

RED EYE DEPT.

YOUNG BLOODS

The Sanchez Brothers explode childhood in their new series, "The Young"

by Adam Gollner and Derek Webster

ROBERT FRANK, ONE of the twentieth century's most important photographers, famously declared in 1961, "You can photograph anything now." That freedom has proven to be quite liberating—but it has also inspired a proliferation of tedious, snapshot-style photography in the halls of contemporary art. True snapshot art comes out of very special talents, people for whom the moment-by-moment passage of time is essential to their aesthetic. The work of the Sanchez Brothers is the complete opposite. It can take months to complete a single shot. Slow to gestate, difficult to produce—but when an image is finished, the result is often stunning.

Jason Sanchez, twenty-two, and Carlos Sanchez, twenty-seven—who hail from the Montreal suburb of Laval—describe their art respectively as "*mise en scène* photography" and "very controlled photographs." They seem obsessive, almost paranoid in their recreation of detail. "We are able to build sets to suit our ideas, be very selective in what props and furniture are used and choose the colours we want," says Jason. Studio

shooting lets them design lighting schemes to their exact liking. "We enjoy taking our time while making images," Jason explains. "To be honest and sincere in my art, I have to work on my own time and at my own pace, which tends to be slow and meticulous." For *Easter Party*, the set alone took three months. "We spent lots of time with the crew at Cineffects (a Montreal special-effects company) creating and building the bleeding piñata," says Carlos. "In all, we must have built ten different piñatas and spent over seventy-five dollars on cotton balls alone."

THE SANCHEZ Brothers' art inhabits that region of the mind visited just before sleep. Things seem quite real—yet are somehow one step removed from reality. In the aforementioned *Easter Party*, a boy hits a piñata amid the knick-knacks, snacks and chatter of a regular Sunday family gathering. Everything seems ordinary—until you realize that blood is pouring out of the lamb piñata. "The blood is in the boy's mind," says Jason. Nascent, untested sexuality,

suburban motifs, religious imagery and the uncertainty of early adolescence all come together in this and other photos to powerful effect. "The Young," their new series, turns innocence into a losing battle.

Carlos Sanchez began shooting black and white documentary photography when he was sixteen. "I was doing a lot of that for, like, five or six years," says Carlos. "Then I started shooting colour, staging scenes and photographing them." Back then, younger brother Jason and a few friends would model for the shoots. "We would all be in suits acting out mobster-type scenes, or what we thought to be mob scenes, and I looked like a fifteen-year-old kid in an oversized second-hand suit. It was a lot of fun while it lasted, but I wanted to get more serious with the images." That's when Jason stepped behind the camera with his brother.

The photographer Jeff Wall has been an important influence on the brothers' style. "I like to be able to look at a picture and ask myself why certain elements were chosen," says Carlos. "[Wall] cre-

EASTER PARTY 46 x 72 INCHES (2003)

"Every Easter, my grandfather, along with his grandchildren, would make a lamb-shaped piñata. Sacrificing the piñata was an offering to God. It was the family's opportunity to ask Him to forgive our sins and clean our slate for yet another year. The boy in our image is acting on that same notion. He is shedding blood for the well-being of his family. Within the structure of a family exists a spider-web of truths . . . the boy in our image is aware of what's going on and, along with his imagination, acts accordingly."—Jason Sanchez



PRINCIPLES

40 X 49 INCHES (2002)

"A friend of mine used to drink whisky with her principle in his office during high school. We set up the shoot in a McGill University building that our aunt works in. We brought in everything except the back wall and the painting." —Carlos Sanchez



DESCENT
48 x 60 INCHES (2003)

For this underwater shot, the Sanchez Brothers worked with Aquamedias, a company that specializes in underwater cinematography. Carlos: "We did lots of tests with them—the shoot wouldn't have gone as smoothly if they hadn't been there. The model [a synchronized swimmer] was also amazing . . . Thirty-four takes—with one break! For the lighting, we placed the flash head on a thirty-foot crane provided by Adam Hoppenheim, who owns Gripworx, and had it hovering over the water for the shoot. It was great."





WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING, PART I
40 × 49 INCHES (2002)

"We try to expand on the characters' personalities through use of props and other objects in the photographs. For example, even if we are shooting in the woods, we will shape the woods to our liking."—Carlos Sanchez

WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING, PART II
40 × 49 INCHES (2002)

For this shot, the brothers lugged two three-hundred-pound generators into the middle of the woods. "This picture speaks to me about . . . a certain direction in life that this child might lean towards," says Carlos. "Lots of serial killers started out killing animals. I see this image as warning of the future psychological problems that he might encounter."



ates so many levels on which his photographs can be interpreted. Most of his pictures are 'ordinary-looking,' but, when you really study them, you can find certain hints that have been placed for some precise reason." Wall's *Insomniac* is one of Jason's favourite images. "I love the simplicity of it," he says. "Attention to detail fascinates me. When I learned that the kitchen was a set and lit with studio lights, my photographic horizons greatly expanded." The production values of Gregory Crewdson's work also impress him: "I get my kicks from trying to figure out how his shots were lit."

Definite comparisons can be made between a Sanchez still and cinema. Sets are built for both productions, actors chosen, costumes picked and lighting designed to create specific moods. Props and dramatic effects—a Ouija board, a piñata, light underwater—further the relationship. And story: there is always some kind of narrative lurking within these rich stills, usually something dark and sinister. The action and aftermath of an entire film can be found here—almost as if the stills possessed a memory of movement.

The brothers cite directors David Lynch, Stanley Kubrick and P. T. Anderson as influences. "[Kubrick] knew the importance of collaboration with others, specifically with the writers, the art department and with his director of photography," says Jason. Carlos praises Robert Elswit, cinematographer for all of the P. T. Anderson films. "The lighting he used in *Punch-Drunk Love* was very gutsy. The way he chose to sometimes just blow out the image completely was great." During the shooting of *Easter Party*, the brothers produced a short film about the religious holiday. Jason remains very interested in doing another—"I now desire pictures in motion."

There's more than props and technique to a Sanchez photo, though. Put your thumb over the pool of blood, or the spirit board. The images still attract the eye and the layers of narrative are still there, whether it is the immigrant experience portrayed in *Easter Party* or the tense vision of pre-adolescence in *While You Were Sleeping, Parts I and II* and the untitled shot of a boy in a bedroom.

There is, clearly, a religious aspect to these works, but not in the usual

sense of cathedral frescoes and other such high religious art—more like those tacky felt paintings of Jesus or Mary. Up stares our Saviour, in a halo of near-neon light, his fuzzy crown of thorns and meaty heart bleeding stylized drops of blood. A Sanchez photo draws upon this stylized aesthetic, but to very different effect—witness the gory but fake blood in *Easter Party*, the otherworldly chiaroscuro in the untitled water image or the Gethsemane-like quality in *While You Were Sleeping, Part I*.

"The Young" suggests there is a ritualistic aspect to exiting childhood that holds true even in a modern, sanitized reality. The sites in which these images occur are familiar to any child of the suburbs: picture-window living rooms, the high school swimming pool (or a lake beside the family cottage) and the undeveloped woods behind houses and between subdivisions. The suburban wood has yet to be acknowledged as the rich source of experience it is for contemporary artists. Like Edward Hopper's symbolic use of the dark green and black forests of New England, these narrow ribbons of uncontrolled growth are where the illicit blossoms, where strict rules are not enforced and where the terms of experience are not predetermined. The children in the forest in *While You Were Sleeping, Parts I and II* all know that what they are doing is wrong: tempting the spirits of their own imaginations in *Part I*; staring without pity into the glazed eyes of a dead cat in *Part II*, the smashed ceramic tiles of a former kitchen floor piled on a refuse heap nearby. The mood of this last is somewhat reminiscent of Goya's famous portrait of a child about to let two cats eat the magpie he has on a string. Childhood's morally immature experiments in life and death can be shocking to behold.

When asked the obvious question—did you have a happy childhood?—the brothers have different responses. "I don't really know," answers Carlos. "I had quite a normal childhood, lots of family parties and hanging around with friends and stuff." Jason smiles and says, "I never grew up." ♣

The photographs on pages 67–70 are from "The Young." An exhibition of the full series opens at Dazibao (4001 Berri) on November 20 at 5 pm.