

## The Last Man Standing

By Jess Frost  
(07/14/2009)

In “The Last Man Standing,” an exhibit at the Fireplace Project in Springs, Anthony Goicolea is not only the last, but the first and in some cases the only man standing. In 1999, the Brooklyn-based artist began producing photographs using staged environments and digitally manipulated self-portraits to create the psychologically and formally perplexing tableaux that are in this show.

The term “directorial photography” was coined by A.D. Coleman, the critic, and best describes this genre. It is readily associated with postmodern photographers such as the shape-shifting Cindy Sherman, but its roots and influences can be traced to surrealists such as Ralph Eugene Meatyard as well as commercial fashion photography like that of Irving Penn.

In the majority of these works, Mr. Goicolea assumes the role of photographer, director, and stage designer, but his most conspicuous role is that of performer. Using his own unusually youthful physique (he was almost 30 when he began these works), the artist creates a cast of pubescent characters, often dressed in uniform, who appear virtually identical on the surface.

“I was working on the idea of this archetypal kind of notion of boyhood and that journey into adulthood, and so I was trying to base myself on this universal character,” the artist said. This generic look helps to magnify the temperament of each teenager depicted. From nose-picking wimp to class clown, bully, or daydreamer, Mr. Goicolea acts out each cliché with an accuracy that pinpoints the power and vulnerability of adolescence.

One of the exhibit’s most striking images is “Pool Pushers,” where more than 25 young Speedo-clad versions of the artist stare out at the viewer from an extraordinary bathhouse shot in New Zealand. The color, composition, and form result in what feels like a combination of a “Twilight Zone” still, a L’Uomo Vogue advertisement, and a 19th-century painting like Ingres’ “Le Bain Turc.”



“Pool Pushers,” above, shows how Anthony Goicolea uses his own face to portray the power and vulnerability of adolescence.

Another of the artist's more iconic works exhibited is "Fraternal," which features two brothers seated for a traditional family portrait. The room is hung salon style with ornately framed portraits of the boys, the effect of which is shrine-like.

Although subtle, the crux of this artwork is the positioning of the boys, who, although they appear individually in the images hung on the wall, are presently merged together at the leg, implying that their intimacy has manifested itself in the fusing of their flesh.

In Mr. Goicolea's works, it is as easy to be seduced by the horror as by the beauty. In the video "Act of Contrition" is a single shot featuring a steady stream of the artist's well-groomed clones, who step in and out of an elevator styled as a confessional.

The uniformed boys each exercise the rituals of confession: rosary kissing, kneeling and blessing themselves, one by one, over and over. As the video progresses, the whispering of sins and Hail Marys builds into a collective cacophony until finally the boys dissipate, the machination stops, and the video ends.

Ritualistic behavior is another recurring theme in his work, from the gothic formality of a forest tea ceremony, in "Teaparty" from 2004, to the combination communion, wedding, and funeral in "The Septemberists." The red hoodie, a ubiquitous garment in Mr. Goicolea's work, is not unlike that of Little Red Riding Hood. The combination of mass ritual and uniformed attire further suggests the presence of a cult or sect and the surrender of individuality.

These early works often feel like highly stylized fairy tales. As frightening as they are fascinating, the loosely woven narratives are rife with the issues of alienation, abandonment, and abuse, all readily associated with childhood development and rites of passage.

According to the artist, much of his early work is about our culture's obsession with youth and "the ideas of vanity, self-love, and self-hate." His ability to pass for half his age, combined with a keen sense of social observation, has allowed Mr. Goicolea to examine and expose the unspoken rituals and fears of boyhood.

In the midst of making these portrait-driven works, the artist became progressively more interested in the environments he was constructing, particularly after his red-cheeked subjects had left the scene. "Although most of the images are devoid of actual human presence, there is a strong sense of humanity established through the wake of their aftermath" Mr. Goicolea wrote.

Some of the landscapes are subtle, like a stairwell carved into an ice-blue glacier, and others are overstated, such as "Cherry Island," which depicts a saccharine garden scene overrun by an absurd assortment of exotic animals.

The human element is again subverted in an image titled "Lake" from the "Sheltered Life" series. Here a misty cemetery is the main character, and the performative element takes place within a tent, where the obscured figures might as easily be wrestling as undressing.

Confident that he had explored the subject of the teenage psyche, Mr. Goicolea has more recently begun exploring concepts of family history and identity in his work. He was a first-generation immigrant, so much of his upbringing was filled with stories and images of his family in Cuba, which contradicted his suburban upbringing in Atlanta.

The same family mythology that influenced the personal isolation in his earlier works is now focused on cultural alienation and a bittersweet nostalgia for a past the artist never experienced beyond family photos and oral history.

Although touted as a "retrospective," the show is closer to a brief survey, presenting a concise selection of some of the artist's most sought-after photographs and videos.

Although the progression of Mr. Goicolea's work and ideas from 1999 to 2006 may not be completely transparent in this exhibit, the individual images stand on their own and encourage further investigation of the artist's career. It is exciting to see how the narratives in each series develop and mature. For anyone who is interested, Mr. Goicolea has an extensive Web site with what appears to be a full account of each.

The exhibit can be seen through Monday.