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# Bated Breath

A Conversation with Anthony Goicolea

by Sarah Kessler



**ANTHONY GOICOLEA'S BROOKLYN ABODE** had a decidedly pleasant vibe. Puttering around the thirty-five-year-old artist's living room before our chat, I felt at home—comfortably casual. The lighting was warm and the atmosphere cozy; delicate drawings of deer (by a friend of Goicolea's) hung on two of the walls. Examining the drawings at closer range, I noticed the deer were, almost imperceptibly, eviscerated. This added to the charm of the place, while lightly hinting at Goicolea's affinity for the uncanny.

Best known for his work in photography and video, Goicolea finished his MFA at New York's Pratt Institute in 1996, and has since been, literally, prolific. His early photographs often featured the artist himself, multiplied into a veritable "army of me," playing the

**Anthony Goicolea, *Greenhouse*, 2006, C-print mounted on aluminum and laminated, edition of 9, 28 x 120in**  
Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery, New York  
Collection of Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson



roles of pubescent schoolboys and fairytale characters. Goicolea has since shifted focus, experimenting with ethereal (and surreal) digitally altered landscapes, as well as eerily manipulated nature scenes peopled by masked or hooded "kidnappers" and survivalists.

*The Septemberists* (2006), the artist's most recent *chef d'oeuvre*, is his longest video to date. Produced in collaboration with menswear designer Thom Browne, the narrative depicts a colony of ghostly young men clad in immaculate suits wordlessly laboring, day and night, in a pastoral setting. Beautifully photographed—Goicolea is classical in his composition—they methodically prepare ritual garments, later donning them for a mock funeral and baptism that convey, despite their symbolism, an absolutely disquieting emotional ambiguity.

An accompanying series of photographs displays Goicolea's signature digital interventions, which unleash rats, moths, dirt, and dirtiness into the picture to hint at the idyll's darker alter ego.

The following is a sampling of my discussion with Goicolea. Our conversation focused on *The Septemberists*, but we also spoke about his previous works and his influences, along with an embarrassing analogy I drew in my notebook that happened to catch his eye . . .

**SARAH KESSLER:** So I'm wondering, was there any improvisation in the video? Did you do storyboards? What was your process?

**ANTHONY GOICOLEA:** I didn't do storyboards, but I did outline everything that was necessary to get each shot done. I'm not used to working in that manner, so it was a really good experience, in a way, but it does get rid of any impromptu kind of thing. Occasionally we ran out of time and things had to be cut short or cut out, so maybe there was improvisation in the fact that something wasn't done [laughs], but not on the level that I'm used to in making video, where things tend to happen a bit more organically.

**S:** I ask because even though you're saying it was rigidly planned out, there is this collective aspect to it.

**A:** Yes, but there's no visible communication between the actors. You know, normally, if someone were doing something they'd look at somebody else to see if they were doing it right, and I didn't want any sort of interaction between them on an emotional level; I wanted them to be very stoic. It's almost monastic, in that they have these rituals that they perform, so there was a lot of rehearsal before each take to get them to do it without laughing, or messing up, or looking at each other . . .

**S:** It's amazing—there's no eye contact between them. If you hadn't said that I don't think I'd be able to explain what's so eerie about it.

**A:** Yeah, I think it's a subtle little thing that helps betray the idea of perfection. They're working in a group, but they're so isolated at the same time; there's no association with each other.

**S:** So, I mean, why? That's such a huge question, I know!

**A:** [Laughs] I don't know if I know why!

**S:** Right, how do you begin to answer that question? A smaller question is: how did the collaboration begin?

**A:** Thom Browne and I met through a mutual friend and talked about doing something for his spring collection. He described what it looked like, and it sparked some ideas in my head of an old Southern plantation. I've always been attracted to ritual and tradition, and how, through repetition, these things can actually lose their meaning and become distorted. They become almost mechanistic, robotic actions. I was raised Catholic, and in Catholicism you stand, then you kneel, then you sit, and I remember one day just looking and thinking that these people don't even know what they're saying. It's such a droning, even monotone when they're praying, and it just seems so un-heartfelt. Repetition

can rob something from meaning. The actors perform these ceremonies, or rites of passage, and the rituals become—what's the word? I'm thinking rituals to prepare for rituals . . .

**S:** Meta?

**A:** Yes! Yeah.

**S:** Meta is a good prefix.

**A:** Yeah, I've heard people say, "that's very meta," yeah. Meta, macro, whatever [laughs]. But yes, they're preparing to make the preparations for this ritual, and it just takes so many steps backwards. There are a number of different rituals—wedding, funeral, baptism—and they're all merging and becoming their own hybridized versions of different Western cultural traditions. I grew up in a Cuban-American household . . .

**S:** Right. Your Wikipedia profile proclaims, "Anthony Goicolea is a Cuban-American artist . . ."

**A:** I know; that's so funny. But it did inform my work, because I grew up with different songs, fairytales, and stories from both cultures. I also grew up with different understandings of certain expressions, like the expression "dog eat dog world." I always thought it was "doggie dog" or something like that. I still don't know if it's "old wise tale" or "old wives' tale" . . .

**S:** I think it's "old wives' tale."

**A:** Well if it's "old wives'," that makes sense, although if it's "old wise," then it's old wise people. [S and A laugh.] Yeah, little things, little expressions I would use, and people would say, "You know you're not using that right," or, "You know that's not what it is, right?" And I'd say, "Oh, yeah." I think it informs my work—I like to blend things together and make sense of things that don't make sense. [Points to S's notepad, which is sitting, open, on her knee.] I saw "KKK" written here, which I thought was interesting!

**S:** See, well, that's something—I often word questions in a way that I worry is offensive! But I don't consider them offensive; I mean, those [points to a photograph against the studio wall featuring small hooded figures in a vast white landscape]—are those the guys with the hoods? I wanted to ask you about fascist aesthetics, too . . .

**A:** You're thinking of a different series, but yeah, they're wearing red hoodies. About the video, though, there is this feeling of a kind of German, idealized countryside. Even when they're getting dressed in the morning it's very reminiscent of a sort of Nazi youth thing, in a weird way. There's a militaristic aspect. In a lot of my work there's the hint of persecution, or possible persecution. The idea of marginalization—how in a mass movement or a group

**Anthony Goicolea, *Still Waters*, 2006,**  
C-print mounted on aluminum and  
laminated, edition of 9, 50 x 40in  
Courtesy the artist and  
Postmasters Gallery, New York

**Anthony Goicolea, *The Tin Drum*,**  
2006, C-print mounted on aluminum  
and laminated, edition of 9, 30 x 58in  
Courtesy the artist and  
Postmasters Gallery, New York

“ . . . in Catholicism you stand, then you kneel, then you sit, and I remember one day just looking and thinking that these people don't even know what they're saying.”



movement people are so willing to give up their identities to blend in and feel part of a larger whole, rather than stake out their claims as individuals and fear persecution. There are major moments of that.

S: Do people usually ask you about this?

A: One or two curators have asked me in private, but no, never, really. I always wonder, when I do stuff like that, if somebody's going to take it the wrong way. And then nobody even brings it up and I think maybe it's so subtle that it's just really hidden and buried . . .

S: That sort of moment you're talking about was one of two things that came to my mind upon seeing your work—that and the Gothic element, maybe more so in the older work I've seen that seems to deal with doubling, surface and depth, and the homosocial. I wouldn't call it male bonding, but there's a kind of men-with-men, relating-to-men thing. I don't know if it's homoerotic. I see it as homosocial.

A: Personally, I don't find it homoerotic, but I think it would be really easy to say that. It's hard to put a group of guys together and not have that association unless they're really trying hard not to.

S: In which case you think it's even more homoerotic!

A: Right, I think in our culture you just don't see that—it's not something that happens a lot. Unless it *is* homoerotic, but that's not my goal. If it is in there and you want to focus on it then go ahead, but that's not all there is to the work.

S: That aspect wasn't the first thing that struck me at all, actually.

A: I like to have a level of ambiguity, so that when you're looking at my work you can feel one way about it one day and then see it a different way—maybe something that seemed really funny one day you realize is kind of dangerous the next. Some people like to harp on certain aspects more than others [laughs].

S: You've used yourself in a lot of your work.

A: To the point where I've had people ask how I did that. And I ask, "What do you mean?" And they ask, "Well, were there wigs, or what?" And I'm like, "That's not me!" I haven't photographed myself in four and a half years!

S: What led you to stop using yourself?

A: It just seemed to have come to a natural conclusion. Any time something becomes formulaic, I get bored. I can see the idea so clearly, and I know all the steps I need to take to get there, and it's just labor, so why do it? I figure if I'm bored with it, other people are going to be bored, too. Also, I've always worked

in many different media. I've always enjoyed going back and forth between things.

S: That seems like a rare instinct in the art world.

A: Yeah, I guess so [laughs]. I think a lot of people in school now have this idea that someone like (Charles) Saatchi is going to buy out their thesis show and they're going to be an art star. I've always thought, I'm not going to let that dictate what I do. It never occurred to me to stick to the same thing just because people liked it.

S: On a more typical track, who are your influences? Whose work did you look at a lot when you were first starting to do your own work?

A: Cindy Sherman was an influence when I first started doing photography. There's such a long history and tradition of self-portraiture in painting and sculpture, but in photography, because it's a new medium, her work was very exciting. And Matthew Barney's sort of self-performative pieces—they were early inspirations.

S: *Poolpushers* [a 2002 photograph from the *Water series*] really reminded me of a Matthew Barney piece.

A: I could see that. Actually, in general, I tend to gravitate more towards painters. I like Peter Doig, Ernest Bieler, Vuillard, and a lot of the *fin de siècle* Viennese Secessionists like Klimt and Schiele. As for photographers, I like Jeff Wall, some of Sally Mann's family series . . . a variety of people. It's hard for me to say that I like someone as a whole—I usually like periods of the person's work. For example, I like these black-and-white aerial photographs of neighborhoods that Gregory Crewdson did in the early to mid-90s.

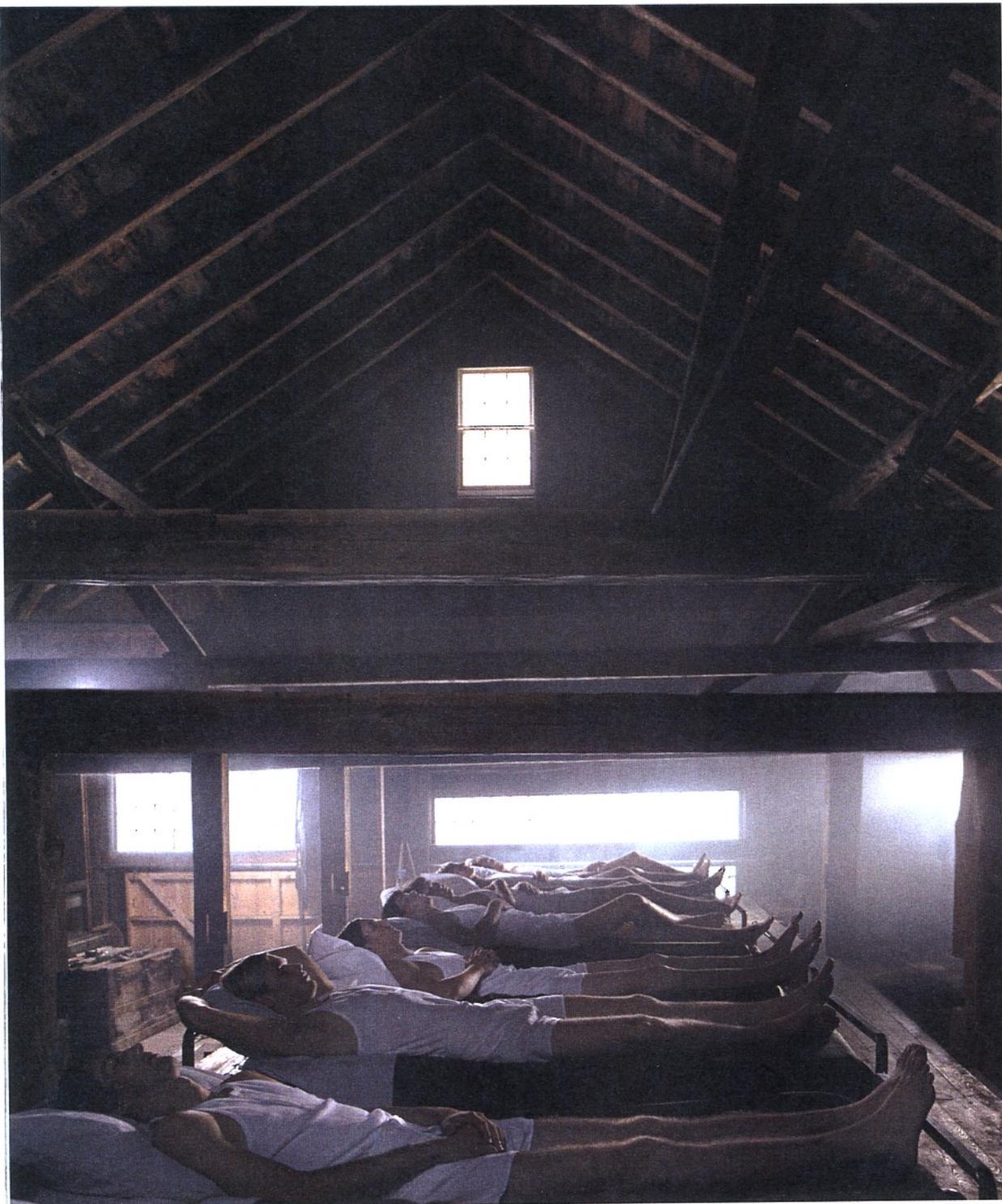
S: Going back to your own work, to clarify, the "KKK" thing that I wrote was actually in response to the series of the guys with the hoodies. Which series is that?

A: *The Kidnap series* [2004] with the fire. They actually burn a scarecrow. I think this series also invokes the idea of minorities and persecution. I remember in the 70s there were the boats that came over with the prisoners—there was that exchange—and there was all this stuff about Cubans in the news. I was really young and I didn't understand it. My brother told me, "Don't tell anybody you're Cuban because that's bad." Also, being in school and sort of knowing that you're gay, knowing that you're different—these elements make you fear persecution. I borrow historically to touch on this, I guess.

S: And that comes across, too, in the boarding school photographs [referring to *You & What Army series*, 1999-2001]. That's you in those

Anthony Goicolea, *Sleeping*, 2006,  
C-print mounted on aluminum and  
laminated, edition of 9, 50.5 x 40in  
Courtesy the artist and  
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Collection of Laura Lee Brown  
and Steve Wilson

“Hopefully, with all the work, there’s that element that any minute something bad is going to happen.”



photographs, no? There's this vibe to it—you feel like any moment the headmaster is going to come in.

**A:** Hopefully, with all the work, there's that element that any minute something bad is going to happen.

**S:** Does something bad ever happen?

**A:** Not really, because that's almost too much. I like David Lynch films—they feel really violent and disturbing but nothing violent ever happens, really. It's just the feeling that it's about to that gets you really freaked out. ♫