

JOSEPH SANCHEZ'S SOFT LIGHT

Joseph Sanchez
Artist

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When speaking with Joseph Sanchez it is clear that he thinks deeply about how his paintings play with light. But, as it happens, he often finds himself painting in the dark. In traces of ambient light, he is able to distance himself from the world of corporeal objects and embrace the drift of time. All this to activate the unconscious inklings of his hand and its sudden movements. The results last only a few minutes, rarely over an hour, but sometimes no more than fifteen. Upon completion, these painted archives of spontaneous gesture are then revisited the following day in his studio, namely as an opportunity to reflect upon what happened and make sense of it, both aesthetically and spiritually. If adjustments are needed, they are usually done so using *chiaroscuro*, the old European technique of manipulating light to create the perception of depth. We know from science that light is comprised of photons that behave like a wave. The undulation of these waves is merely an expression of energy and they vibrate across the surface of Sanchez's paintings.

In his manifesto on Surrealism, André Breton cautions that "experience itself has found itself increasingly circumscribed."¹ His words insinuate that the phenomenology of daily experience, of being in the world and finding oneself among it, is measured by logic and rationality. (Breton's proposal appears less than a decade after the start of the First World War, during which he worked in a French mental health facility treating patients with "shell shock," among other conditions). While this is a broad definition of the kind of "waking state"² that Breton sought to delegitimize, it correctly applies to the way that Sanchez's paintings attempt to reconcile spontaneous gesture with his singular worldview. As such, they rigorously map his connectivity to time and place and people, his unanimity with the land of the Americas, and his sanguine communication with the spiritual world. "I use the word 'spir-

itual,'" he writes, "to describe those things that aren't tangible to us but we know that are there [...] My paintings are windows to other dimensions."³ They also show, in an uncompromising way, that the subliminal minutiae of everyday life is worth communicating.

Seventh Generation Baby (2019) and its sister painting, *Ancestors Talking* (2019), are produced around the same during his 2019 studio residency at Portage College in Lac La Biche, Alberta. The similarities between them are somewhat conspicuous and inscribed across their lurid surfaces. Peering in, looking closely, Sanchez's brushwork imitates the howl of wind. We stumble across silhouettes, objects, and spirits oscillating amongst sweeping black lines and twisting forms. The works apply a tripartite colour palette of softened reds, blues, and yellows, the groundwork of all colour theory, in fact, and which harken back to the Modernist tradition of Alexander Rodchenko, Piet Mondrian, and others. Looking closer still, fleetings images of faces, bodies, and flora reveal themselves in Sanchez's phantasmagoria then quickly disappear as the eye moves from one side of the painting to the other.

Sanchez's body of work can be approached a number of ways, but it is tricky to separate the formal qualities of his paintings from the autobiographical elements that motivate them. Considering that he gifted himself with the moniker "Surrealist" at the age of thirteen, the nuances of his mind's viscous workings, its cryptic dreams and uncanny thoughts, have been embedded in his practice for decades. To this end, his near-total fragmentation of the picture plane can be interpreted as a metaphor for seeing the world as a permutation of energies and experiences. During the creation of *Seventh Generation Baby* (2019), in particular, he remembers that a number of students gathered in his studio most days and looked on in curiosity from over his shoulder. In the course of their conversations, laughs, and in their gaps of silence, each student contributed to actualizing the painting in some way. Accordingly, the act of painting moves beyond its media and material to strengthen the bonds of community, fulfilling Sanchez's own promise to listen and share his teachings with younger generations.

His swift, curvilinear lines cut over and under themselves in a poetic deluge of free association. The title of the painting itself, *Seventh Generation Baby*, is in reference to the seven generations philosophy of sustainability. In effect, the philosophy calls on the human beings alive today to consider how their actions towards the natural world, each other, and themselves impact ensuing generations. A stanza from his recent automatist poem offers evidence that Sanchez struggles with the potential of 'future' itself, especially in light of our current geologic period, what scientists call the Anthropocene. Though consensus varies, it can be defined as a gauge that shows the extent to which human beings have impacted Earth's ecosystems enough to cause grave and perhaps irreparable damage:⁴

We must leave something
 For the generations coming
 or
 Have we crossed a threshold that
 There is no repair for our violations?⁵

⁴Here Sanchez observes how the beginning of the end of the world is at stake in our generation. From this perspective, paintings such as *Seventh Generation Baby* cull from different historical and ancestral knowledge to generate a grim apparition of our present condition and, simultaneously, hopeful visions of the future. It is both a painting of beauty and tragedy, a dire admonition that we may have crossed a threshold to no return.

The paintings from the Lac La Biche period are products of time spent inside the Boreal forest as well as a reflection on the forest's recent past. In his words, they veritably reflect "feeling the land" and are "filled with all the energy of the northern forest."⁶ They are, he says, a visual manifestation of energies and experiences offered by the land. Only a few generations ago, the Boreal forest thrived under the care of its original stewards, Indigenous tribes including the Dene, Cree, Anishinaabay, and Mi'kmaq. Yet today, and as a caustic symptom of colonialism, it is scared by gravel roads, clear-cutting, and oil exploration. In this view, Sanchez's incarnations of line and movement take on new and unexpected inferences. If the work is about the forest then it must also "speak to the destruction of our planet, our Mother Earth."⁷

Before he travelled North to partake in the Lac La Biche residency program, Sanchez produced a painting to commemorate the birthday of his close friend, the artist Alex Janvier. *Feb. 28th, Alex's Birthday Commemoration* was produced in Sanchez's Sante Fe studio on the date of Janvier's birthday. It is as much a homage using pigment and paper as it is reflective of their transcendent connection spanning many decades. He and Sanchez remain the only living members of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. (PNIAI). Joined by Daphne Odjig, Norval Morrisseau, Carl Ray, Eddy Cobiness, and Jackson Beardy, the PNIAI officially formed in 1973 to challenge attitudes that art produced by Indigenous artists was 'handicraft' and therefore isolated from the matrix of contemporary art. Soon after arriving in the North, when Sanchez was not working in the residency studio, he ventured roughly 150km east to visit with Janvier in Cold Lake. They shared meals together, sat and talked, and participated in sweat ceremonies. *Feb. 28th, Alex's Birthday Commemoration* functions as a critical exploration of his unconscious mind's associations with Janvier. This may be the reason why, unlike other works from this period, it takes the shape of a circle, while the waves reference the signature liquidity of Janvier's later paintings. Above all, however, it is a painting about love.

Spirit of Mother Earth (2020) is expansive, glazed numerous times with transparent colour to forge a gentle patina. Similar to his dedicative work for Janvier, this painting was also created as a poetic homage to Sanchez's "favourite earth Mother" and fellow PNIAI member Daphne Odjig, who passed on in 2016.⁸ We encounter an abstracted representation of Odjig, laden with potential meanings. During his automative meditations of his beloved friend and mentor, he appears to have symbolized her transition from life to death to the spiritual plane. Is this why her head is surrounded by both an anthropomorphic face and a human skull? The theory is emphasized by the muted red glaze employed throughout the composition, which is representative of our flesh and blood, but appears to slowly wash away as entropy takes over. Undoubtedly, she is not alone since various skewed and crooked faces swirl frenziedly like the embers of a fire. Their meaning is abstruse yet disquieting in tone. Despite this, Odjig's silhouette stands defiant and tall in the centre of the painting, confronting Sanchez (and the viewer) straight on without pause. Following its competition, Sanchez reflects on the painting and ponders if "her spirit [was] sending me some guidance, warnings, messages?"⁹ Ultimately, though, it attests to the verve of Odjig's memory in his mind and in the minds of others, as well as the body of work she left us, brimming with life.

Finally, Sanchez's paintings represent different conceptions of time and space, as well as energies and experiences, that curtail and collide on two-dimensional surfaces. In 1902, French mathematician Jules-Henri Poincaré published a study on the mechanisms of scientific inquiry where he posited the belief that, "There is no absolute space [...] There is no absolute time."¹⁰ In a handful of words, Poincaré was able to change our understanding of the universe, while questioning how all matter, how all things, is perceived. Before the work went on to influence Albert Einstein's theory of special relativity in 1915, which proposed how large objects like the Earth distort space and time, Pablo Picasso unexpectedly received the book as a gift. It is a coincidence that he did so while working on what is considered the proto-Cubist painting (and a forebearer to Modernist abstraction), *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.K.R.) (1911).¹¹ Sanchez's paintings share a deep affinity with the Cubist approach and other cultural movements in the early 20th century, Surrealism included, in that they are preoccupied with representing reality and lived experience on flat surfaces. What we see in his work is the simultaneous gesture of energy, experience, and even spiritual direction recorded and reworked beyond convention. His paintings are invitational, not confrontational. They unfold space-time in front of our eyes, all at once, to reveal that which we fail to see, what he calls the stuff of "other dimensions."

Notes

1. Andre Breton, "Andre Breton (1896 – 1966) from the First Manifesto of Surrealism," *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, new edition, eds. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 447.
2. André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 15.
3. Joseph Sanchez quoted in Kyle Muzyka, "Permanent Art Display for Indian Group of Seven to open in Alberta College," CBC News (4 April, 2018), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/indian-group-seven-joseph-sanchez-1.4603977> (accessed 13 May, 2020).
4. For more information on the Anthropocene, see: Colin N. Waters, Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin Summerhayes, Anthony D. Barnosky, Clement Poirier, Agnieszka Galuszka, Alejandro Cearreta, Matt Edgeworth, Elre C. Ellis, Michael Ellis, Catherine Jeandel, Reinhold Leinfelder, J.R. McNeill, Daniel deB. Richter, WillSteffen, James Syvitski, Davor Vidas, Michale Wagreich, Mark Williams, An Zhisheng, Jacques Greinvald, Eric Odada, Naomi Oreskes, Alexander P. Wolfe, "The Anthropocene is functionally and stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene," *Science* 351.6269 (8 January 2016), <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/351/6269/aad2622> (accessed 14 May, 2020).
5. Joseph Sanchez, "Press Release," Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art (date unknown).
6. Joseph Sanchez, "Re: Writing and Trade Information," e-mail message to Matthew Ryan Smith (4 May, 2020).
7. Joseph Sanchez, "Press Release," Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art (date unknown).
8. Joseph Sanchez, "Re: Writing and Trade Information," e-mail message to Matthew Ryan Smith (4 May, 2020).
9. Joseph Sanchez, "Re: Writing and Trade Information," e-mail message to Matthew Ryan Smith (4 May, 2020).
10. Jules-Henri Poincaré, *La Science et L'Hypothèse*, translated in 1913 (Paris, FR: Flammarion, 1986), 111.
11. Maurice Princet worked in insurance and held an interest in math and science, which he later discussed with his avant-garde artist

friends such as Picasso, Georges Braques, and Marcel Duchamp. See: William R. Everdell, "Space-Time Cubism, *New York Times* (6 May, 2001), <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/06/books/space-time-cubism.html> (accessed 12 May, 2020).