



ARTIST

Don Gregorio Antón

TITLE

A Donde Vas? (Where do you go?)

DATE

2006

DIMENSIONS

7.25 in H x 9 in W

MEDIUM

Mixed Media

IMAGE NOTES

Translucent Image on Copper (with black wooden display stand)

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2007.070

CURRENT LOCATION

3D-Anton

DON GREGORIO ANTÓN

BORN

1956

BIRTHPLACE

East Los Angeles, CA

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Mexican-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2006
Main Gallery, 2007

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 142
Contact Sheet 145

BIOGRAPHY

For a more recent CV or bio please visit the artist's website, <http://www.dongregorioanton.com>

In the word's of Cameron Woodall, Don Gregorio Anton "explores the possibilities of the spirit and enhances our awareness of its existence. ... His work deals with the meaning of self and the spirit within and around that self." Don creates mystical retablos that look like sacred objects in themselves. They are intimately small and sit on little stands to be viewed individually. Each retablo is one of a kind. During his stay at Light Work, Don touched us with his generosity and humility. Don's exhibition record spans coast to coast, as well as overseas. His work can be found in collections across the country, including the Baltimore Museum of Art, Consejo Mexicano de Fotografica, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and more. He has given lectures and workshops throughout the country. "He now serves as an Emeritus Professor of Art and lives and teaches in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico."

circa 2018

ESSAYS

Don Gregorio Antón's photographs radiate compassion like the work of no other living artist I know. They are filled with an intense humanity we usually find only in a few documentary photographers and photo-journalists—the Gene Smiths, Salgados, and Nachtweys. Antón is, however, a different kind of photographer, though one could call his work a document of the spirit, the journal of a sacred quest. But his photographs are not even photographs in the usual sense of the word—those captured moments of a past reality, be they taken by someone's uncle at a family picnic or by Paul Strand in a French village. His images, though equally real, are constructions of psychological realities, portrayals of mythic fears, sacrifices, and hopes. Such photographs come as knife-thrust-shocks because they carry emotions we're unused to seeing in imaginative and seemingly imaginary work. We expect great documentary photographs, those instants seized from the most desperate flow of reality, to be tortured acts of compassion. We know they wounded their photographers as they took them. We don't expect that in other kinds of photography, yet Antón's work affects us in the same way as he interweaves and counterpoints his themes of hope and suffering. These themes have been yoked in art before: some of the world's greatest altarpieces were created for hospices so that the dying might be comforted in their suffering. Grünewald's 'Isenheim Altarpiece' depicts a crucified Christ whose wrecked body could be mistaken for one of the plague victims who would have gazed upon it, and van der Weyden's 'Last Judgment' at the Hospices de Beaune is far more beatific than terrifying. Antón's art, like theirs, is about hope because he knows our reality is suffering. Siddhartha knew the same thing and recommended we quench our desire. But Antón knows desire courses through us as elementally as our blood, so in his art he suffers with us. On one of his 'Retablos' he wrote, 'I know what howls in the night, . . . not the screams of demons . . . No, it is the sound of longing that breaks upon the rock & bone, against light sliced by endless night. I have been dragged through all of this, down every dark path, past every senseless act, over every stone that twists & turns the spine & curves the soul.' When I first saw Antón's work—and that was years before he began his series of 'Retablos'—I could see he was a rare, saintly artist who, like Fra Angelico, dispensed solace with comfort. But his vision is radically different from Fra Angelico's for it derives not from the Tuscan sun but from the more sober Mexican moon. In that reflected light of many Antón photographs, death, suffering, and dark gods with no taste for drink light as wine still hover near. The ghost of Bacchus yet haunts Italy's Catholicism, but it is Huitzilopochtli that broods over Mexico's. Antón knows this, and his 'Retablos' blend the physical form of a somber, Mexican religious and folk expression with his own dark, mystical imagery. Traditionally painted on a small sheet of tin and hung in one's home, retablos are devotional paintings, personal altarpieces, usually of the Virgin, Christ, or a saint. They are pleas, cries to saints for help when we are hopeless and feel there is no aid. They were and are little plaques of hope, encouragement, and strength. Antón took the retablo, an object of cultural and emotional significance to him, and, in a stroke of genius, reinvented it within his own art. He changed its form from tin to enameled copper and its content from the saints of the Church to those of his own pantheon. He makes us think of William Blake, another mystic, who did a similar thing in his Prophetic Books, which like Antón's 'Retablos' are visual and verbal mythologies of the spirit. Look at the retablo in which Antón kneels before the deer. Hear his words: "I have made my way, the subtle distances of fear & hope, & have breathed the fine sediment of ash that lingers around such silent things." In the presence of such art we are in the presence of the sacred. John Wood ©2007 Don Gregorio Antón is a professor of art at Humboldt State University in Arcata, CA. He participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in June 2006. His work may be viewed at <http://www.dongregorioanton.com/>. John Wood has written and edited over thirty books, including seven award-winning ones, on photographic history and on such contemporary photographers as Sally Mann, Joel-Peter Witkin, Flor Garduño, Luis González Palma, Brigitte Carnochan, and Eikoh Hosoe. He co-curated the National Museum of American Art's photographic exhibition 'Secrets of the Dark Chamber,' is editor of '21st Editions,' and for thirty years taught at McNeese University where he was director of graduate studies in English and held professorships in both English literature and photographic history. CONTACT SHEET 145: "For now, I release this form into the impression of things and their meanings. I loosen the burden of questions, of thoughts I knew and the images they created. No form of loss is here, no yearning or distraction, as nothing is lost when nothing is owned. I breathe this into position, into the trajectory of ordinary time and the total sum of solitudes." (1) Don Gregorio Antón Don Gregorio Antón's work has been described as "radiating compassion," (2) "at once tender and forceful, hushed and thunderous," (3) and as an "opportunity to see the richness and undeniable power of hope." (4) Sometimes the work is reminiscent of distant ancestral memories, while at other times his images remind of dreams experienced with a clarity that can only be felt in the moment of waking. To enter the mystical world of Antón's retablos it is necessary to set aside the assumptions that guide us through our daily lives. We have to surrender to his evocative images that are unfamiliar to our mind, yet resonate within our souls. Antón creates a world full of mystery, where life and death are not binary opposites, and where emotions are assets as powerful and tangible as a vault of money might be in our normal existence. In Antón's world pain and fear coexist with bliss and euphoria, neither able to survive without at least a little of the other. Antón's work is likely to provoke a different response in every viewer. The retablos can be appreciated for their enigmatic beauty, their haunting narratives, or their intense spirituality. Where we find ourselves in our lives may be where we find ourselves in Antón's imagery, so it is up to each person to find his or her own

way to his world. Antón has tightly woven his cultural identity into this body of work. Through the imagery and text of each retablo he describes and reforges his connectedness to his roots in Mexico. The writing on some retablos is easy to read, while the words on others fade into the background like melodies half remembered. Not unlike diary entries, the writing is deeply personal and vulnerable to exposure. As he writes on one of his retablos, "Every word, every image is inked in my blood. Each page burns, consumes, and carries the weight of memory, the weight of life." (5) The work describes a mysterious and otherworldly existence that most of us experience only through dreams or nightmares. Linear time does not exist, and raw emotions are laid out in the open. Antón's world is not defined as pain and suffering, though both appear frequently in the images. Rather suffering, pain, and fear are invited and accepted as players within the timeless cycle of life, along with bliss and salvation. To the Western eye Antón's world may seem like a primal realm. Most of us do not entertain such a non-threatening relationship with death and pain that we would invite corporal manifestations of these experiences to the dinner table, yet such is the case in Antón's images. On the surface, the work may seem dark and sinister, existing in sharp contrast of light and dark. However, light can only define itself through darkness, and rarely does human spirit shine brighter than within a world of sorrow and despair. In these retablos all emotions and experiences, beyond good or bad, coexist to create the fabric of human existence. Created on copper with a mixture of photographic images and paint, Antón's retablos are small and function as both two-dimensional images and sculptural objects. The artistic form of retablos, also called ex-votos, has been part of Mexico's tradition since the seventeenth century. The votive paintings on wood or metal panels were hung behind the altars of Catholic churches. Peaking in popularity in the mid-nineteenth century, retablos remain a tradition to this day. Unlike santos, which were painted portraits of saints, ex-votos were traditionally public expressions of gratitude in acknowledgement of specific saints, such as the Virgin of San Juan. The text on each retablo described a miracle credited to the saint, or a request for such a miracle. Over the centuries, retablos have captured the magnitude of a people's most trying experiences, including the recovery from serious illnesses or injuries, the survival of accidents, fights, or other life-threatening situations, or an unexpected resolution to financial or legal problems. Retablos, the painters of retablos, were usually self-taught and rarely signed their work or considered the retablos to be works of art. As Antón explains, "there was no need to claim them as art as they served a higher purpose." Frida Kahlo described retablos as the truest representation of the people's art. Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera collected them and many still hang in their house, which is now a museum. Antón reinvents retablos as metaphorical documentation of the spiritual struggles of mankind. He uses the visual language of ex-votos to create existential tales of human existence that speak of spiritual searching, suffering, hope and despair, life and death. This overarching concept is expressed in the title, 'Ollin Mecatl', which refers to a Nahuatl expression for the measure of movements. The artist also translates this as velocity of change. He describes the concept as the "instances of time and tragedy and the reconciliation of hope... the core measurements of things lost and found, evidence of thought, and the resulting sum of solitude." In Antón's retablos all distractions of daily life have been removed to distill the essence of mankind's passage through time. Antón uses himself as the model in most images, but the retablos are not self-portraits per se. While he expresses deep seeded, highly personal emotions that may loosely include auto-biographical aspects, he also creates a message of universality. His personal path leading to this work is one that sidestepped many perils and temptations. He avoided dangers that led some of his closest childhood friends to violent deaths, crime, and addiction. While not setting himself apart as being better or more fortunate than others, Antón humbly describes that he simply chose another path. He was not to go the route of his friends, and photography, which he discovered at age seventeen, was to change his life. Born into a family of laborers, he has done with art and passion what his parents had to do with physical work. He still tells of his father's reluctant approval of his son's artistic endeavors. Antón's vision was born from the fruits of his family's labor, and in return he has dedicated his life to teaching and passionate giving. It is not easy for us to enter Antón's world, nor is it free of pain or regret. By contrast, his world makes our comfortable existence seem void of life and passion. Having walked within Antón's world and opened up to its intensity, we may find our view of our daily existence altered. As if returning from a trip abroad, it is not entirely certain that we will be able to readjust to our old ways of life that had previously seemed so entirely our own. Such is Antón's gift to us. Hannah Frieser ©2008 1 Text from an untitled retablo by Don Gregorio Antón featured on page 7 of this catalogue. 2 John Wood, *The Light Work Annual 142* (2007): 52. 3 Cyrus Smith, *The Total Sum of Solitudes: An Offering to the Viewer*. Exhibition catalogue, First Street Gallery in Arcata, CA, 2004. 4 Paul LaRosa, "With the Gestures of the Mythic: The Rituals of Don Gregorio Antón," *Journal of Contemporary Photography V* (2002): 29–33. 5 Text from an untitled retablo by Don Gregorio Antón featured on page 5 of this catalogue. NOTE FROM THE ARTIST: What is important right now is not who I am or why I've made these retablos. No, not at all. What matters most to me is present in the hands that hold these pages, the eyes that see these words, and in the moments lived by you. Nothing else really matters. Why? Because what you have in your hands is only so much paper and ink, but you, the nature you occupy, are far more important. You are a single event that will never happen again in the history of the world. This is far more meaningful. Do you understand what I am trying to say? Whether you see it or not and regardless if you care, your image reflects in everything around you. Your thinking, your beliefs, all that you have learned are mirrored in the things you see, and upon the surface of what is in and around you. How you react to this determines how you will see, and how you see will be how you'll live. To be aware of this and to do it well, your own truth is essential, your own understanding is critical. Not in what you see, but in how you see and the meanings it creates. That is why I am reminding you of what you own, of what is necessary to complete the act of seeing. Your mind, your thoughts, and your feelings are essential for this. Without you, without your intelligence, without those emotions that create meaning, this essential act is useless. It is not naïve to think so. It is crucial to understand that you must add a part of yourself to all that you see for learning to take place. Learning is not in what you see, but in how you see it and what should come from it. Whatever you approach in your life, whatever mysteries there are, all of them will need you as a vital part of their unfolding. We seem to forget this, forget to remember how important it is to own our world, to discover our thoughts, and to believe what is uniquely ours. I believe that there is more to seeing, more to what we are taught our eyes can see. Our eyes should be allowed to breathe, taste, and listen. They should be courageous and permitted to go further into any space that has not known their shape before. Why? Well, this is something you must decide for yourself. But I believe it is imperative for you to name your world, to not separate yourself from its existence. Just know that it takes time to grow into your eyes, to become use to what they have to teach you. Why? Because our world so desperately needs you to decide this. It needs minds capable of dynamic thought and compassion. It needs those who can see below the surface of things and who can reflect on their meanings so that others may learn their own. Like you, meaning has its own unique velocity and movement in each of us. Look for it, chart its terrain within you and believe, regardless of experience, regardless of intelligence or culture, your right to see. Excerpt from gallery handout Don Gregorio Antón is a professor of art at Humboldt State University in Arcata, CA. He participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in 2006. His work can be viewed on his website at www.dongregorioanton.com. Un/Common Threads In organizing the exhibition "Un/Common Threads: Selections from the Light Work Collection," curator Kaylen Williams went beyond a superficial perception of diversity that has become pervasive in the United States. As a 2007 study by the sociology department at University of Minnesota revealed, many Americans happily endorse diversity as a nebulous concept; however, many are still at a loss to discuss the specifics of diversity and its related sub-topics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, and sexual orientation. (1) "Un/Common Threads" harnessed the power of photographs, using a visual language to voice these all-important specifics of diversity. Williams used the visual language that coalesced among the various images to stimulate dialogue about the complex challenges of a pluralist culture in ways that addressed both broad and

personal implications. Exhibiting together the work of artists such as Myra Greene, Dawoud Bey, Clarissa Sligh, Yuri Marder, Hank Willis Thomas, and Binh Danh, among others, certainly highlighted the individuality of their concerns and aesthetic choices. Yet this varied grouping also served a common goal by giving voice to specific, possibly contentious topics surrounding diversity. To emphasize this unity of purpose, Williams combined the "Un/" in the exhibition title with "Common Threads," acknowledging the connections that can occur between diverse artists and the viewers of their work. Many of the photographs in "Un/Common Threads" manage to evoke the idea of connections and also simultaneously turn it on its head by asking viewers to re-examine preconceptions that they may bring with them into the gallery. Ellen M. Blalock's photograph, "Jermane," a portrait of a black teenage father pictured full-frame in an intimate embrace with his baby daughter, may provide a good example of this phenomenon. Those who find themselves jarred by the tender presence of emotion displayed by the young African American father must question and explore the sources of any biases regarding age, race, and gender. This is the inherent power of such photographs—when a viewer accepts involvement in questioning such preconceived connections, he or she is more inclined to get involved in talk of answers that can lead to a deeper understanding of identity and diversity. Many of the artists whose work curator Kaylen Williams, a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, selected for "Un/Common Threads" engaged the topic of diversity from a personal perspective. Regarding her impetus for organizing the exhibition, Williams explains, "This project was of particular interest to me because of my own ethnic background of Japanese and Western European ancestors. Many students on campus are, like me, a mix of diverse cultural backgrounds. My Japanese mother was adopted by Americans and never had an opportunity or the encouragement to explore her racial identity." In culling this selection of images from the Light Work Collection, Williams invited viewers of Un/Common Threads to explore the diversity of identity and to participate in the critical mass that follows an expansion of consciousness. Laura A. Guth (c)2008 1. Joyce M. Bell and Douglas Hartmann, "Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of 'Happy Talk.'" *American Sociological Association: American Sociological Review* 72, no. 6 (December 2007): 895–914. The exhibition was on view in the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery from January 16 to April 19, 2007. It was curated by Kaylen Williams. The exhibition included work by the following artists: Don Gregorio Antón, Dawoud Bey, Ellen M. Blalock, Binh Dahn, Sylvia de Swaan, Lonnie Graham, Myra Greene, Saiman Li, Yuri Marder, Nzingah Muhammad, Osamu James Nakagawa, Suzanne Opton, Kanako Sasaki, Clarissa Sligh, Tone Stockenström, Lida Suchý, Hank Willis Thomas, Linn Underhill, and Carrie Mae Weems. When she curated the exhibition, Kaylen Williams was a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University. She graduated in 2007. Laura A. Guth is an artist and educator. She lives in Manlius, NY.