

# M E N T A L M A S T I C A T I O N

D o n G r e g o r i o A n t ó n

The Photographic Oeuvre of C a m e r o n W o o d a l l :

Spirituality, Symbolism, Visual Narratives, and the Interpretive Role of the Viewer

In a large, richly lavished palace in India four blind men were selected at random and taken to a specialized room within the palace. They were told that they were to enter this room one at a time and perceive as best they could what was in that room. They would then exit the room and tell the people on the other side what was in the room. The first blind man entered and walked into a large, immovable, rough textured surface. He walked around it and ran his hands up and down its sides and perceived that it was a tall and columned shaped object. He exited the room and pronounced that the thing inside was a tree. The next man walked into the room and was struck by leather like material. He grasped it as best he could but it continued to strike out at him. He could tell that it was long, slender, and flexible. He ran to the other side of the room and exited where in an exasperated tone said that he had been whipped by a bullwhip. The third man then entered and as he casually strolled around the room he brushed against a large plant like object, he was comforted by the movement of the air it produced and lingered awhile. He exited and said he was happy to pronounce that it was a luxurious fan inside the room. The last man, not hearing the other proclamations, but being fearful of what was to happen because of the length it had taken for his time to come, built up his courage and dashed into the room. At once he was struck in the breast by a sharp point, hard, solid, long, and curved. Falling to the ground he cowered and had to be led out of the room. As he propped himself across his guide he said that it was a majestic sword of great strength and warrior like qualities. Within this room was an enigma that changed every time it was perceived. It was an objective and universal being that had the ability to form into subjective consciousness. It was an elephant.

This parable was used by the Muslims to describe the beliefs of the Hindus. Later it was used by the Christians to explain the beliefs of the Muslims. It explained how a Universal God could be interpreted differently based on cultural and individual belief. This parable explores the question of metaphysics; what is it? And the problem of epistemology; how do you know? The point is that reality is an objective thing but can only be described through subjective interpretations after perception and translated through belief. These Truths are not dependant upon our beliefs or our perceptions of them, but can only be communicated in subjective ways since our senses and language is limited. This is why visual symbols are so important. They promote the reality of transcendence and immanent truth and help art and philosophy coexist. These symbols bring our spirit and world together into consciousness.

Using photography, Don Gregorio Anton searches the depths of consciousness leaving us awed at magic manifested. Charged with spiritual energy, his art is

utilized to seek understanding of himself and his world. Through his use of personal myth we find the connection between subjective knowledge and shared emotion. The final pieces are neither questions nor answers but are artifacts of memory and experience.

What is a spirit? It cannot be weighed, measured, or quantified. Can it therefore have a definition? Can a person have a spiritual experience? I cannot define for you what or where a spirit is. I can describe it as energy and awe, the essence of life, found in connections and relationships, the spark of love and bliss. A person who contends that the physical world is the only reality must therefore not believe in thought or emotion. The discussion of the existence of a spiritual realm is a long one. It has been debated for as long as the history of philosophy. I say your answers to these questions depend on your life experience and directions of conscious thought.

The eastern philosophers describe a mystical experience as losing oneself. The practitioners of most Eastern religions and philosophies believe that through meditation one can gain enlightenment and reach a nirvana or place of peace, where there is no ego or self. Western thought usually says that a mystical experience is gaining knowledge of the totality of being without that loss of self, a oneness with a divine power. William James said that it defies the attempt to define it, and that the mystical experience could only be a direct one. People must be able to find their own way to the mystical. He also expressed that it was not only comparable to conditions of emotion but those of knowledge as well. These mystical experiences are times of revelation and insight. They are a part of being spiritual. Don Anton says he doesn't talk about mysticism. But he does believe that the mystical appears around us all the time and it is usually explained away. He also talks about gaining knowledge, connections and relationships, and understanding oneself and the world.

Is this a spiritual experience? Or is this life? I contend that depending on how one understands self and defines spirit it can be both. I also argue that the work of Don Anton is a record and product of a spiritual experience. He "dwells on the things that cause pain" and "the interconnectedness of all things". In this way he is exploring himself and the relationships he has formed with his soul.

Epistemology is the study of how a person gains knowledge. Experience it seems is the answer. Either as a catalyst of remembering what is innate within the mind, or by observation and analysis, experience teaches us about us. Through this act of learning we operate in the world, forming connections and recognizing relationships. The conscious person will comprehend that what is seen makes them and how it is seen makes the world. "We are the world." This comprehension and acceptance is a spiritual awakening; it is life. It is how Belief begins to make its way known in the world of reality and affects the Truth of

experience, much like in the parable of the elephant.

“Art is the language of the spirit,” says Rene Huyghe. It is made of both knowledge and emotion, intuition and reason. It illuminates the darkness within the human consciousness and frees our creative urges. Don Anton explores the possibilities of the spirit and enhances our awareness of its existence. Through story and symbol we can glimpse the universal, even though their manifestations may change based upon experiences.

The world of objects and visual references signifies the world of thought and intuition. Does this mean that these worlds are separate or does this mean that they rely on one another? By understanding ourselves we can understand the universals. In a way, thought must be connected to object and experience. This microcosm of the macrocosm is reflected in Mr. Anton’s philosophy, that we must relearn how to see and observe, we must teach ourselves. Then we can understand our soul’s place within the world. But does art transcend this realm of objects? Sometimes it can push the understanding beyond the realm of the rational and transcend objectification. So when we recognize the universal principals within ourselves we are communing with the universal and ourselves. When viewers see themselves in a piece of art they are communing with that piece of themselves, participating in an “intimate discovery”. This happens when a person is “awe inspired, humbled, and perplexed”. This discovery is a dimension of that object, but at the same time transcends that object and joins thought and spirit. It is not based on other people’s definitions but defined by the way the person found it and understands it. It can then become a personal truth reflecting a Universal one.

Krishnamurti spoke of Truth as a “pathless land.” His speech to the Order of the Star, in which he disbands the organization, speaks of truth as a fragile thing that must come to a person on his or her own terms. He gives a parable that describes why it is so important that organizations do not claim to hold the truth unto themselves.

The devil and a man were walking down the street one day conversing and enjoying the afternoon. When the devil looked over he saw another man stop in his tracks and pick up something and put it in his pocket. This other man looked content and resumed his journey. The devil smiled at this and thought that this was going to be a good day for him. Seeing the devil so happy his companion inquired as to the cause of his pleasant disposition. The devil replied that he had seen a man find a piece of truth. Perplexed as to why this would make the devil happy rather than upset, the man asked as much. The devil’s response was that it was good for him because this man would take that piece of truth and organize it. Once organized it would cultivate followers and become the way. Once it was the way it could no longer be the truth. This was why it was good for the devil. “No

organization can lead me to spirituality.” You can never follow someone to find the truth. It must be found in your own way.

The first priests were artists. These shamans, magic men, projected their hopes and fears into images, influencing great spirits to do their bidding through their act of creating. Modern artists are like these old shamans suggesting magic and having spiritual resonance. Artists tend to commune with the unknown and work with the unnamable. They must learn about it and describe it in their own way.

Eleanor Heartney says that in the Catholic Imagination there is a propensity to approach the world in a metaphoric way and use the body as a symbol for larger meanings. Don says that his catholic background has shown itself more in the form of longing. All of the work I have seen of Mr. Anton has to do with the body. It is usually in some sort of pain or ecstasy. And it reminds me of holy relics and religious paintings. Don Anton has a Catholic background and it is probably safe to assume that he follows the tendencies of that religion while independently creating his own cosmology or understanding of reality.

It is also common in the Native American community to mix both Christian symbols and indigenous ones. Don Anton is on a personal journey in search of understanding his spirit. I am sure he was surrounded by the Latino tradition of what has been termed “Magic Realism”. Magic Realism is a combination of this blending of symbols and the exposure of everyday miracles and grace. The artists working in this style try to encapsulate the subsistence of the soul by using symbols of the impossible or horrific.

Symbols function as a visual way to transcend obvious meaning. Their meanings transcend the common visual interpretation by both referencing themselves and another reality, either external or internal. Images become symbols when they fit that description, when it is no longer a copy of reality but an impression of a greater reality. The modern symbol can allude to meaning but because of the breakdown of communication in a post structural society symbols cannot denote meaning. In this type of society symbols are more of a representative, suggestive power than a factually accurate representation of reality. This usually leaves plenty of space for fetish projection and occupation for the viewer’s interpretation.

This symbolic reality is also understood in terms of myth. The symbols employed by myth serve to connect the mind and body, the universal and the singular. The archetype is the essential quality of a universal myth; it is what connects the singular expressions of myth to the underlying absolute. These archetypes are somewhat ambiguous in their factual meaning but serve as an indispensable attribute to the modern mythmaker. Don Anton is a mythmaker. By transcribing his personal points of views so ambiguously and pictorially he is fulfilling the

same function as past storytellers, allowing our creativity and spiritual longing to connect within his photographs.

Formally Don Anton is working in a medium that has deep connections to reality. In his artist statement for Total Sum of Solitudes, Mr. Anton says, "...I can make no rationalization for process or material." He says this so as not to "hamper discovery" and force a viewer to see the way he does. As a viewer I must take an authoritative stance on what I see in order to understand. Don Anton leaves space for occupation of a person's ideals and fetish projections. He understands that art is not finished by the artist but must live a life of its own. The viewers must begin a dialogue with the work of art and base their understanding on what they have personally discovered within a piece. This discovery of self in art and myth is what makes them so alluring and therefore propagate and multiply in a cohesive society.

The camera is a machine that sees reality in an objective way. It is how it is used that introduces subjectivity. By probing metaphysics with art and observational tools one can understand more deeply the mysteries that surround us. The camera can either complete what we see or it can see for us. Photography deals with a very specific reality, one that is determined by the photographer. The problem is that viewers become accustomed to what they see everyday; therefore, they overlook the image as a symbol. The viewer must be tricked in a way so as to make him/her rethink how he/she observes the world and art. In the darkroom further manipulations are produced, signifying further subjectivity and provoking the invisible to become visible.

The use of the photographic image serves as a tool for showing a sense of the miraculous in the world. This manifestation of miracle is common to the catholic faith and is the cornerstone to the literary term Magic Realism. Art to Mr. Anton is another form of the artist that made it. His work deals with the meaning of self and the spirit within and around that self. I see the finished photograph as both window and mirror. As viewers we can see the thing it portrays, we can see it as an object, or we can see ourselves looking into it.

What he has learned in life through experience is implied through narrative, but only an intrapersonal reading of the image, as something other than a text can one comprehend this. He relinquishes all authority over the picture and forces the viewer to begin a dialogue with what they see. He wants his work to be non-ideological; he is not trying to promote any ideas through his art. He doesn't want to be understood since this work is a product of his quest for understanding. One day it may be about a documentation of personal discoveries or manifestations of symbolic reality the next. He says that images are always teachers, changing and showing him what he needs to know that moment. They show him evidence of memory; things "lost and found", the objects themselves are a residual act of

thought.

In las reglas de tragedia Don Anton surrounds a human male figure with candles. It reminds me of the long traditions of memento mori in classical art and photography. The explicit reason being that memento mori was an image of a deceased loved one for the purposes of remembrance. This photograph also presents a scene reminiscent of a religious painting of a martyr after death. Although dead, it looks like there is motion blur. Could this signify the release of the soul after the death of the body? We also are presented with a dark halo above the man's head. This further encourages a reference to a martyr either after death or in ecstasy. Within the photograph I now see an aura around the figure making the movement more pronounced and possibly referencing the spirit again.

The surrounding candles remind me of the practices of prayer and holy rights. A Catholic might light a candle in front of a statue of a holy person and say a prayer for a deceased loved one. Light is important in all religions and is connected to both God and thought. The circular form of light caused by the candles may be another clue as to the spiritual story that is going on here. In most cultures the circle is a symbol for spirit and its eternal quality.

The photograph itself has a soft focus but harsh quality of light. Is this a contradiction? Or maybe it shows that in tragedy the ends are harsh but romanticized. The title "The Rules Of Tragedy" seem to invoke an ominous end to a wonderful story. But Don may not want us to know the name; otherwise he would not present it in Spanish to a largely English speaking audience. Once again he doesn't want to be understood. The piece functions as a device for meditation, a window or mirror.

Following the thoughts of Joseph Campbell this photo would represent the hero as a saint. But instead of the hero returning to present his findings after completing his journey this hero has died because of that journey. This unsuccessful return may represent the failure of the modern mythmaker in a society with corroded myths and symbols that no longer function as a way of communication. The hero as mythmaker is doomed to malfunction because we can no longer connect to each other in a post-industrialized society. Campbell begins his book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* with a quote from Sigmund Freud. Freud writes, "The Truths contained in religious doctrines are after all so distorted and systematically disguised that the mass of humanity cannot recognize them as truth." This is precisely why the hero as martyr becomes important in this discussion. It is why artists must find their own symbols and wrestle with the misunderstanding that will come from an uninformed audience. It is another reincarnation of the curse of Sibyl who was gifted the power of prophecy and insight but could either no longer be understood or was not believed when she spoke truths. She however was compelled to continue her

speaking of truth finally writing books about the downfall of Rome.

For this reason and the reason that Don Anton does not want to preach or teach dogma, he does not care to be understood. He makes his work to find out about himself and possibly other people. He is not an iconoclast, he does not attack religious imagery, but he does not care to teach through his images, although he does call them teachers and he himself is a teacher. His memories are not the same as the viewers' memories, but because of the human condition there is a connection of remembrance. The same can be said of his personal symbols. We must own our own truths and find our own paths to the spiritual. In this way Don Anton has produced artifacts of experiences. These experiences connect him to the mystical and the spiritual.

*Cameron Woodall is a contemporary artist-photographer who has refrained from associating himself with any particular artistic style or movement, past or present. Woodall is primarily an artist-photographer; however, he has developed his oeuvre through exposure to and experimentation with a wide variety of means. His many influences and sources of inspiration range from fine art and photography to literary and philosophical sources.*