Panorama With Hood Ornament

June 16, 2015 By Visual AIDS

Joseph Nicéphore Niepce, The World's First Photograph (1826). Courtesy the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas, Austin

Rafael Sánchez and Mark Morrisroe met as neighbors moving into the same building in Jersey City in 1985 when Morrisroe arrived in the NY area from Boston. They helped each other as young artists and confidants. Sánchez became a caregiver to Morrisroe in his last years; the complex nature of that experience is poetically chronicled in Sánchez's essay "Panorama With Hood Ornament" in the influential Boston School exhibition catalogue (ICA, Boston, 1995), reproduced below for the Visual AIDS website.

On Thursday, June 18, at 3 p.m., Sánchez will discuss his personal recollections of Morrisroe, Morrisroe's artistic process, and the Morrisroe work "Untitled" (1985) for the Whitney Museum of American Art's "99 Objects" series. More info here.

Panorama with Hood Ornament*
by Rafael Sánchez

Never knew I calm was in the soul,

although I have seen the elements still'd.

Byron, Cain.

Once...you and I... out on a ledge... floor eleven I think, of that haunted place. We hold on your fingers pierce. The eyes of your face, deep, serene pools of horror, assure me of the gravity below. Beckoning. A step stirs and we spiral. The hospital is pale and flourescent; a reminder of the taunting buzz we might find in limbo. I am a stray herald beside your bed, and you a solitary bridgeroom, crushed by your very sustenance, stained in white. We try our best to decorate the moments. Yet between tropical shakes, a balinese shadow dance, and Sade, we know that it is soon and sure that you will go. Now it seems so far away that a little black box of ashes has broken my heart. So I raise a heavy pen to Mnemosyne aflame and send a long lost letter... since I never quite got your new address. We were so young and poised the night I came down to see your pictures for the first time and the only light we knew was on us and the deep red of your vinyl sofa. It's funny how thinking of you feels like traveling throughout the atmosphere of your photographs. Maybe they always had this at their core... a way of staging a pretext for memory. You handed me a print that seemed to have a distant origin, like some early photo experiment from a hundred years ago. But Lonely Bird was instantly more than this. Through its haze I imagined the

possibility that we may have inherited a derailed photographic past. The horizon splits the world in two equal parts , the earth and sky. The bird belongs to both but rests momentarily on our ledge, triumphant, like a weathered biblical messenger, or a beacon perched before eternity. A view from a leap into the void.

I drift there as you recall surviving an intentional overdose in a lonely room in the city of light. Your voice is lapsed and there's all this scrawling around the picture. "This is my ode to Diane Arbus," emerges as I weed through the lines. The scene falls into place and dissolves again. How many suicides were there anyway, Mark? This one was supposed to be your Westbeth... your "last supper." Then the world came back with the morning on its wings and even Paris looked pretty good.

How many birds flew by Niepce's primitive lens when he managed to take the world's first photograph? How many were absorbed by the eight hour exposure? Initial proof, you might say, of how photographs lie. As in Atget's ancien regime. The sun rises beyond a cloudy dream... a ray of hope as an inverted cry.

Life has a funny way of bringing fate to your doorstep. We first met when you came up one day to borrow a neighborly cup of sugar. It was the beginning of a conversation that continued, with many twists and turns, through your last four years. I admit that during some of my early visits to your place, I'd hesitate by the doorway when greeted by the monumental odor inside. "The strange grossness" of your habits somehow paralleled your inspired ambition. At the time it amazed me how hard you'd work at making a good impression against such a fetid backdrop. Plastic bags blocked out the window of the kitchen, which doubled as a darkroom. It was a sticky, stinky, greasy, gritty, boozy, cat pissy hair ball, roach infested ordeal. Nice try, but lacing the air with Saint Anne Spray only coronated the stench.

Eventually I came to appreciate your little atrocities as features of your cave. Classically, caves are places of wonder, mystery and majestic beauty where poets and alchemists associate with the muses. Nature boy in a darkroom cavern, you played freely and beyond the possibilities of your medium. Despite a ranting desire for celebrity, you were always the true alchemist whose work towards The Work ** is a consequence of deeper spiritual journey.

Aubrey Beardsley once said, "I am nothing if not grotesque." Like Beardsley you relish the grotto, giving prominence to your distortions; mannering them with love and awe. The dusty, brailled complexion of your photographs radiates as light rubbing up against the surface of your life.

You've left us many gifts... broken souvenirs from a hard, fast drive. A bawdy panorama tattered and silently mystic.

So, in honor of your reeling gait and a pile of worn-out shoes, I champion our vain talks on prolonged strolls to the check cashing place and to the A&P. Here's to broken tea cups and bouquets in the sink. To Lili Marlene, Bruce Willis and crackling Liberace records... and yes... thanks for the memories.

Rafael Sánchez

Jersey City, 1995

*Originally published for the exhibition catalogue, Boston School, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1995, Lia Gangitano, Editor

**Here the wording of: whose Work towards the Elixir, as it appeared in the original draft, is changed to: whose work towards The Work. The phrasing, however, remains interchangeable.

Rafael Sánchez is an artist working in New York City. Though his primary medium is drawing, he has produced a number of projects locally and abroad that explore the confluence between theater and visual art. Sanchez was a founding member of Aljira, A Center for Conteporay Art in Newark, New Jersey. An exhibition that explores the artist's exhibition there, "Look Don't Touch" (the center's first one-person show in 1985), is being organized for 2016. A project examining Sánchez/White collaborative work is being planned for 2017 in NYC. As well as a number articles on Morrisroe, Sánchez is co-editor and founder of alLuPiNiT (the New York City environ mental magazine) with his partner, artist Kathleen White. Through alLuPiNiT and in conversation with the Estate of Mark Morrisroe (Collection Ringier), Sánchez/White published the official reprints of Morrisroe's DIRT when it was discovered that Mr. Sánchez' archives contained the only known complete set of the notorious punk zine.

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