

# Di punto in bianco (All of a sudden)

Horace Brockington

Image: Carolina Raquel Antich, *Pinfloi (Pinfloi)*, 2005. Acrylic and confetti, 25 x 25 cm.  
Courtesy of Florence Lynch Gallery, NYC

The development of young Latin American artists in the context of recent artistic practices reveals a host of themes and conceptual strategies. For many of these practitioners, their work provides critique from multiple viewpoints with emphasis on tradition, modernism, conceptual art and recent theory regarding postcolonial, feminist theory and gender/identity politics and their impact on rich Latin cultural heritage. As a result, many of the works are loaded with hybrid cultural, linguistic and artistic intents. No longer concerned with making art through formalist strategies, Carolina Raquel Antich joins a core group of young artists who are interested in extending painting outside the past in order to investigate new truths.

Antich currently lives and works in Venice, Italy. Born in 1970 in Roasario, Argentina, a country with a rich history of modernism and one that, early on, embraced minimal and conceptual practices in art, Carolina Raquel Antich is a young artist who utilizes a range of artistic strategies of painting, and contemporary video/animation with its performative aspects in order to address a host of socio-political issues.

Antich has exhibited extensively in Europe and South America. Her recent exhibitions include a solo exhibition at Florence Lynch Gallery, New York, and the Francesco Girondini Arte Contemporanea, Verona. Antich's art has recently been included in the Venice Biennale, in the Giardini's Venice Pavilion, and the exhibition project "Altre Lilith Le Vestali dell'Arte-Terzo Millennio" at the Scuderie Aldobrandini in the Comune di Frascati, Roma, which also included artists Vanessa Beecroft, Bruna Esposito, Tracy Moffat, Mariko Mori, Orlan, Lucy Orta, and Margot Quan Knight, among others. She has received numerous awards including the Prize for Young Italian Art (2005 Finalist), Premio per la giovane arte italiana 51st Edition Venice Biennale, Premio Bevilacqua La Masa 87 mostra collettiva (2003), Corso Superiore de Arti Visive, Fondazione Ratti Como and Grant (1998), perfezionamento per giovani artisti, Fondazione Proa, Buenos Aires (1995).

Carolina Antich's art works are an often ironic and amusing commentary on memory, more specifically, the transformation from childhood to adult. They are poignant statements about life and art. Childhood becomes representative of a type of "marginalized" outsider in a worldview. Through a rather stripped-down vocabulary, Antich aims to address the existential tragicomedy of human affairs. Shifting the vantage point to that of childhood situations the artist is able to subversively mine potential in the seemingly

ordinary. For Antich, childhood becomes a socially constructed reality, as opposed to a real-life experience. Antich's art is grounded squarely on the ideological divide between those who insist that every child should be treated as some uniform entity, and those who advocate the unique and imaginative experience of the individual regardless of age. In her paintings, figures of children openingly enact the eternal quest for identity that begins at birth and goes on driving adults even as society insists that grown conform.

The re-conceptualization of childhood as dark has recently emerged as a revisited preoccupation for many artists, although it has often been the domain of photographers such as Wendy Ehler, or Sally Mann and, to a lesser extent, in the darkly subversive raw imagery of the adolescent, self-absorbed youths of Larry Fink. Steven Winn has noted that childhood has become a boundless new frontier in the arts, of seemingly infinite magnitude, emotional density and thematic complexity. Childhood is now presented in new and unconventional views of innocent, preciousness and predatory corruption. The concept of the childhood experience has been deeply complicated by challenging and sometime uncomfortable ways. Broadcast media, television, new sociological investigation in early child development have further pushed new concepts of childhood to the forefront. Children now occupy and increasingly share our collective imaginations.

Carolina Antich's imagery however, is never to be read as direct rendering of childhood nor are they documentation of her own autobiographical memories. Rather they function, as Barbara Pollack suggest as "Moment(s) when we manage to re-inhabit a memory, reliving the complexity of keeping a stiff upper lip as we endure a broken arm...To Antich, her work represents a "negotiation" between the child and adult space, the constant comparison between the inside and outside, vulnerability and endurance that allows us each to survive childhood."

Immediately upon encountering Antich's drawings and paintings, figures appear as innocent things, vulnerable beings. But on closer inspection, they possess qualities that are adult-like in character, and precocious indifference. Underneath their rather charming exterior, there is a tension that is hard to resist. Antich offers dual views of children and childhood that subtly get played out in her drawings and paintings. These implied undercurrents are revealed in works such as *pinfloi* (2005) and *Comparsa (lei)* (*Extra-She*, 2005), in which child-like female figures are presented with closely cropped hair and swimming eyes. While there is a suggestion of childlike wonder of possibility, the figures also evoke an uncomfortable sense of adult sophistication through the figures' facial expressions. Behind their silky eyelids and enormous, half-shadowed cloudless infinite eyes, something strange is occurring; both a fragility and a plush darkness.

Her still-like figures—in which children are depicted in artificially posed gestures and expressions and are often simply dressed and placed against rather stark backgrounds—act as an important referential marker for the

artist. Her children are painted against blank empty backgrounds that leave little to distract our eyes from their simple gestures. For Antich, these backgrounds are not a space of innocent idyllic purity, but are the places where figures with subtle gestures inhabit and where Antich's true thematic intent rests. Upon close observation of the work, it is apparent that something is amiss. Pollack has suggested that observers have noted that in these spaces Antich's figures become symbols of commentary on contemporary situations, which eradicate our association of childhood with innocence.

Antich images often reveal metaphors for adult behavior. In the video animation *Drummer Boy*, consisting of 14 animation sequences, the very subtle movement and change is almost anti-animation, there is unsettling narrative of war, complete with gun shots, and voices of soldiers in the battle field. These works are clearly not a simple childhood fantasy. In *Drummer Boy*, her animation technique supplies a rather disturbing undertow in which the animation amplifies the tension that often more subtle in her drawings and paintings. Here imagery runs from impish to teasing to sinister. While her *Drummer Boy* may seem strangely familiar to the adult gaze, on further exploration there is a deeper, darker metaphor behind his gestures. We are momentarily invited into the strange interactions occurring in the scenes.

Antich's contextual play between childhood and memory has greater semiotic implications in the dialogue of differences. While she declassifies and subverts the visible appearance of events, her work is loaded with conceptual inferences in the reconstructing of the very contexts in her work she deconstructs precise meaning. Antich's images speak to the codes of gender and age difference and the tactics of representation that enabled them. She enters the world of children determined to embrace and transcend the unbridled terrors and dark-side impulses of children, but always in very allusive ways. Through her paintings, Antich wants to confront the viewer to consider the complexity that makes childhood both exhilarating and threatening, places loaded with a subcontext of turbulence, swirling expressionism as evident in the work *I malandrini (Urchins, 2005)* in which the figures re-enact almost military-like composition. Her intent becomes to depict—through rather minimal painted strategies—the essential human struggle between dependence and autonomy, community and individuality, expressed most richly in children.

Stylistically, Antich has explained her manner of drawing as child-like in order to make a clear distinction between how children conceive space, and express three dimensionality in two-dimensional space. Her approach is a to re-create that notion of childlike space that remains rather restricted and ultimately surreal. They therefore intentionally equally painted with compositional strategies devoid of dictates governed by laws in corrected modeling and spatial perspective. Not only does this approach push the work towards a folk or self—taught tradition, but reinforces the notion of child-like aesthetic. However these are rather earnest, improvisational approaches

against the subversive for, upon greater inspection, it is clear Antich has quite a command in handling materials, and her surfaces are far more complex than they immediately appear—as evident in the highly rigorous surfaces of the painting *Ifiglii di Robert Kennedy* (*Robert Kennedy's Children*), and *Volare* (*Flying*).

Deliberately working with a rather limited palette, figures exist in Antich's works almost like objects, in which the reality of the drawn or painted figure offers uncommon views of forms that spur our imagination. The simplicity of the forms endows the figures with a type of alienation from real expression. As such these children become host to metaphorical musing on re-constructed memories and imagination. The viewer must look carefully at each work to discover relationships between things and their representation.

Carolina Antich's works operate between reality and representation, at once minimalist in forms and conceptual in intent. The viewer must constantly renegotiate the engagement of his/her perception of the work as a physical object to a perception of the work as an artifice or illusion. In rather simple compositions she wants to create a dialogue between representation, translation, explanations, and imminent revelation. Antich is highly aware that there are various ways of perceiving and understanding memory and as such she establishes a vocabulary that operates between child-like consciousness of expression in the context of a painterly surface endowed with conceptualism strategies. By this approach in her painting a spatial world is re-created and remains elusive—affirming nothing but making allusions to various possibilities.

But she remains a painter that is deeply concerned with the greater potential of her craft. Content can never override craft. Although through meditations on childhood experience, Antich aims to return the representation of human experiences with a specific cultural and historical climate, to the center of the argument of art, she is equally confident that painting is uniquely equipped for this purpose. As a result, her approach is not only given to the subject of the works, but importance to their drawn or painted surfaces and dynamic interplay between the two. Antich's uniqueness is her understanding of the richness of a minimal theatrical situation which painting can still achieve. Because she works with very limited narrative devices, essentially the strange position of figures, frozen expressions, lack of motion, the painterly strategies open up a range of suggestion in order to allow the viewer to project emotion and meaning to the context. Intentionally minimal in structure, the reductive aspect of the works ever neutralized their narrative quality.

But her works are never formalist paintings. Antich's art wants to reclaim the dynamics of an inner life. The world in her paintings and animation are intentionally hyper-reality, both eccentric and highly meditative. However, underneath this rather simple surface, Antich offers the viewer a profound critique which aims to bring to light the division between world of children,

their cultural, physical, and psychological adjustment to the real world, and the distinction society imposes—clearly defined cultural, social markers that demand that the individual create a center, and move everything else to the margins. Using her own background as a point of entry, Antich is able to draw from her own history to create images that in fact have a certain honesty.

Carolina Raquel Antich works must be viewed as part confession and part artist's role-playing. In capturing important truths about childhood in her art works, she also is moving towards a re-creation of self. Through this process the artist is able to give meaning, understanding, and order to the world.

James Stewart has remarked that the cult of innocent children is a relatively recent invention and that during the period of the Renaissance in art, children were often depicted in ways of far more nuance and psychological complexity. Through her paintings Antich aims to explore this often-contradictory baggage that whether we choose to acknowledge its presence or not, it often shapes our individual adulthood.

For while understanding its wonder, Antich has no intention of sentimentalizing, or sanitizing childhood's experiences, as Pollack notes:

"Other have credited Antich with conjuring up child-like metaphors of adult behavior, making war, for example, more close-up and personal by putting the weapons in the hands of children. The complicated truth is that childhood does not need the amplification of media imagery and new headlines to be a terrifying experience in and of itself. Antich seems to understand this fundamental truth, or more pointedly, remembers her own childhood truths, and lines her seemingly simple renderings with an aura of inescapable tragedy."

Carolina Raquel Antich's works must be viewed in the context of her many contemporaries such as Sally Mann, Loretta Lux, and Rineke Dykstra who seek to reclaim the complexity of childhood in more honest ways. These artists reveal an important aspect of childhood, for the most part in some rather conscious ways it acts as the platform on trying on character rather indifferently that help to ultimately shape, empower and define a self. This masking often gives us both the endurance and vulnerability to survive. Antich and her contemporaries move against accepted theoretical definition of childhood in order to make it fundamentally more relevant.

*"See, we grew up together. I am Ruby and she is Pearl as we was jewels. We use to always say that. We use to act out how these jewels would act. I was always strong, deep red and solid deep. She was brown but was all lightness and frail and innocent, smooth and weak and later I realized made out of pain."*

J. California Cooper, from *A Piece of Mine*, Wild Tree Press, 1984

