

# CONTACT SHEET

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DON GREGORIO ANTÓN

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# DON GREGORIO ANTÓN

OLLIN MECATL: THE MEASURE OF MOVEMENTS

*January 14 – March 20, 2008*

*Reception: February 7, 5–7 PM*

LIGHT WORK  


ROBERT B. MENSCHER MEDIA CENTER

316 Waverly Avenue, Syracuse New York 13244

*Gallery hours are 10 AM to 6 PM Sunday through Friday except for school holidays*

*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.<sup>1</sup>*

Don Gregorio Antón

Don Gregorio Antón's work has been described as "radiating compassion,"<sup>2</sup> "at once tender and forceful, hushed and thunderous,"<sup>3</sup> and as an "opportunity to see the richness and undeniable power of hope."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup>

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. Retablos, 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 Mecatli*, 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.

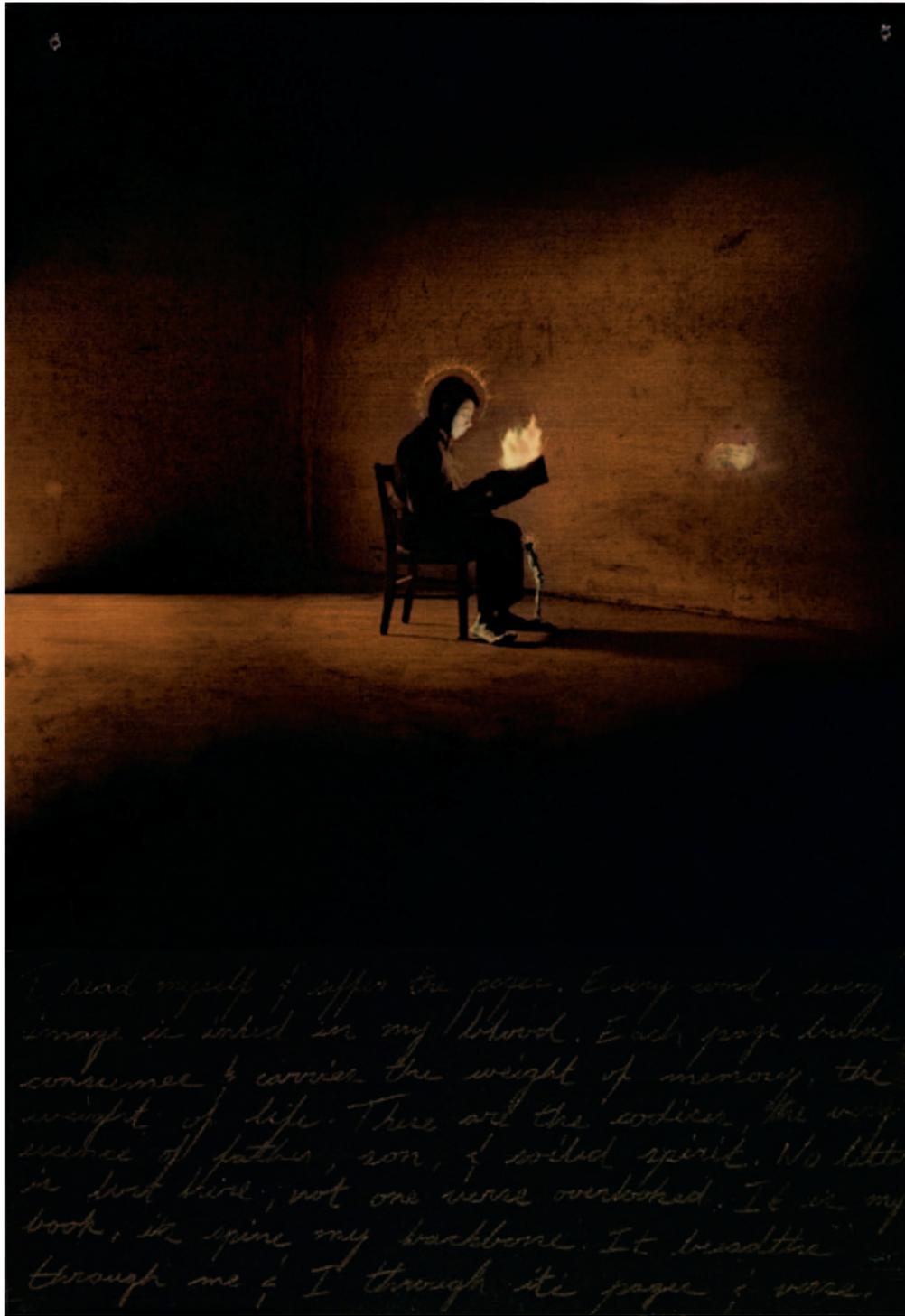
It is not easy for us to enter Antón's world, nor is it free of pain or regret. By contrast, his world makes our comfortable existence seem void of life and passion. Having walked within Antón's world and opened up to its intensity, we may find our view of our daily existence altered. As if returning 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 pages. Every word, every  
image is etched in my blood. Each page bears  
conscience & carries the weight of memory, the  
weight of life. These are the codices, the very  
essence of father, son, & solid 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  
makes me into them? Distance creates longing; longing knows  
each of us by name. I remind me of who we were & where we were  
going. The longitude of darkness & the latitude of light.



For now, I release this form into the space  
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 trajectory of  
ordinary time & the total sum of solitude.



had made the scene  
The weight of memory when  
lengthens these distances of  
blind distances into life.  
How death instantly flares  
each candle flame. Above the  
scene is found without  
blood or incision, matter  
released into the slow motion  
of dreams. Light knows  
this, claims its place only  
in death. It draws us  
to itself, to the unfolding  
of deeper thoughts & meanings.  
I wish I could see this scene  
the weight behind it, make  
but for my eyes I should  
what was found in some  
and have only the ghost  
of a scene.

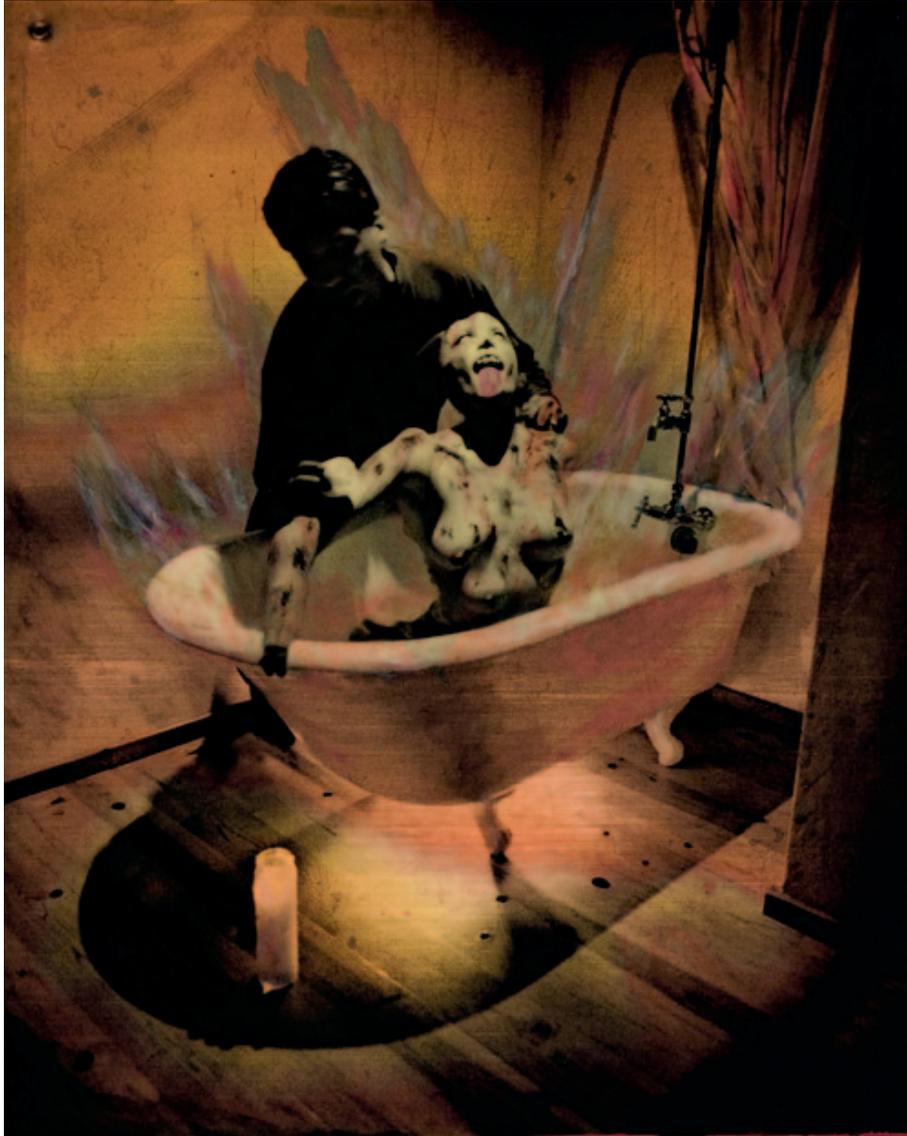


I remember with me, the silence, the long rows of stones, the  
ground that never broke. This is where it is placed,  
between one & the other - between words that never  
escape. No form of sympathy needed, or acquired, as this is  
the point of entry to a different world of learning.





As a child I learned light through darkness, through prayer, and love in the  
night. Through love, in face of solitude, in the company of another, love  
has I learned to give from love, to see through darkness, I discovered, to  
experience my right of vision, I sought, to believe in silent patience, love for  
the face of impatience, to measure the weight of hope on the conditions  
of reality. Here the test was set to hold tight, to endure the night, to turn

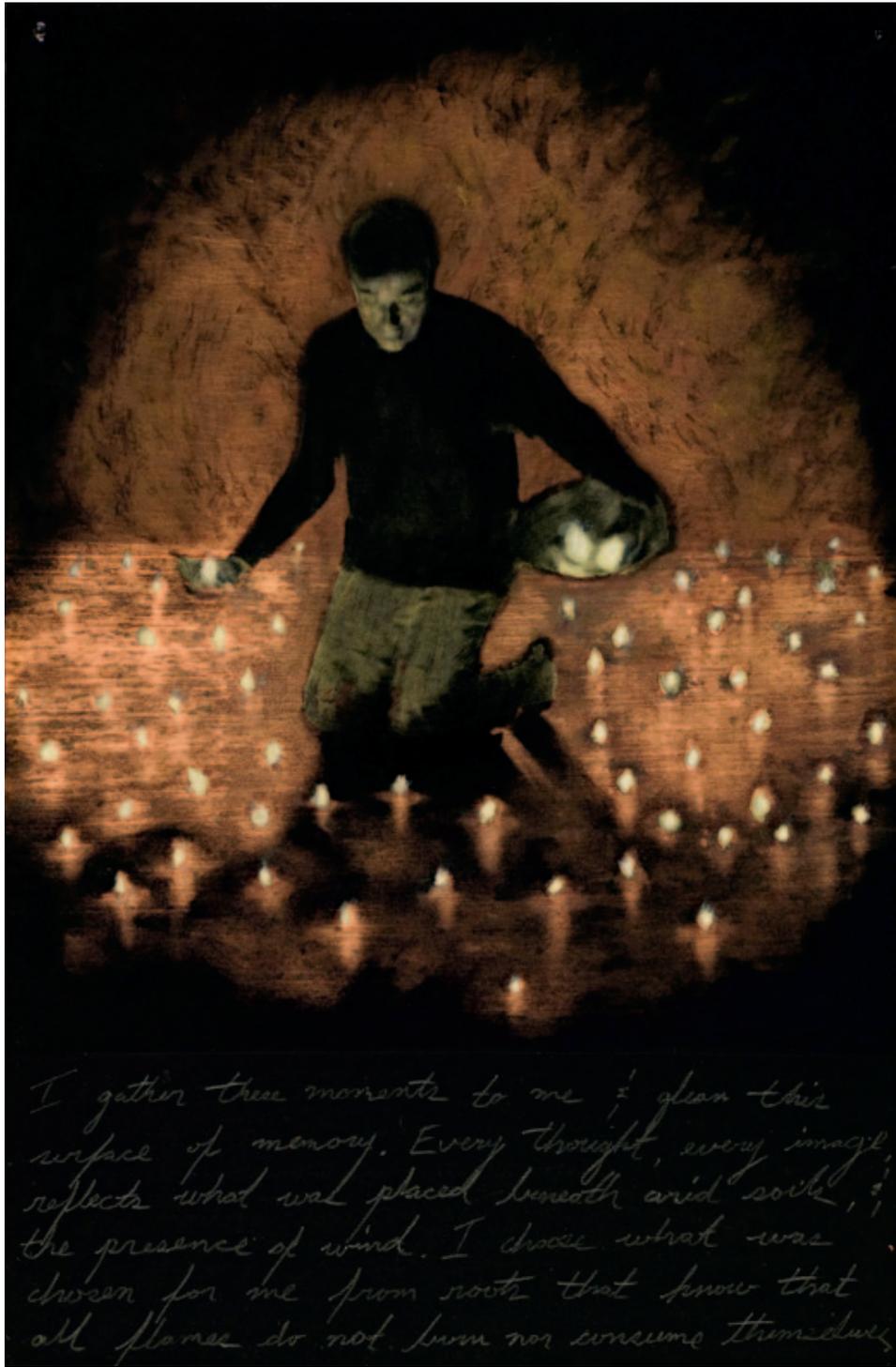


Every soul speaks its own language. Every bruise  
& stain forms their poem of isolation. To see  
the deformity of solitude, of moments long  
spent in neglect. Who is it that binds these  
souls that wraps these poems restricted from  
light. Who would cast this soul from care?



To chase the wind, purge the senses of  
thought. Of occasion left undone, beyond  
hidden but not forgotten. I trust the people  
the unceremonious 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 soil,  
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 savored in taste & terror & the affection of light. For this, I place you here





Every scar, line, pore, its story revealed, & folded  
into every pore, every inch in what was said & judged  
forgotten & remembered. Where I you, face of fiction,  
map of distance, or just the impressions made  
by your presence? I cannot take back the impressions  
your face made but I offer this for the transmission



Let him pour his wrath this upon my back & let him to reel from words that  
rear like from hope & I have to live in darkness has in light, his  
fled into shadows much too small for my feet, I found you waiting  
for me again as I emerge. Every foot print his made behind you  
as well, but not so my light. What you could not extinguish  
our soul in jealousy & rage was mine alone, given to purports you  
will never understand. Oh adversary of fate, we share only both our light.



Every stone has its place, every thought its application, its volume, its weight. Not  
who is assigned to do it, but what the office that one is given is suited  
without purpose or making, each one where to read & heard, speaking  
not from where they come but rather, from what they are. I had  
only arranged the meaning of place, as it will be rearranged &  
placed by others. For the far beyond, that days more words, content





How for the edge of reason, was one? What wonder, this distance I  
transcended this journey, for the sake of journeys & the words that  
they create. How else would I've survived here, to stand my way  
through the opposition of forces in matter & spirit? I have sold  
my way the wretched distance of fear & hope, I have learned  
the fine sediment of ash that forever remained with about things



I know what looks on the night against these cliffs, in valleys far away  
It is not the wailing of women, not of their children longing for their  
return. No, it is the sound of trumpets that breaks upon each ear,  
against jagged crags 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 & wounds the soul.



Where now? Whence shall my soul be raised? It has been,  
Lord I found, dropped from great heights, upon rocks &  
waters, & upon other seats. It has been abandoned in  
walle, in wells, long dry & left in view of death. It  
has been left on shores of death, only to be lifted again  
& returned to this journey of what we still may become.







Deep within what is, lies what was, made of seed of light, of seed  
of 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 reveal of evil, seed of light. Everything I have found  
has found me first, something that was never mine before.



I had seen you as you have entered  
me through a world of light through  
a world of night through your distance  
in small places. I wish you as  
I have been raised knowing that  
few things concrete are seldom cold





In the quiet of the night, the stars are like  
the pattern of history, the substance of existence, and  
the mind. The illuminated world is a transition in space  
towards the future. For this, the past has no value  
with which to follow. It is the point of the  
end, in limitation, a few moments, but here, but here.



I have felt the sword of this year before, as it tore through flesh  
a line through each a narrow incision blood in scars but when  
healed, it looks like had torn from the bitter edge of gold  
this unusual thin broken of each. However it follows the slow  
speed of learning the long sustained ideas of names. It does  
not, cannot sleep but strikes the feet of insomnia. In  
that moment, when I was raised & two lives - we have seen



through the water, leaving not a trace of my being, and a deadly  
thought from possession. It should be kept in mind, off death what is  
left of strength, it drops, and the spray from the old to separate what it  
leaves in darkness, and of some darkness, and a darkening, when my  
water becomes open, when the darkness, and with some power, and  
I saw the dark, and nothing, to find, and what divides, being, and



The scene is dark and atmospheric, with a strong sense of shadow and light. The figures are silhouetted against a lighter, textured background. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.



It was not true. I could not put it upon the men, amongst these people, amidst the ashes of  
flames that signified us. It was not to be found in the language 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 bring it from memory, or see it rise from  
their prayers. All they said, was that we should leave. That our thoughts would only  
squelch them if cause them to wonder. They said that it would be useless to find other shores.



On this night, I ride the white horse with the invisible motion in sight. Through hours of  
light, upon each of sand, each horse has brought me to the other since birth. There  
is the hand of disaster, or perhaps of time over flesh of love, fear of mystery. Of  
movements, beyond measured of distance, towards. I do not see them, nor they me for  
this restless life, master for me the destination is then the path well known, but  
not in time of small each its end, as in when, with each, in 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 reached, food can  
be made, but what of hope? What of heart? What must be feared  
for their purpose when purpose is reached instead. All I know is  
that the hand testifies to the mind's intention. It belongs to  
what it has reached for, having a great deal to do with it.



For the first time, what she really wanted was to see the peak of fear & into the music  
to remember that we had those things, but she shall have the weight of our vision  
they shall keep you to me, I see you, they shall intrigue you, give each  
other a chance of escape, you are entering. We are all that is left of this  
agreement with the world, the multitude of people that are not yet joined by things  
I wish had not been for the world, but I think with all the things that are



What will be the night of my return? Who will be there that I can turn, as these leaves I write  
in darkness, through great distances of quiet change, to be home a history that remembers you  
I'd hold you near from far, I'd hope for you from where once you were, to history that  
remembers your face before it changed, the hope before the night the sad man without his  
outbase. I am the captives of light, I will pay the price of building like those before me who  
made the journey & for I am the heart that holds the heart in death, the heart that remembers















## 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.

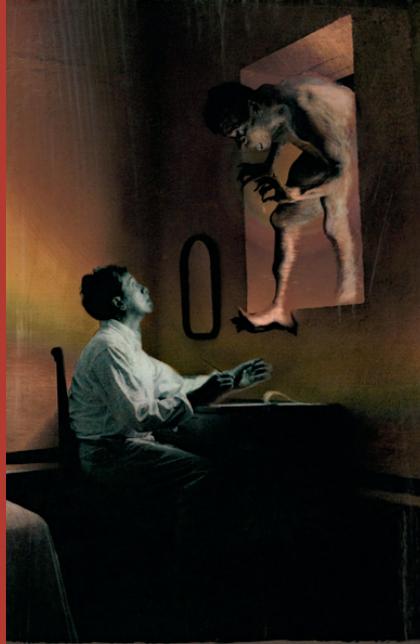
I believe that there is more to seeing, more to what we are taught our eyes can see. Our eyes should be allowed to breathe, taste, and listen. They should be courageous and permitted to go further into any space that has not known their shape before. Why? Well, this is something you must decide for yourself. 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](http://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



The drawing on paper was the same  
as the one in the book on horse  
in the air - and I could see some  
to be what I meant to do. The  
idea is that the horse's motion  
is the window - a wall where one  
could see what was not in the

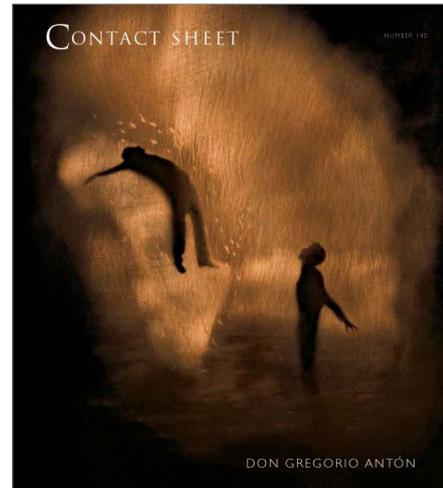
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