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POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY



The Tin Drum, 2006
30" x 58"

Anthony Goicolea

POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY



In Anthony Goicolea's photographic tableaux, what is left unsaid is often as important as what meets the eye. Stimulus meets the artist with a knack for beautiful yet thought-provoking images. Text and interview by *Yannis Tsitsovis*.

“Maurice forgot he had ever been sexless, and only realised in maturity how just and clear the sensation of his earliest days must have been. He sank far below them now, for he was descending the Valley of the Shadow of Life. It lies between the lesser mountains and the greater, and without breathing its fogs no one can come through.”

When E.M. Forster painted this young man's struggle with his own essence, he could have described the story of Anthony Goicolea's subjects and their troubled path to adulthood. It started with tableaux of adolescent boys – all manipulated images of the artist himself – with amorphous identities and an obsession with spit, snot and jism. The confines of authority – represented by a class room or church – were gradually removed, and the kids were left to their own devices in a fight against nature. In the *Shelter* series, the boys slowly begin to build a makeshift society of their own. The rite of passage into adulthood finds its culmination in the *Septemberists*, where the boys have grown up and live an ordered life in a self-sustaining commune.

Goicolea describes the *Septemberists* as a “summary” of his art's larger narrative. The film is rich with symbolism and allegoric structures. I ask him whether he thinks the film takes his work into full circle.

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In a way, I view the *Septemberists* as a closure, because it embodies everything I've been dealing with in my work. I feel that it's allowed me to take a departure from those subjects and do something new. It sort of goes from the *Landscape* series and the idea of the wilderness and these groups of people working together in nature, but there is still this institutional feel in the way they dress or operate in silence. It's almost monastic or militaristic – they know the function they're supposed to fulfil and they're able to engage in that role in utter silence and without communicating with each other. I'm also interested in the idea of tradition, and how, through repetition in tradition, things lose their meaning and movements become robotic and they take on a different type of interpretation. Within that film, I take these rituals and ceremonies – whether it's a baptism, wedding, funeral or communion – and merge them in a way that makes them take on this hybridised, ritualistic procession.

Is your new work a break from this larger narrative?

It's a little bit of a departure because the whole show – drawing, video and photo – is in black and white and it's kind of industrial, urban environments and I'm working with older people. In the new work people seem more isolated. They're

not really functioning in groups. They're more akin to the *Shelter* series, in the sense that the environment is more of a predominant figure. People are dwarfed by their surroundings, but they're presented in a singular or solitary way. The drawings and paintings look like negatives – they're black and white or monochromatic. The work is less narrative than the earlier ones. I would say that they're probably a little bit more formalist, although initially they might seem realist. I think my photos are becoming more painterly in the way I am shooting them and putting them together, because I'm creating these environments that don't actually exist – it's like making something from scratch. So I am allowing myself to become looser.

In the Kidnap series, there are some images that are a reference to the Wickerman, this ritual of burning an effigy of a real person in a ceremonial sacrifice. It made me think of transgression, this pagan idea of reaching this state that's almost non-human and committing an act that goes beyond generally accepted boundaries – because after the burning ritual there is a scene where the boys are asleep and the viewer's left wondering what has happened.

Yeah, that's definitely part of it. The idea of a ceremonial ritual is representational but also leads to the act of change. What both the *Kidnap* series and the *Septemberists* have in common is that a lot of these rituals take on a persecution feel to them. I am interested, within the notion of homogenisation and cultures and groups, in the idea of how minorities are persecuted or set out aside of that. The *Kidnap* video, for example, has a moment that references the KKK. The *Septemberists* has moments that references fascism and Nazism and the Holocaust – this sort of dystopian society. And they're also set against a Southern plantation backdrop. I grew up in Georgia, so I don't know if that filtered in a little bit.

Is this type of persecution something you've ever felt?

Yeah, I think that's part of it. I grew up gay and Cuban in a very homogenised white Southern society, so I definitely felt the danger of persecution, but not actual persecution. I felt like part of a minority where there was still a possibility of blending in and not being a visual minority. But that to me is what's interesting, because that's where the choice comes in as to whether you allow yourself to lose your identity and become part of a larger group or whether you assert yourself and risk becoming persecuted or 'other' and different.

With some photos from your Shelter series, such as Ice Storm, teenagers are exposed to nature in a way and that renders them vulnerable.

Particularly with the *Landscapes* series I was interested in how fairy tales and mythology take this mystical woodland environment and make it both beautiful and dangerous. I think that's something a lot of early American landscape painters also

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Above
Ice Storm, 2005
70" x 80"

Left
Sleeping, 2006
50.5" x 40"

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dealt with – the issue of the sublime and how landscapes seem beautiful but foreboding at the same time. Also, fairy tales and mythology and biblical stories have all these iconic symbols and allegorical structures set up. I grew up in a Cuban-American household, so I had stories from different cultures, which I somehow ended up fusing together.

Can you remember any stories from your childhood that have had a particular effect on you?

Various things, like idiomatic expressions or songs that were sung before bedtime. I remember my mother telling me that if you swallow chewing gum, you grow a tree out of your nose, ears and belly button. Every culture has their own absurdist little tales to prevent kids from doing what they shouldn't, so I ended up getting both.

Have you heard of the Shockheaded Peter story?

Oh, is that Slovenly Peter? Who wouldn't take a bath and ended up in the river?

In the story I know, his hair and nails kept growing and he ends up turning into this vegetable.

I heard a version where he wouldn't bathe and was really disgusting, so the villagers took him to the river to bathe him and he drowned. The stories seem really absurd when you're older, but when you're younger somehow they seem really believable.

A lot of fairy tales are quite brutal in a way, because they portray uncomfortable, ugly truths, but they do it in a poetic way. I feel your art does that as well with, for example, ideas of mortality in the Septemberists or the idea that kids can be cruel in the earlier work.

In my work, I like a level of ambiguity. I like the contrast between an image that's beautiful in composition or colour and an act that seems grotesque or dangerous. So you're looking at something and it becomes palatable. In the earlier works, the adolescents seem sweet and innocent, but they're being portrayed as doing these malign acts. Their youth and looks betray what they're doing or make it visually palatable.

“Every culture has their own absurdist little tales to prevent kids from doing what they shouldn't”



In Tin Drum, the boys are all asleep and about to be summoned by a drummer. There are also some rats at the bottom of the photo. Is this a nod to the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin?

Maybe a subconscious one. I wasn't really thinking of that – I wanted to show that even though things seem quite ordered, there is this gritty underbelly to it all.

I mention this because, in the tale, the piper drives out all the rats from Hamelin and then, because the town didn't pay him for doing that, he seeks revenge by driving out all the children. So the tale symbolises the departure of childhood, and in the Septemberists, for the first time, you use young men instead of adolescents.

It's funny because I didn't know the whole story. It's often the case with fairy tales I refer to that I only know parts of the story and I mix them with parts of stories from other cultures and that's why they end up being such a weird hybridisation. I don't know if that subconsciously seeped in, but it seems really great. I love that you told me that. It's pretty perfect.

The photos where you use clones of yourself have a strange effect on the viewer, because the scenes are immediately recognised as an artifice. So although the images are quite grabbing, they give the viewer something to distance himself intellectually. How does your more recent work explore notions of artificiality?

If you look at the *Landscape* series, or the *Shelter* series, or even the *Septemberists*, some things initially seem believable, but then they fall apart. *Greenhouse* is shot simultaneously from the outside and the inside. In *Sleeping*, the vanishing point in the rafters is kind of skewed off to the right, whereas the vanishing point of where the boys are sleeping is skewed off to the left. Also, part of it is shot from above and some of it is shot from below. When you look at it for a while it starts to reveal it's own artificiality in a way that you maybe can't put your finger on but you still know it's not quite right. That's something I'm interested in: putting things together that undermine the way we normally see things.

Anthony Goicolea's new work will be on show at Postmasters gallery, New York, from 28 April until 2 June. Please visit www.anthonygoicolea.com.

All works colour photographs (C-prints mounted on aluminium, and laminated, edition of 9). All images courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York

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