

CONTACT SHEET

NUMBER 145



DON GREGORIO ANTÓN

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DON GREGORIO ANTÓN

OLLIN MECATL: THE MEASURE OF MOVEMENTS

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*For now, I release this form into the impression of things and their meanings. I loosen the burden of questions, of thoughts I knew and the images they created. No form of loss is here, no yearning or distraction, as nothing is lost when nothing is owned. I breathe this into position, into the trajectory of ordinary time and the total sum of solitudes.'*¹

Don Gregorio Antón

Don Gregorio Antón's work has been described as "radiating compassion,"² "at once tender and forceful, hushed and thunderous,"³ and as an "opportunity to see the richness and undeniable power of hope."⁴ Sometimes the work is reminiscent of distant ancestral memories, while at other times his images remind of dreams experienced with a clarity that can only be felt in the moment of waking.

To enter the mystical world of Antón's retablos it is necessary to set aside the assumptions that guide us through our daily lives. We have to surrender to his evocative images that are unfamiliar to our mind, yet resonate within our souls. Antón creates a world full of mystery, where life and death are not binary opposites, and where emotions are assets as powerful and tangible as a vault of money might be in our normal existence. In Antón's world pain and fear coexist with bliss and euphoria, neither able to survive without at least a little of the other.

Antón's work is likely to provoke a different response in every viewer. The retablos can be appreciated for their enigmatic beauty, their haunting narratives, or their intense spirituality. Where we find ourselves in our lives may be where we find ourselves in Antón's imagery, so it is up to each person to find his or her own way to his world. Antón has tightly woven his cultural identity into this body of work. Through the imagery and text of each retablo he describes and reforges his connectedness to his roots

in Mexico. The writing on some retablos is easy to read, while the words on others fade into the background like melodies half remembered. Not unlike diary entries, the writing is deeply personal and vulnerable to exposure. As he writes on one of his retablos, "Every word, every image

is inked in my blood. Each page burns, consumes, and carries the weight of memory, the weight of life."⁵

The work describes a mysterious and otherworldly existence that most of us experience only through dreams or nightmares. Linear time does not exist, and raw emotions are laid out in the open. Antón's world is not defined as pain and suffering, though both appear frequently in the images.

Rather suffering, pain, and fear are invited and accepted as players within the timeless cycle of life, along with bliss and salvation.

To the Western eye Antón's world may seem like a primal realm. Most of us do not entertain such a non-threatening relationship with death and pain that we would invite corporal manifestations of these experiences to the dinner table, yet such is the case in Antón's images. On the surface, the work may seem dark and sinister, existing in sharp contrast of light and dark. However, light can only define itself through darkness, and rarely does human spirit shine brighter than within a world of sorrow and despair. In these retablos all emotions and experiences, beyond good or bad, coexist to create the fabric of human existence.



Historical retablo from Don Gregorio Antón's collection, 1905

Created on copper with a mixture of photographic images and paint, Antón's retablos are small and function as both two-dimensional images and sculptural objects. The artistic form of retablos, also called ex-votos, has been part of Mexico's tradition since the seventeenth century. The votive paintings on wood or metal panels were hung behind the altars of Catholic churches. Peaking in popularity in the mid-nineteenth century, retablos remain a tradition to this day. Unlike santos, which were painted portraits of saints, ex-votos were traditionally public expressions of gratitude in acknowledgement of specific saints, such as the Virgin of San Juan. The text on each retablo described a miracle credited to the saint, or a request for such a miracle.

Over the centuries, retablos have captured the magnitude of a people's most trying experiences, including the recovery from serious illnesses or injuries, the survival of accidents, fights, or other life-threatening situations, or an unexpected resolution to financial or legal problems. Retableros, the painters of retablos, were usually self-taught and rarely signed their work or considered the retablos to be works of art. As Antón explains, "there was no need to claim them as art as they served a higher purpose." Frida Kahlo described retablos as the truest representation of the people's art. Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera collected them and many still hang in their house, which is now a museum.

Antón reinvents retablos as metaphorical documentation of the spiritual struggles of mankind. He uses the visual language of ex-votos to create existential tales of human existence that speak of spiritual searching, suffering, hope and despair; life and death. This overarching concept is expressed in the title, *Ollin Mecatl*, which refers to a Nahuatl expression for the measure of movements. The artist also translates this as velocity of change. He describes the concept as the "instances of time and tragedy and the reconciliation of hope...the core measurements of things lost and found, evidence of thought, and the resulting sum of solitude." In Antón's retablos all distractions of daily life have been removed to distill the essence of mankind's passage through time.

Antón uses himself as the model in most images, but the retablos are not self-portraits per se. While he expresses deep seeded, highly personal emotions that may loosely include auto-biographical aspects, he also creates a message of universality.

His personal path leading to this work is one that side-stepped many perils and temptations. He avoided dangers that led some of his closest childhood friends to violent deaths, crime, and addiction. While not setting himself apart as being better or more fortunate than others, Antón humbly describes that he simply chose another path. He was not to go the route of his friends, and photography, which he discovered at age seventeen, was to change his life. Born into a family of laborers, he has done with art and passion what his parents had to do with physical work. He still tells of his father's reluctant approval of his son's artistic endeavors. Antón's vision was born from the fruits of his family's labor; and in return he has dedicated his life to teaching and passionate giving.

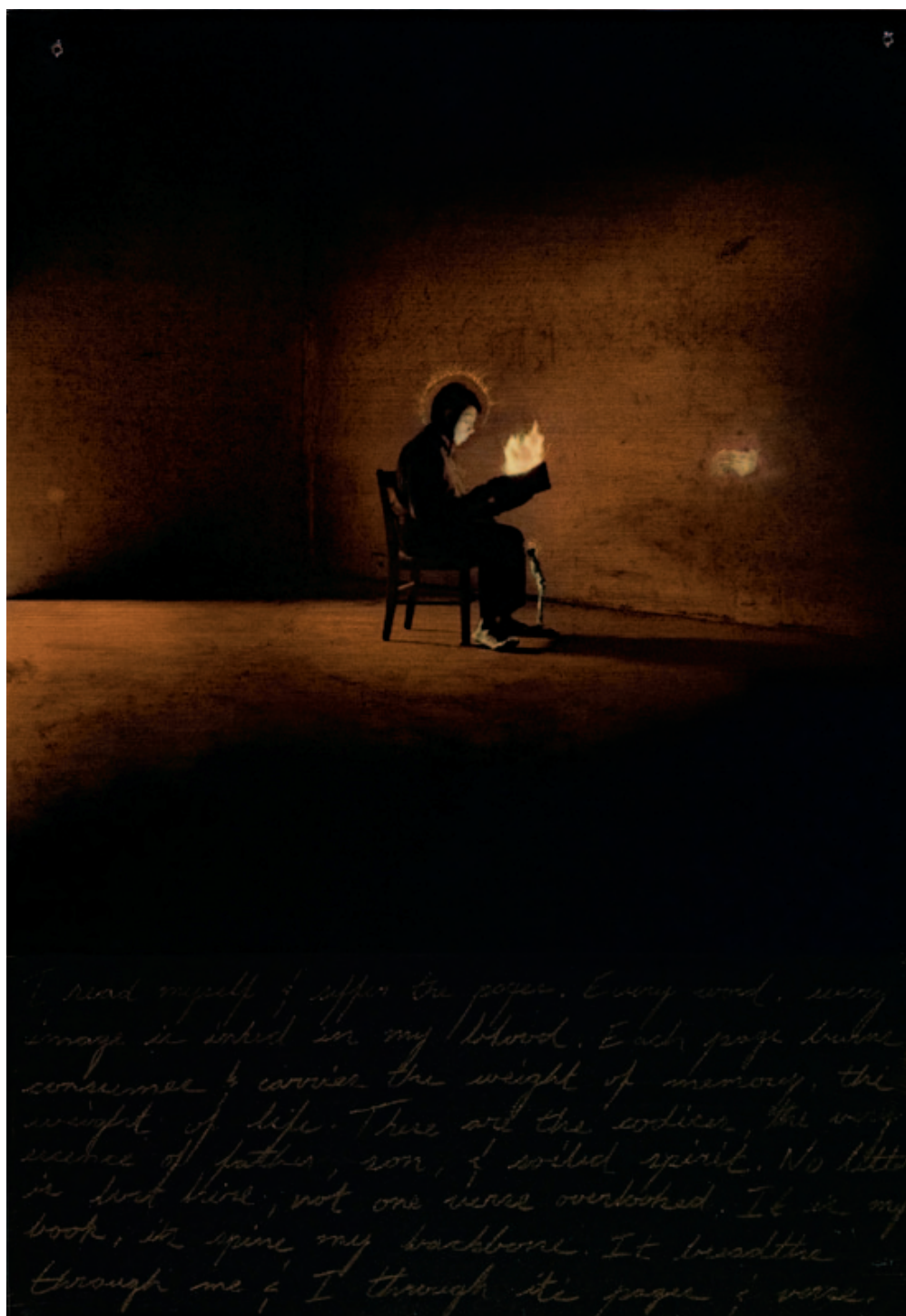
It is not easy for us to enter Antón's world, nor is it free of pain or regret. By contrast, his world makes our comfortable existence seem void of life and passion. Having walked within Antón's world and opened up to its intensity, we may find our view of our daily existence altered. As if returning from a trip abroad, it is not entirely certain that we will be able to readjust to our old ways of life that had previously seemed so entirely our own. Such is Antón's gift to us.

Hannah Frieser
Director
Light Work

- 1 Text from an untitled retablo by Don Gregorio Antón featured on page 7 of this catalogue.
- 2 John Wood, *The Light Work Annual* 142 (2007): 52.
- 3 Cyrus Smith, *The Total Sum of Solitudes: An Offering to the Viewer*. Exhibition catalogue, First Street Gallery in Arcata, CA, 2004.
- 4 Paul LaRosa, "With the Gestures of the Mythic: The Rituals of Don Gregorio Antón," *Journal of Contemporary Photography* V (2002): 29–33.
- 5 Text from an untitled retablo by Don Gregorio Antón featured on page 5 of this catalogue.

All retablos on pages 5 through 43 were created between 2000 and 2007.
They are all translucent images on copper and vary in size.

The reliquaries on pages 44 through 48 were made between 2007 and 2008,
each containing translucent images on brass and varying in size and shape.



I read myself & suffer the paper. Every word, every image is inked in my blood. Each page burns, consumes & carries the weight of memory, the weight of life. There are the codices, the very essence of father, son, & soiled spirit. No letter is lost here; not one word overlooked. It is my book, its spine my backbone. It breathes through me & I through its pages & words.



Have I gone so far that I cannot return? So far that I cannot be forgiven?
What is the distance from hope to sorrow? Where does the earth
divide? Where is that border that cuts through this dark soil
that severs hearts with words & meanings? Which separate steps
make me into them? Distance creates longing; longing knows
each of us by name. I remind us of who we were & where we were
going. The longitude of darkness & the latitude of light.



For now, I release this form into the amorphous
of things & their meanings. I loosen the
burden of questions, of thoughts I know
& the images they created. No form of loss
is here, no yearning or distraction, as nothing
is lost when nothing is over. I breathe
this into perception, into the trapstays of
ordinary time & the total sum of solitude.



that moment the night
 The weight of memory when
 lengthens those shadows of
 blind distance into life.
 Here death instantly flicks
 each candle flame. When the
 scene is formed without
 blood or incision, matter
 released into the slow motion
 of dreams. Light knows
 this, claims its place in life
 & in death. It draws us
 to itself, to the unfolding
 of deeper thoughts & meanings.
 It melts what they were, as
 the weight fades & makes
 little my eyes. I released
 what was bound in sorrow
 and have only the quiet
 of the night to go with me.



I come then with me, the witness, the long axis of signs, the
 around that never breaks. This is where it is placed,
 between one & the other - between words that never
 escape. No form of sympathy needed, or acquired, as this is
 the point of entry to the interior of the burning.



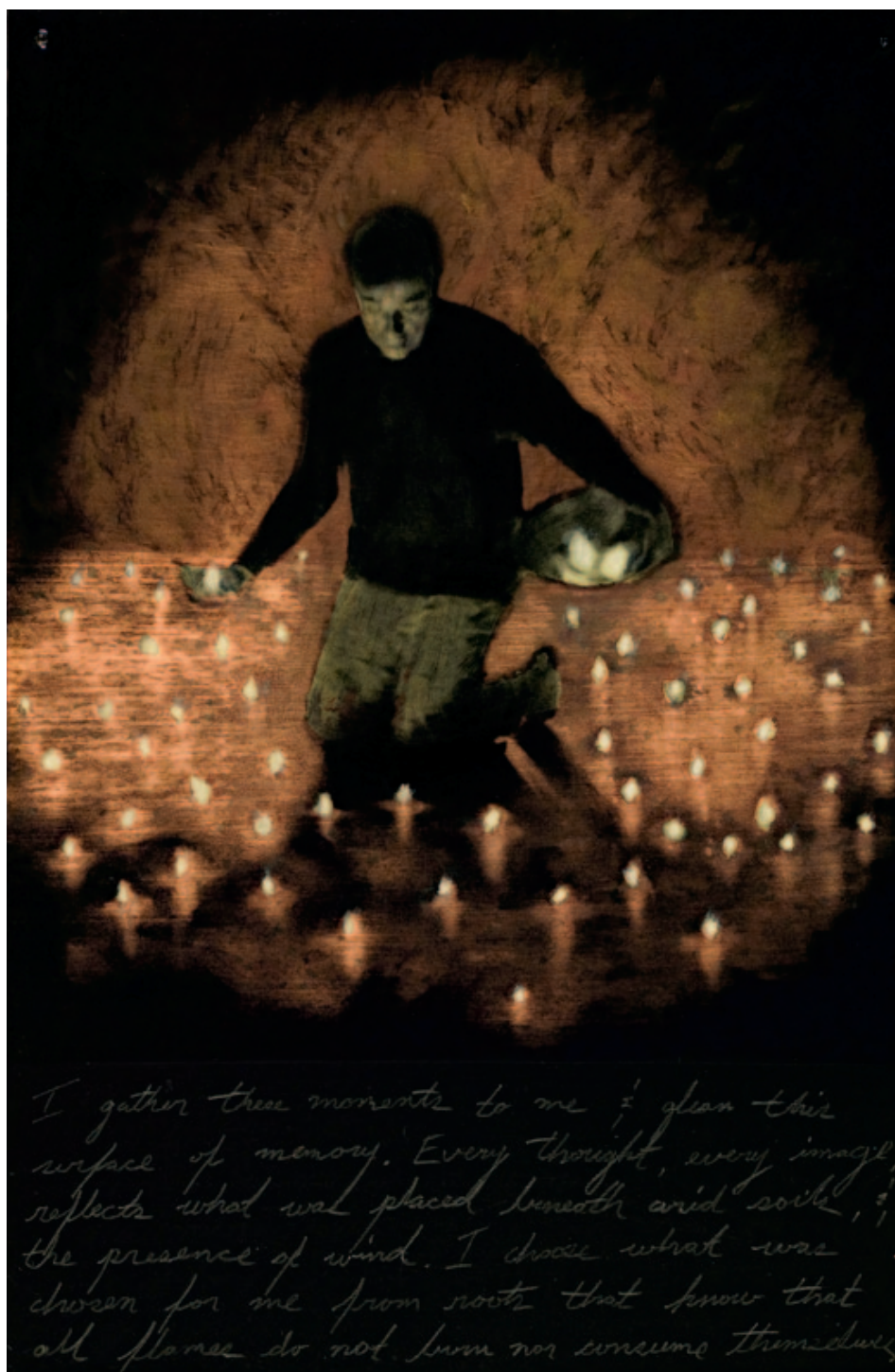
As a child I heard light through darkness, through prayer made love in the night. Through became in face of solitude & the awareness of another time. I heard to grow from love, to see through darkness & darkness, to embrace my right of vision & speak, to believe in what patience does for the face of impatience, to measure the weight of hope on the conditions of reality. Here the test was set to hold tight & endure the night of time.



Every sore speaks its own language. Every bruise
& stain forms their poem of isolation. It is
the deformity of solitude, of moments long
spent in neglect. Who is it that turned these
skin that weeps these pains restricted from
hurt. Who would cast this soul from care?



To change the world, purge the sinners of
thought. Of sinners left undone, buying
hidden but not forgotten. I trust the people
the unworried, I place my fingers against a
pulse of meaning. How else could I move
in the world without these things.



I gather these moments to me & glean this
surface of memory. Every thought, every image,
reflects what was placed beneath arid soils,
the presence of wind. I choose what was
chosen for me from roots that know that
all flames do not burn nor consume themselves.





I pray each moment into position,
each year into where once it came.
Not one bone is lost here, nor the
the marrow of its meaning. I can
only touch the edge of this silence
like the edge of your hand, still
warm in thought, I call this
darkness to us both. This is
an act that knows itself,
that knows I listen to the
breath of change I movement.





Here is the weight of my reality, the anchoring of possibilities in a defined space, contained
& verified by experience, a catalyst of memory, time measuring thought. I cannot take
back or give to you, divide or deny your gravity to the forces that have pulled your
form. All I may offer is the appreciation of things past, of sight & breath, pulse & sound.
Moments savoured in taste & terror & the affection of light. For this, I place you here



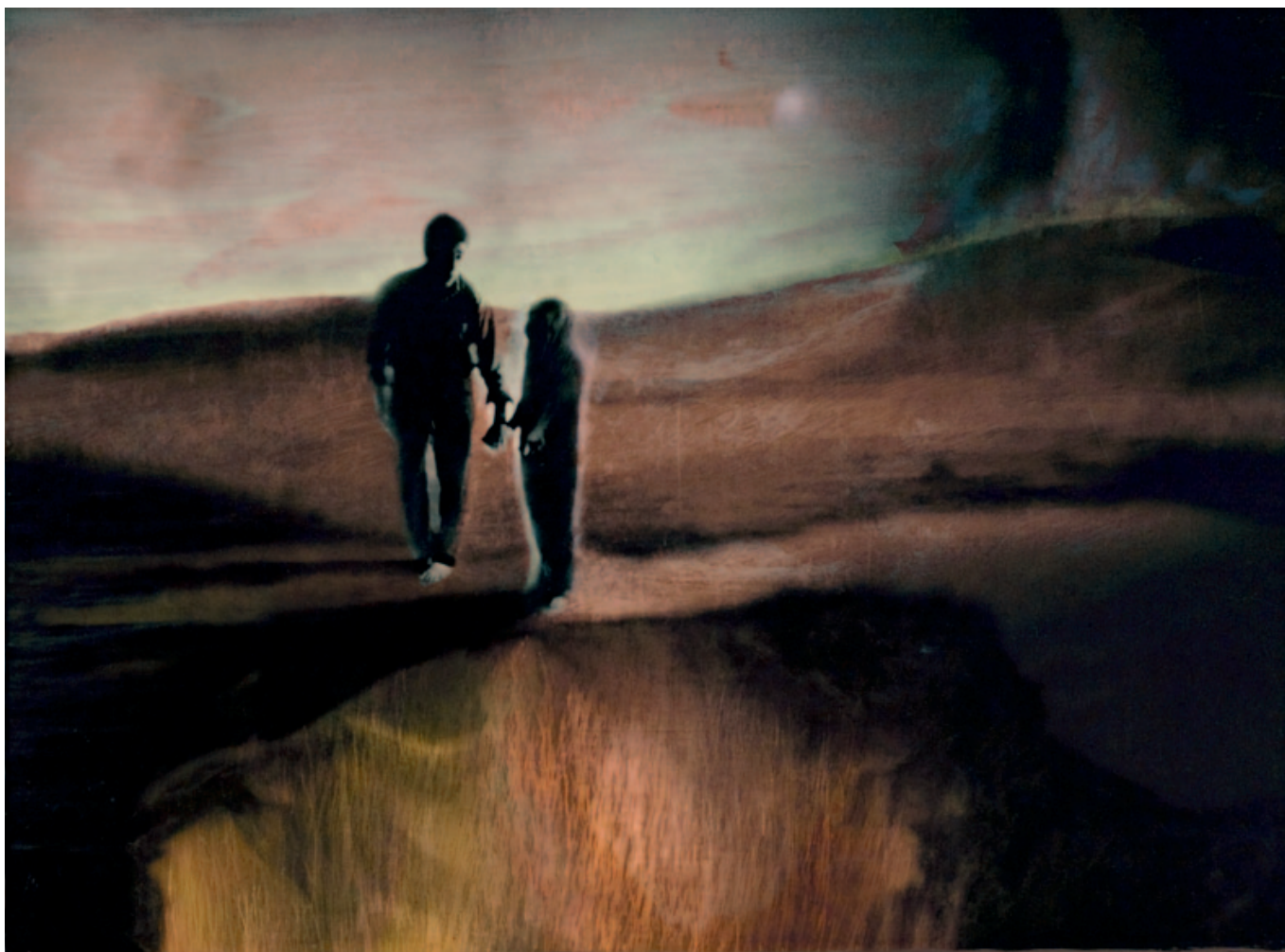
Every scar has its place, its story revealed, & folded
into every pore, every inch in what was said & judged
forgotten & remembered. Were I you, free of fiction,
map of distortions, or just the impressions made
by your presence? I cannot take back the impressions
you have made but I offer this for the transference



let here from here, with this upon my back? All here to rest from words that
 rear flesh from hope? I have to live in darkness here in light, I've
 fled into shadow, much too small for my feet, I found you waiting
 for me again as I emerge. Every foot print I've made shows you
 as well, but not so my light. What you could not extinguish
 nor soot in jealousy & rage was mine alone, given to yourself you
 will never understand. Oh adversary I feel, we share only God's own light.



Every stone has its place, every thought its implication, its volume & weight. Not
 who is misplaced or lost, amongst the others. Not one joined or separated
 without purpose or meaning. Each one there to read & heard, speaking
 not from where they stand, but rather, from what they are. I have
 only rearranged their meaning & place, as it will be rearranged &
 placed by others. For this I learned, that things never really exist



I do not claim the power of a poet, only my gift of a small
 frail hand. She has talked me through barren hills & deserts, past
 vast divisions of time & the breathing in of memory. She has
 pointed out those particular of best necessity for longing & has
 placed my hand upon the well worn objects of sacrifice. I know
 her touch & every name for every step we have every taken together.



How far the edge of reason, how far? What destiny, this destiny? I
have ridden this journey, for the sake of journeys & the roads that
they create. How else would I be admitted here, to stand my way
through the opposition of forces in matter & spirit? I have ended
my long the restless, restless of fear & hope, I have reached
the fine, edifying of order that brings around such silent things



I know what breaks in the night against those cliffs, in valleys far away
It is not the weeping of women, nor of their children longing for their
return. No, it is the sound of weeping that breaks upon each & every
against light & dark by indrawn night. I have seen them dragged
through all of this, down every dark path, past every sinister act,
over every stone that twists & turns the spine & awakes the soul.



Where now? Whither shall my soul be carried? It has been
lost & found, dropped from great heights, upon rocks &
waters, & upon other souls. It has been abandoned in
water, in wells, long dry & left in view of death. It
has been left on altars & idols, only to be lifted again
& returned to this journey of exile. And still may become.



I must return the matter to the imagination of our nation, its patience,
 its patience, the endless running of thought. It allows for passage, for
 the shunting of light & distance, for the gathering of souls, for this I fear
 the weight of difference, of change born of loss, of tugging made essential for
 journey. In darkness, it shows its own light, when the phases of year
 is the inevitable movement of hope set into motion, it waits without
 intention, rearranging itself to accommodate the advantage of the dialogue of time



Deep within what is, lies what was, made of seed & light, of sweet
& evil, of stories long forgotten by some & retold upon the tongue
of others. Deep within in nature we lose ourselves only to
reappear again, not as we remember, but as we are formed
by sweet & evil, seed & light. Everything I have found
has found me first, everything that was never mine before.



I shall enter you as you have entered
me, through a world of light, through
a world of sight, through just distance
in small place. I will pass as
I have been passed, knowing that
few things concrete are seldom solid

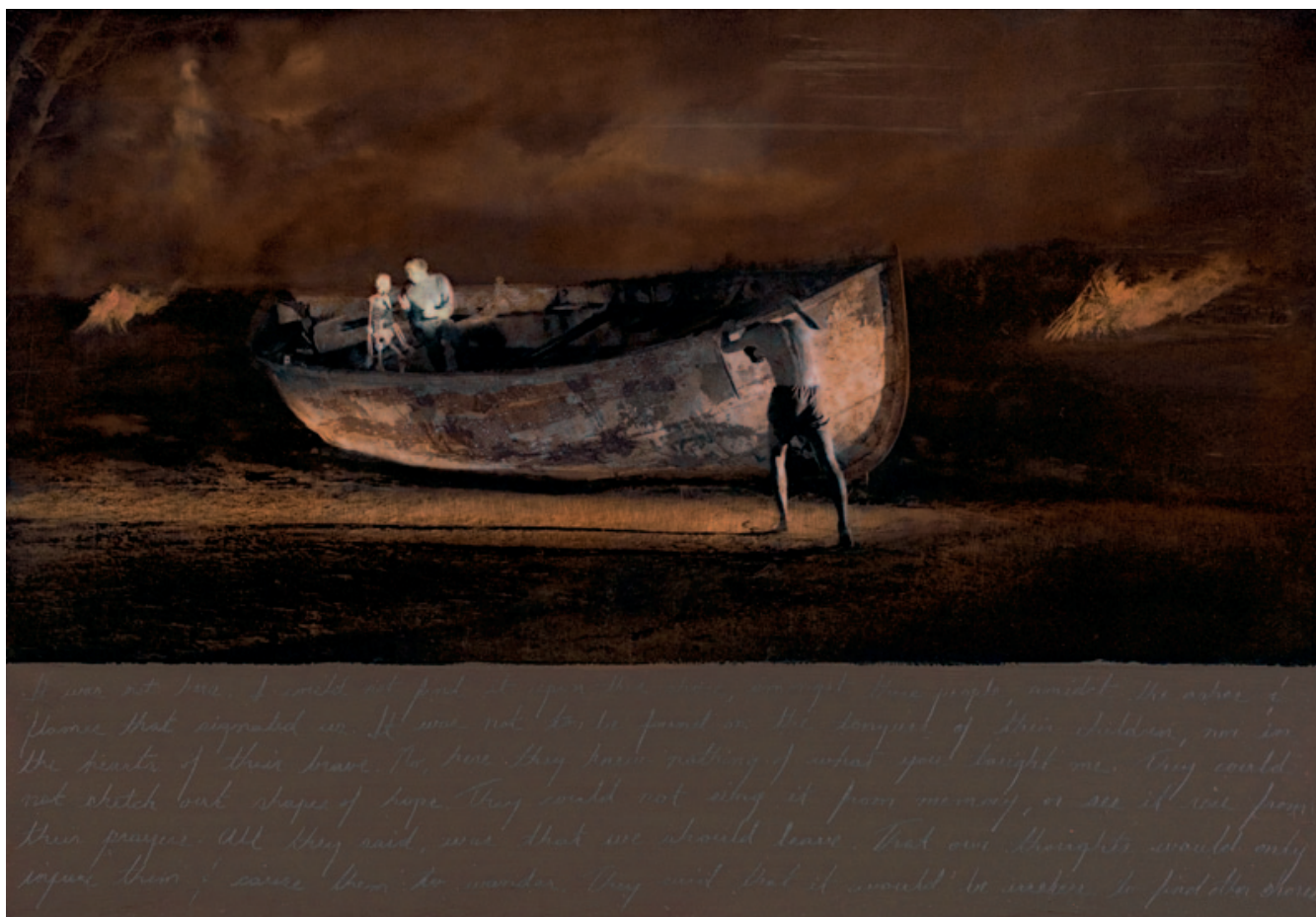


I have felt the agony of this scene before, as it tore through flesh
 & bone & spirit, & a narrow, crimson blood in veins that under
 the skin, it looks like dead tissue from the bitter edge of cold
 this - around this broken & cold. Because it follows the dark
 rest of knowing the long sustained ideas of man. It does
 not, cannot sleep, but strikes the heart of man. In
 that moment, when I was raised & two lives & we have seen



through the undertow, defying fate, firm in the filling being, and dividing
thought from possession. It must be helped or denied. It starts what is
left of strength, of hope, gets the spray from the old, deposits what it
sinks in distant times, and once, knowing this, wondering where any
water becomes space, when the old returned, looks with born power, and
I saw the lake of nothing, be patient, that which divides being, respect





It was not here. I could not find it upon their faces, amongst these people, amidst the ashes & flames that signified us. It was not to be found on the tongue of their children, nor in the hearts of their brave. No, here they have nothing of what you taught me. They could not sketch out shapes of hope. They could not sing it from memory, or see it rise from their prayers. All they said, was that we should leave. That our thoughts would only square them if carried them to winter. They said that it would be useless to find other shores.



On this night I ride the eighth horse with the ancient mention in sight. Through down & light, upon rock & sand, each horse has brought me to the other since birth. There is the hand of disaster, a stampede of time over flesh & bone, hair & memory. Of movements, longed measured & distances covered. I do not aim there, nor lay me for this restless life cauterized. For me the destination is there, the path well worn, but not one horse & shall reach its end as in when I shall reach mine there in darkness.



It is not the wall, but those who built it. Not the hunger, nor the
 pain, but those who have created it. Stars can be crushed, food can
 be made, but what of hope? What of heart? What must be feared
 for their purpose when purpose is crushed instead. All I know is
 that the sword testifies to the minute intention. It betrays the
 content of what it has received of heaven as great truth to its rebellion.





What will be the weight of my regret? Who would have said that I would have, as these lessons I write
in darkness, through great distances, & greater dangers, Oh to have a history that remembers you.
I'd hold you near from far, I'd hope for you from where once you were. A history that
remembers your face before it changed, the hope before the injury, the sad man without his
cubase. I am the captain of hope, I will pay the price of something like that before one who
made this journey before I was born, I will hold it for you, I will hold it for you, I will hold it for you.













NOTE FROM THE ARTIST

What is important right now is not who I am or why I've made these retablos. No, not at all. What matters most to me is present in the hands that hold these pages, the eyes that see these words, and in the moments lived by you. Nothing else really matters. Why? Because what you have in your hands is only so much paper and ink, but you, the nature you occupy, are far more important. You are a single event that will never happen again in the history of the world. This is far more meaningful.

Do you understand what I am trying to say? Whether you see it or not and regardless if you care, your image reflects in everything around you. Your thinking, your beliefs, all that you have learned are mirrored in the things you see, and upon the surface of what is in and around you. How you react to this determines how you will see, and how you see will be how you'll live. To be aware of this and to do it well, your own truth is essential, your own understanding is critical. Not in what you see, but in how you see and the meanings it creates.

That is why I am reminding you of what you own, of what is necessary to complete the act of seeing. Your mind, your thoughts, and your feelings are essential for this. Without you, without your intelligence, without those emotions that create meaning, this essential act is useless. It is not naïve to think so. It is crucial to understand that you must add a part of yourself to all that you see for learning to take place. Learning is not in what you see, but in how you see it and what should come from it. Whatever you approach in your life, whatever

mysteries there are, all of them will need you as a vital part of their unfolding. We seem to forget this, forget to remember how important it is to own our world, to discover our thoughts, and to believe what is uniquely ours.

I believe that there is more to seeing, more to what we are taught our eyes can see. Our eyes should be allowed to breathe, taste, and listen. They should be courageous and permitted to go further into any space that has not known their shape before. Why? Well, this is something you must decide for yourself. But I believe it is imperative for you to name your world, to not separate yourself from its existence. Just know that it takes time to grow into your eyes, to become use to what they have to teach you. Why? Because our world so desperately needs you to decide this. It needs minds capable of dynamic thought and compassion. It needs those who can see below the surface of things and who can reflect on their meanings so that others may learn their own. Like you, meaning has its own unique velocity and movement in each of us. Look for it, chart its terrain within you and believe, regardless of experience, regardless of intelligence or culture, your right to see.

Excerpt from gallery handout

Don Gregorio Antón is a professor of art at Humboldt State University in Arcata, CA. He participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in 2006. His work can be viewed on his website at www.dongregorioanton.com.

I wish to thank those of you who have held me close. Who've shaped me by your kindness and care, and have made more of me than I could of myself. Through your generous efforts I have traveled these great distances by what you have placed in me. From you I have seen grand occurrences, felt their weight and purpose, and noted the contour and directions of hope. Because of you I breathe a little deeper. Please know that your names are written upon me, wound and molded to my bones. It is through your beliefs that I in turn have been permitted my own. Thank you. Like light, it is what you have illuminated that has permitted me to see.

Don Gregorio Antón, 2007



in which we were to see the rain
in which the water was so
in the air, and we were to see
to us what it meant to be the
other to touch the boundary water
to the window, and what we were
to see, and what we were to see

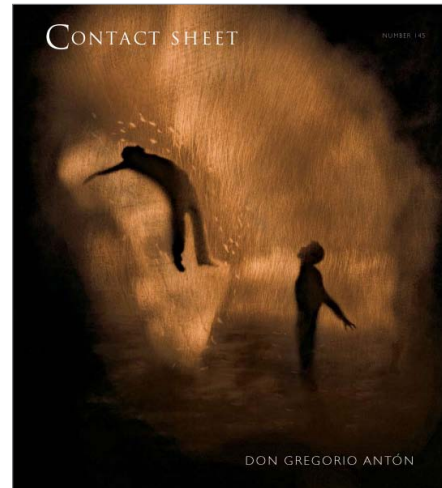
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It has become the place where lovers of photography—from museum professionals to avid amateurs to collectors—turn to see the latest work by important emerging and mid-career artists from around the world. A one-year subscription to *Contact Sheet* includes five issues, including the *Light Work Annual*.

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Light Work is an artist-run, non-profit organization that has been serving emerging and under-represented artists through direct support since 1973. Programs include an international Artist-in-Residence Program, exhibitions, publications, a collection of over 3,500 works that are viewable online, a state-of-the-art public access workspace, and other artist services.

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