is acting for their betterment."



Locations that should be places of comfort are consistently made alien in Sanchez images. "Pink Bathroom" shows a wet little boy peeking nervously around a tiled pink wall. Behind him, a shower curtain has been ripped down and the floor is littered with hair and curtain hooks. "After the Fire" shows a burned room lit with morning sunlight, serene despite the obvious devastation to the room. Probably the creepiest of the Sanchez brothers' recent works is "Abduction": it features a prettily-decorated room. A little girl sits on a child's bed. Next to her are some gifts. At first this seems to be a natural place for her to be. However, a closer inspection of the suitcase tucked under the bed, and the way she stares listlessly at the birthday card slowly fills the viewer with dread. Is she trying to avoid the gaze of the man across from her? Despite his seemingly paternal connection to her, the enclosed sloping walls confine her. One can only guess at his intentions, and these guesses sometimes reach the darkest of interpretations.

A film's plot generally shapes and limits story and character. Sanchez's photoworks, on the other hand, multiply and complicate the lives of the subjects they photograph. A film is like a modern novel; it tends to relay a series of events and is generally more detailed and more explicit. In comparison, these images are like poetry, capturing moments in time that often occur before or after a crisis. This makes us ask "what just happened?" or "what might happen?" There are no straight answers to these questions. While these brothers want their audience to make their own interpretations, their photoworks, which revel in ambiguity, continue to trigger numerous and conflicting interpretations that reach beyond any singular meaning.

View a selection of Sanchez Brothers' works and a list of upcoming exhibits at www.thesanchezbrothers.com.