

With the Gestures *of the Mythic*:
THE RITUALS *of* DON GREGORIO ANTÓN
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To view the widely praised and widely exhibited work of Don Gregorio Antón is to bear witness to an intensely personal vision, immersive and in-the-raw. It seems more compelled than devised, conjuring a world both strange and familiar, enclosed and internal yet reverberating outward. We are riveted by these photographs as we might suddenly catch a stranger in a moment of self-reflection, caressing an exposed limb or talking out loud or shedding a tear alone in public. In times like these, we glimpse ourselves in others, acknowledge common pains and desires and fugitive thoughts. This is the hidden, introspective terrain Antón explores and records, and in which we in turn, halt, and find ourselves reflected.

At first the terrain appears otherworldly, a primitive and distant plain beyond recognition. Choked by fire and acrid smoke, horizonless and without definition, it registers a kind of subconscious space, a dark and uncharted landscape. Into this dark canvas, both soil and sky, Antón projects light, casts the human body, and in so doing renders the ground fertile, makes the unknown known. Resonant with the drama of ancient ritual, rife with symbols of mercy and sacrifice, birth and death, his work channels the archetypal through the personal. This is what draws us in to recognize ourselves and our world: the elemental forces of nature - fire and earth, wind and water; sculpted scenes of prayer and ecstasy and salvation; the body in its original state, naked and emblemized. Antón mines the iconography of religion and ritual in order to pursue an art that's essentially inquisitive and spiritual, posing questions about the coarse shuffle of life, how we anchor ourselves and attempt to understand. It is nothing less than an arcing inquiry into the stories that have cradled humanity for ages, an intuitive and sensual envisioning of our collective dramas - all struggle, aim, and hard-earned conquest - spoken on our behalf in one man's voice. And we not only see the drama unfold, we seem to hear it as well, to smell pungent odor of flesh and fire, to feel our tongues flickering with stories in turn. The longer one views these photographs, the more they seem eternally alive, and centuries old in the making.

Ageless themes circulate throughout Antón's work: the passing of time and our implacable destiny (*Ollin Mecatl* [*The Measure of Movements*]; *Me Muevo Sin Querer* [*I Move Without Wanting To*]; *Time is the Flame That Burns Us All*); human vulnerability (*Las Reglas de Tragedia* [*The Rules of Tragedy*]; *En el Sombre del Eclipse* [*In the Shadow of the Eclipse*]; *Help Me*); longing and a return to origins (*The Child of the World*; *Remembrance of Things Past*); love and wisdom (*For You I Will Be, May You Not Be Frightened*). They're themes that compel us in their universality, even as the images retain their quivering strangeness. For though the work may emerge from the whorl of inner life, it speaks to us in a universal tongue. Even when figures seem more wraithlike than human, their expressive gestures, pliant and yearning, are resolutely understood. Formally, they're structured like quadrants, Limbs extended, toes pointed, heads arched back, they resemble dials, compasses, musical notes. Their graphing defines the body as a fundamental axis, a point of measurement, at the same time that curved and yielding forms reveal an instinctive urge to open like seeds, to unfurl and flourish.

More performative than declarative, Antón's photography conducts a symbolic act of cleansing, and it brings to mind, in its imagery of smoke and flames, the heightened emotional and physical states of Native American erotic smokehouse ceremonies, rituals performed to attain greater knowledge through intense sensation. Such rituals represent a quest for wisdom and enlightenment, and the imagery of Antón's photos - the hosts of flame-anointed heads, the painted, bandaged bodies, the penitent forms and circles of fire - suggests a similar desire to burrow deep within the canyons of the mind, beyond barriers, and to purify, invoking ceremony as a way to interpret the vexing orient of the world and our mortal role within, and approach a unity of understanding.

It's a remarkable feat of imagination, and a radical one, too, in an age in which Truth is a designer scent and Celebration a prefabricated Disney village. For Antón, photography is the essential path to these universals, a liberating creative process through which access is gained to unfathomables, to the wrestling forces of light and darkness and the mysteries that move and endow us with what it means to be human. In summarizing his work, Antón states, "A lot of my images are based on trying to create what's felt instead of seen." He seems to know instinctively that the corner of the eye is where the soul resides, where tears well and the sap of sleep's dreams collects; where truth is a mere glint, and what's half-glimpsed in the flutter of an eyelash can be more vivid and forceful than what's fully seen. It's akin to the way a blind person might construct in his head the image of a friend. For surely the work is about the pursuit of the visible yet invisible - the face of a loved one that appears late at night, when alone, in a corner or closet, or the cool white porcelain of a kitchen sink; perhaps the image of a departed friend hovering in the cabin of the mind, stumbled upon mid-sentence. In moments like these, the heart dictates what the eyes see, and memory is unsourced - the stories of our lives, plucked from the broad veil of time, clung to in pure and harmonious image. The world of Don Gregorio Antón issues forth from these recesses of emotion. Silence is often song, stillness a dance, and the shadow world of dusk is most moving; for Antón, these things inspire.

And his imagery startles. One can imagine these photos, with their potent mix of erotic, the grotesque and the catholic, and with images of half naked children, being attacked by conservative demagogues as corrupting and sacrilegious. If an image such as *The Measure of Movements* were to form the cover art for a CD by a death metal band, it might very well be banned from Wal-Mart. And indeed, the images are intense and graphically limned. Bodies often appear racked and dilated, tarred and skeletonized; they're engulfed in flames or crucified; flesh can appear sinewy and knotted. Though often solitary, the body nonetheless seems in a throng, enthralled, possessed by some dance macabre. Viewing these images, at times I'm reminded of a scene in Polanski's *Repulsion*, when a co-worker opens Catherine Deneuve's purse, aghast to find the decaying carcass of a rabbit - a mordant symbol of her mental deterioration and her discomfort with the body.

Yet we are not harrowed by Antón's work. It is not a dislocating dance of demons on display, of souls lurking and tussling in a claustrophobic netherworld; the photos are not unveiled like

cryptic scenarios of inner turmoil and ramifying horrors. Rather the inverse: the images ring out like *cris de coeur*, in a charged atmosphere that's vibrant and expansive. Figures assume haloed positions of prayer and communion, their proportions balanced and symmetrical, their eyes cast upward to the heavens. They seem to hover in a cavernous space that's more womb and purifying water than subterranean pit. They remind me of candles, filaments, vegetal forms - and the organic shapes which emerge from hot breath exhaled on cold grainy glass. The background resembles trampled earth; at times it appears crinkled, like a tangled bed sheet heated and moistened with sex. And accordingly, the body is very sexualized, stretched out to its fullest contours, elongated and ecstatic. Bathed in a glowing light, his figures can seem ghostly and angelic, unreal. Yet though they float and spiral and rise up with the gestures of mythic beings, they are quintessentially human, their feet firmly rooted in damp, dark soil, their backs mortally tied to the curve of the earth. Lost in the wilderness, emerging from a heart of darkness toward the light, these are clearly human beings that have journeyed, that have tasted tragedy and joy and carnality, and carry the weight of their experience more as honor than burden.

In Antón's gallery of beings, story and experience are implicit. His photos pass before us like pages from a diary, and also like Stations of the Cross, vignettes interwoven with central signs of faith. Unfortunately it is not possible to illustrate every image of his I would like to talk about, and so I hope my words at least begin to suggest something of their power. In *Diga Mi [Tell Me]*, for example, we discover Antón as one who aches for language and history, whose craving represents a spiritual yearning. Here we find Antón himself in profile, flesh imprinted with glyphs, fortified by symbol. Crouched like some Neanderthal in a cave - not in retreat but rising up and outward - his skin becomes canvas, a pulsing membrane through which the stories and arcana of untold ages pass. It's a beautiful, liquid photograph, a hypnotic image of great power and texture and imperative, for here the twin themes of the artist as storyteller and the religious trope of the flesh as proverbial word cohere magnificently. And some great transformation is enacted in this skin which seems tattooed by watery moonbeams, the face turned inward with eyes shut, open-mouthed and on the verge of voicing. Story, scroll, decree, code: Antón transforms the body into a vast vessel of knowledge, a fount of inviolate wisdom. He receives the word and delivers. "Tell me". he whispers. "Let me know". And we listen and respond, like those tribal denizens pitching their questions and burdens to the oracle in the smokehouse.

Antón may conceive his work as personal documents, dramas laden with theme and archetype, but he emerges foremost as a lyrical and imagistic poet. In a poem entitled "Poetry", Brazilian writer Joao Cabril de Melo Neto defines the poet as someone who can "allow all visible things to speak / allow the surface of all that lives in time to speak" who channels "the enormous voice asleep in the mystery" so that "everything will bear fruit". He views his craft as an emotive exploration, a searching for a "lucidity which sees everything". De Melo Neto's belief in immanence, in a probing vision that journeys toward source, parallels Antón's own pursuit of "trying to create what's felt instead of seen"; of going "toward the glow", as he elsewhere states, and attempting "to photograph with the eyes of my heart." For him photography is a medium of suggestion and transcendence, a synthesis of the possible. Intuition as his guide, he focuses on what's innate in the world: essences and charms, underlying truths and constants. Thus we see the timeless scope of his photography, how his images seem neither to start nor end. Antón may indeed be a master storyteller, but his work essentially pivots on a kind of fecund, eternal voicing

which we attribute to poetry. traditional narrative relies on concrete time and place; poetry is a more sensual pursuit, shaped by imagism and association and rhythm. Antón's stage is abstracted and imprecise, but the pictorial language is sharply etched, evoking the suggestive movements of lyrical dance, the blossoming of thought in fulsome image.

Much of contemporary photography is defined by imagery equally dreamlike and idiopathic, but rarely is it so poetic and sensuous than it appears in Antón's work. More often than not, the work of these contemporaries appears desperately angst-ridden, a histrionic obsession and a superficial bizarreness conceived deliberately to shock us out of our complacency, yet only leaving us nonplussed and unenlightened. What isolates Antón's work and makes it so elevating in spite of its vulnerability and beauty. It is at once tender and forceful, hushed and thunderous. And indeed, the humanity of the work is most apparent in the most graphic and anguished images. In *Help Me*, a scene of rescue and brotherhood unfolds like a religious tableau. An orb of light spilled forth from the heavens projects two figures, faces unseen, onto a kind of spotlighted stage. Fearsome flames engulf one man's legs and torso. The scene is stark and silent, despite an echo of wind and mournful cry. And it's infused with benevolence; lifted in the other man's arms, dragged out of the darkness into a refulgent light, the burning man appears graced in peril, arms extended like canopied vines. The rescuer could be brother, father, friend, angel. One wonders, is the body being rescued from hell, resurrected to heaven? Or is the image simply a basic conception of compassion? We don't really need to know; to recognize savior and saved in this moving image suffices. For who cannot look at this modeling of the individual plunged in pain and not at some level identify? Antón's photo casts our plea for help as a kind of haunting refrain, a plaintive folk song of unknown origin and universal appeal, composed to unify culture, verify a collective grief, and instill an undying faith through verse. *Time is the Flame that Burns Us All*, a companion image of a couple in embrace, invokes the title of some apocryphal song from Eastern Europe or Latin America, born of a disenfranchised people too inured to suffering. Song becomes understanding, transforming loss into solace and ennobling the deepest, most prowling hurt through emotive melody - perhaps a mother's grief over her youngest son, underfed and dying, or lost in battle. In Antón's world these figures reappear, and so in *Time is the Flame that Burns Us All*, we find mother and man-child united, perched on a corolla of light - the son naked and malnourished, harbored by a mother's protective arms and centered by her womb. Time may mean death, its flame burning our bodies' slowly extinguishing wicks, but fire and time are also regenerative forces, and Antón's maternal portrait, pitched like a lilting elegy suspending its notes, represents more blessing than curse. The image is at once baptism and eulogy.

Life and death, which are recurring themes throughout his work, are honored equally by Antón as a single sacrament, viewed not adversarially but as indivisible events which translate the perpetual cycles of nature. The elements figure prominently in his work, modeling the body, in constant dialogue with its gestures. Spectral mists like the vapors of time both buffet and support. Fires beckon and billow, lapping at limbs, stoked by gusting winds. Nature does not appear benevolent, but neither is it mean and duplicitous. What concerns Antón is its energy and dynamism, and the human body as an integral part of a sensual body of the world, ever lost and found within its abundant flow, merging with elements. In *I Move Without Wanting To*, a ring of fire encircles a young man with eyes closed, palms open, arms outstretched. The flames have

dissolved to white ash, and the body is partially wrapped in what looks like plaster or vegetation. It resembles both root and stalk. The pose is peaceful and solemn, simultaneously connoting birth and death, with the body fused to earth, imprinted with the residue of flames and twined in healing bandages. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, the earthbound body sheds its straps and resurrects. It rises from the earth like flame, extended like a flower, curled like a wave. Human memory is imagined as a dynamic force that quickens the flesh, surging through the body's veins like lightening. Defying fear, rapt and willing, the body appears to be answering some call, instinctively responding to some inchoate impulse. And in answer we rise up and are reborn; we "Become the Movement". Here the body achieves its apogee, appearing as essential as breath, uniting form with spirit. Anchoring a vortex of flames, virtually indistinguishable from it, the body is as lithe as a birch limb. The charged space in which it floats evokes the sexual act, the moment when we most feel alive, when we willfully heed the primal tug of nature and the unguessed rhythms of the body. We become powerful and strong, even in surrender. The image resounds as a metaphor for the flux of life in all dimensions, and the body's submission to forces by turns enlivening and dangerous - for that vortex of fire can also be viewed as a whirlpool in whose depths we struggle to escape. Repeatedly the expressive range of Antón's work brings the forces of light and dark, of hope and despair, into play, to create a vision of life that's balanced and whole. His beings may strive to "become of the movement", but elsewhere they move "without wanting to". But conflict binds us to nature, defines what it means to be human - and to be an artist. It is to pursue the creative act as envisioned by Blake and Witkin and Munch and countless others for whom the body is both mortal clay and a conduit to a spiritual realm and whose work vacillates between horror and beauty and can be summarized as a metaphysical inquiry, a Symbolism. (Indeed, many of Antón's titles could be attributed to Symbolist paintings, his photography sharing that genre's psychic preoccupations, its febrile forms). Perhaps *I Became of the Movement* comments on an immersion in the creative process itself, for those grainy swirls also resemble broad brushstrokes. But there's no austere theorizing in these photos; Antón's work, though profound, is too sensual, too captivating and rapturous for clever scheme.

Among the most sensual and emotive images in Antón's gallery is the photograph entitled *The Rules of Tragedy*. A luminous pool of bright light divides the darkness. In the center, a naked man reclines, as if rested on an altar or draped in a lap, limbs delicately folded like petals. He is a rose that's died too soon, and his softly entwined legs, one knee balanced against the other, feet caressing, crystalize a moment of supreme grace and sensuality, a last breath of vitality. The skin is supple and glowing and plucked of thorns, which reappear as candles encircling the valance of light, like an opaque veil hemmed with diamonds, a constellation of stars. Head arched back crowned by a nimbus, the face appears enraptured in eternal sleep, the body poised to ascend to the heavens. The image, funeral and votive, speaks of the sanctity of life and death in a pictorial language akin to psalmody.

And this image resonates with me in a way few others have. Its power was made manifest last spring, when, in a store in Brussels, I heard a thud and an anguished cry suddenly echo through the vast space. I stepped over to the railing and looked below. On the basement floor, limp and with leg twisted, lay a young boy. He had straddled the escalator's rails and fallen hard. The scene was gruesome; the world spun around in chaos. Yet as I looked down on that Belgian boy, my horror passed, for the similar pose, the tragic event, the sudden appearance of death on a

bright spring day - all served to summon forth Antón's peaceful image. The photo became for me a way to interpret the world, and as I gazed at the boy, I saw a pool of blood around Antón's head as Antón's nimbus, the colorless floor beneath a vaporous blanket of light. And while I sent the boy my blessings for his journey's end, I could imagine candles around his forlorn body, framing him with lights of solace and hope, endowing his untimely demise with the purpose-making power of art. The rules of tragedy indeed: torturing flames; love and loss; a boy playing on the rails, dead in a department store.

We know that photography can be a portal to truths, that it has the power to change our perception, to inspire and instill a sense of beauty, to shift thought and provoke feeling--and to create some magic. And time and again in Antón's work we open our eyes to magic and mystery and turn inward in thought. We recognize in him an ability to capture and define our world on the peripheries of his own, to forge a path for us through the wilderness and encourage us to find our way back out. But he is no shaman, neither alchemist nor master of riddles, and the imagery is not all fire and brimstone. He is more the voice within that beckons, "I want to understand; I long to know." And a forward reaching hope triumphs in the process. It's perhaps telling that his most poignant and hopeful photo, *May You Not Be Frightened*, is also his simplest. The figures are clothed and clearly human, the setting realistic, the message basic and clear. A young boy sits in a chair, head despondently bent toward the earth. Behind him Antón stands emerging from the darkness of a damp cell, obscured and disembodied. Above his head a halo hovers, and in his outstretched palms the Holy Spirit rests in silent offering to the boy. Surely he will taste the rules of tragedy, if he has not already; perhaps for him too a moment of play will lead to death. But Antón arrives as the vigilant keeper of the flame, the bearer of blessings and wisdom, bestowing solace and brotherhood, and a sense that all is not lost, that belief can help guard against the trial of hurts and fears to come. The image is essentially the visual equivalent of a kiss.

Antón's visionary and spiritual work charts an imaginative inner journey towards a common experience and belief that unites us all. It is first and foremost emotional photography, nuanced and replete with feeling, speculative yet decisive. Even at its most graphic and pleading, it retains an aura of hope, of necessity and reply. There are no smiles, but there are also no tears or trembles, and the body, even postured in death, never seems entombed. The work may be submerged in the personal, but it skirts self-absorption; no oblique strategies surface, no nebulous networks of vague signals. Instead, Antón seamlessly devises his world in devotional symbols that inspire hope and healing--enfolding arms and open palms, embryonic forms, winds of change and flames descending from the heavens--and conceives the body not as some heavy parish trapped in the boondocks of the world, but pure and naked in the light of day, in the clear and present reality of human understanding. His art represents curiosity and acceptance, a blameless embrace of a life both splendid and perilous, shot through with beauty and vicissitude. It sounds the Angelus. This is the final impression of Antón's work--a sanctifying view of human experience in all its valences, from gutter to glitter, rut to rooftop. It's about love in a sense, the "order and disorder of love" which the poet Paul Eluard describes: the "bath of glad tears" we experience in life, in the "first estate of man," the well of thought and feeling deep "in the core of our body." And it's rooted in love as well, a love that fires and consecrates and imbues his art with conviction and grace. It draws inward only to distill and release. "I look for the

equivalent of something inside me,” Antón writes, “because what’s inside me is equivalent to what’s inside everyone else.” His art is essentially a restorative act of sharing, of connecting with the world around and affirming a unity of thought. Proffered from the heart, we accept his work as a gift, and in turn are inspired to refocus on what’s valuable and moving in life, to reopen our eyes and ears to the things that exalt our world and restore it with spirit and wonder and euphony: the symmetry of snow crystals and complex theorems of stars; sweet cadences of talk and keening birdsong; a red-cheeked baby crying. These are the fluid strains that inform the remarkable world of Don Gregorio Antón, the gift he bequeaths to us in photography.

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