

"In essence, art is seldom finished by the artist. It is always completed by the viewer who brings their own experiences to any piece."

Interview By J Swofford

Don Gregario Anton isn't concerned with whether you know where he went to school or if you are familiar with his long list of publication credits or his numerous credentials as a professional artist. He doesn't care if you don't think his work is "pretty" or if it appears anachronistic by convention or out of phase with the times. What he does care about is that you see his work and it somehow nudges a kernel of something inside you. Perhaps this kernel was planted in you in your childhood or maybe it was yesterday but now it grows. Each sprout and shoot of that growing seed unfurls with associated hopes and fears and memories until it is a great tree. And this tree is a balm to you. This is what is important to Don Gregario Anton, photography as a healing tool. His photos remind us that while the source of strong emotions can be intensely personal, the emotions themselves connect all of us to each other. Anton's photographs are markers that help you make your way on your path in life.



What was the "aha" moment when you knew that art and photography was what you wanted to do?

It always amazes me how the "aha" moment is so easily taken for granted. It is not something that is usually covered in school, nor is it seen as relative subject matter in class, but its very existence is essential in helping us to refine our intuition. I believe this. I believe it rests in that unique moment when we fall in love, begin a personal statement or click the shutter. In that instant without reason or purpose, one feels before thinking, one is touched before touching and we make a bond with the essence of the unexpected. You know this, I am sure. You felt what it was like to discover the tender lips of another, that sudden rush of excitement when your first print emerged in the developer. You knew something was happening even before you could criticize it or question its validity. "Aha" allows us space to own our world for a moment, to identify that part of it that is always calling out to us.

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For me, the "aha" moment in photography was that realization that I had found a home for all those things that were homeless in me. To hear a voice emerge that sounded true to my own and to finally see a soul in need of refining its shape. I was seventeen, scared and unsure of what my life might allow me. I was never allowed to take any Art classes in school due to my father's concerns of mirroring a society that he could never fit into. He made a bet with me. He said if I could find a book by a Chicano photographer, he would let me take the class. A lot was riding on this, but I couldn't find one. I was lost and discouraged and could not believe that there was not one book to look to for inspiration. I searched everywhere and finally made my way to the teacher who was offering this summer class. He said he owned a book by a mexican photographer by the name of Manuel Alvarez Bravo and that I should show it to my father and see what he would say. After a hard days work my father took this book from my hands with a long sigh and spent the next hour in his room in silence. Finally, he handed it back to me and said, "Close enough, Mijo. Maybe you can do with your eyes what I have been trying to do with my hands all these years." From then many "aha" moments would follow and I would never be the same.

You mentioned to us that you wanted the interview to be skewed toward "encouraging individuals to consider the issue of the emotional footprint created when seeing ones work." How would you characterize this "emotional footprint?"

There are innumerable things that are pressed into our experiences. Certain gestures by those who held us close or pushed us away. Each of these created a distinct and lasting impression



in that rich soil that surrounds our thoughts, soil that is often abandoned and left to dust. It

influenced us in how we felt about the world, how we would live in it and how we would see others. Here compassion and animosity are forged, as is our beliefs and denials. From here we either open up or close down to what we ultimately perceive about anything. This often clouds our thinking, fogs our judgment when we look at what we call "art". It compels us to mimic what we've been taught by teachers who were taught by teachers, who were taught by teachers. Those whose

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fears and limitations became our own by those who were so easily challenged by what they saw as threaten-

ing or strange. Then it was much easier to criticize as we were criticized by parent or clergy, much easier to maintain the lineage of limitations that is often passed on without thought or reason.

You see, the emotional footprint that was placed upon us has a long standing effect on the choices we make, the lives we lead and the chance for nuance to enter into our lives. So wouldn't



It was not here. I could not find it upon the shore, amongst these people, amidst the ache of flames that signaled us. It was not to be found on the tongues of their children, nor in the hearts of their brave. No, here they knew 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 signal them of course them to wonder. They said that it would be wiser to find other shores.



What will be the weight of my ache? Who would know that I was here, on these shores, bound in darkness through great distances & greater hunger. Oh to have a history that remembers you. That holds you near from far, that holds you from where ever you are. A history that remembers you face before it changed, the face before the going the red man without his address. I am the capture of hope, I will pay the price of breathing like those before me who made this journey before I was born & who touch it after my death through my small ache.

it make sense to approach anything and anyone with this in mind. Wouldn't it explain why we are often attracted by what is popular and easily accepted by others. Why it is so easy to judge what we think is art, and then to make art that only looks like what others perceive art to look like? The trick is to make art that looks like you. That bears your resemblance and is constructed upon a soil rich in your own understanding of what you see and feel. Without this emotion is lost, caught up in a society that knows very little of self expression and left to a visually illiterate world that can only theorize what it cannot feel.

Who has the greater responsibility regarding the emotional content of a work, the artist as he or she makes the work or the viewer as they view and contemplate the work?

The greater responsibility lies in chance. It initiates the possibility of creation in the mind or the hand of any artist or viewer. It permits a probability for anything to happen and is the first casualty during rationalization; that which neutralizes experience. Thus, emotional content depends solely on the content of emotion that the individual loosens by chance at any moment. It all has to do with how we approach anything.

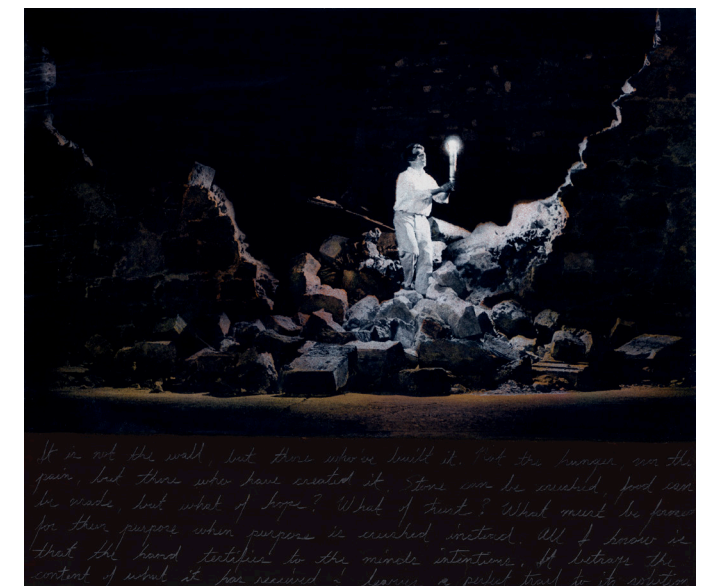
For instances, someone is reading this right now by chance. They are saying to themselves that all this sounds so "West Coast (U.S.)", so corny, too emotional or that it has nothing to do with photography as they see it. By chance, their mood, their opinion ceases their engagement and the encounter ends. Now, take another person who reads these same words for the first time and confirms their place in their own thoughts. By chance, they too arrive through mood and opinion and hopefully take something of what they need. Emotions are like that. They define the owner by what they have experienced.

Photography is at heart an emotional process. We click the shutter when the scene "feels right" and we edit and select images sometimes on a gut feeling. What do you feel is important for artists to be thinking about regarding the emotional content of their work that would not already be somewhat intuitive?

It would be wrong of me to tell any artist what they should be emotionally thinking about in their work. I believe that this is an act of honesty that one can only bring about within themselves. The only suggestion I may offer is what photography has so graciously allowed me in my life; to think about think-

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ing. Sounds simple, but it isn't. Done in any meaningful way, it is easy to see that there are a tremendous amount of emotions that get overlooked, misplaced and misjudged before they ever leave the body. We have been taught to question these feelings, only express them under certain circumstances and to



If it is not the wall, but those who build it, and the hunger on the face, but those who have created it. How can he be created, food can be made but what of hope? What of trust? What must be done for their purpose when purpose is crushed instead. All I know is that the hand touched to the murder intention. It betrays the content of what it has received. I know a quiet bond to a silent

be suspicious of those who share them openly. Why? Because emotions make us vulnerable and have very little to do with a society that separates us from them. So, we often doubt what "feels right" confuse others emotions as our own and mistrust the validity of our own unique expression. That is why it is so easy to misplace our emotions when our our intuition is doubted.

When does symbolic imagery enter into your process? In other words, does the image come first or the meaning?

What comes first is the hunger and the thirst to see and to feel. It starts off quietly, calls me by name and places me amongst those things I need most to learn. Symbology and meaning are simply those impressions gathered during these moments.

What expectations do you have of your viewers? What are the things they should remember or avoid?

I carry no expectations for the viewer, as I believe it would be selfish to assume anything from a life I have not led. In essence, art is seldom finished by the artist. It is always completed by the viewer who brings their own experiences to any piece. My job is to make out of light and form, thought and feeling, the truest anatomy of my own experience and then to offer that. The rest is up to them.

As opposed to the merely pretty, how would you define beauty?

This is a great question. We live in a society that is never asked to define the concept of beauty for itself. Too often it is forced the form of it rather than the meaning it holds. Thus it is safer for some to identify beauty by the established concepts that identifies life style, acceptance and trends. That is easy and requires very little thought.

What is not easy is to define beauty not by its value, but by its relative connection to the things around it. A place one can only claim for themselves. You know this, we know this. It is what makes something or someone stand out like no other. It is what makes sense of a distinct nuance in sound or word, what produces awe during a violent storm or in a child's breath. Real beauty cannot be controlled as it is attached to the unknown by nuance and surprise. Here everything and everyone has the potential for beauty in one form or another.

In editing and selecting images how do you know when you've "missed" and a piece needs to be eliminated? Besides the gut feeling, is there a measure?

I believe every piece is what allows the next one to be made. I

believe in what I am given through the lens. That each image has something, a secret if you will, that it wants us to learn. It is what calls each of us by name and has the potential to point out those things in need of understanding. My only measure is in measuring their movements and aligning myself by their lessons. It is as simple as that.

In your philosophy, are misconceptions possible for your work?

They are essential for my work. To believe in anything is to risk the chance of being misunderstood, and as an artist I believe it is our job to risk it all. Why? Because who will make your work if you do not? Who will speak upon your behalf of the darkness you have seen, or the brilliance of your inspiration? If you are willing to give up the weight of failure and judgment in your work, you will allow it freedom to move at its own velocity in its own unique force of description. Then it will have something to teach you, something to make use of what you know. We have very little time to do this and so the necessity of grasping this concept is quite important.

What are some sources of inspiration for you that others unfamiliar with you may find surprising?

I am fortunate to be so close to the source of my inspiration. To be taught and challenged by those who rarely consider their own unique power. My great students are my inspiration. It is from them that I travel great distances. Through their hopes and failures, through their thoughts and dreams, I see worlds that stretch far out into unknown territories. Here they teach me what I need most to learn, to discover what is common to us all, and to acknowledge the fact that there is not one of us who lacks in depth and meaning. I believe in this. I believe that student knowledge is the beginning of the world's wisdom.



Given photography as an art form at this time, what are the emerging trends that you find exciting or disappointing? Are there past trends that you are happy to see go by the wayside?

This question worries me greatly. It speaks of what we all have learned and been subjected to and judged by when assessing the worth of anything in our lives. It follows the traditional acts of comparison and perpetuates an institutional custom that many could not avoid. Too often we are taught the be like me, to be liked by me practice of learning. When this happens, unique images are thrown aside for what will be accepted and admired by others. Yes, this worries me.

You see, trends by their very nature inspire conformity. They demand adherence and create an altered sense of belonging and identity. Here young artists attach themselves to what a critic will extol, find the nearest compatible theory to justify and confirm their expression while carefully observing what gets hung, what is sold and what is safe to make. Some call this art, but there is a business that surrounds it that demands a certain price of admission in order to participate. It too constitutes itself by trends and affirms its place by the status it protects. Here talent is judged, lines of acceptance divide those who will or will not be seen and the world gathers itself around that which is deemed acceptable, collectable and risk free.

This practice assures that there is always someone somewhere that we will trust to explain what is currently acceptable. Publishers survive on this, galleries and institutions pay their rent by it as well and all of them are subject to that thin layer of exclusivity that excludes so easily. From here a graduate student gives up the best part of themselves, the undiscovered artist condemns the discovered ones and the popular trend is merely replaced by the one that takes its place. In a world like this, we rarely see what is truly around us, rarely honor what is uniquely offered by others. §



Don Gregorio Anton is an educator who serves as a Professor of Art at Humboldt State University. He received the Excellence in Photographic Education - Teacher of the Year in 2002 from the Center and has spoken nationally at universities and intercity schools in an effort to inspire students to realize their own unique selves.

www.dongregorioanton.com

