

REDHEADED PECKERWOOD BY CHRISTIAN PATTERSON

A PHOTOGRAPHIC TRYST IN THE SKIN OF A TEENAGE MURDER DUO

WRITTEN BY CAROLINE PHAM

MURDER HAS LONG BEEN A POINT OF SORDID FASCINATION FOR SOCIETY. We recoil in horror at grisly scenes in film and literature, only to press closer, desperate for every detail, empathizing with killers, trying to understand their psyches, and rooting for justice (or simply feeling a sense of *Schadenfreude*). Art photographer Christian Patterson explores the captivating nature of violent crime in *Redheaded Peckerwood* (MACK), a deconstructed narrative of 19-year-old Charles Starkweather and 14-year-old Caril Ann Fugate's infamous three-day killing spree across Nebraska in the late 1950s, which left 10 dead, including Fugate's family.

Presented as a pictorial crime dossier, the book is largely an assemblage of Patterson's photographs, both of locations and items central to, or inspired by, the story. Curiously, each picture stands alone, save for a list of minimal captions at the end of the book. This lack of explanation,

along with the inclusion of inserted, replicated documents found on the victims, feed into Patterson's deliberate attempt to "force the viewer to participate" and piece together the evidence set before them. "It forces you to move something, to peel something back, to uncover something, which is exactly like the detective process that I went through," he explains. Thus, the reader examines imagery ranging from desolate wooded trails, a torn-out receipt from Jensen's General Store, a bullet-riddled windshield, a throng of frenzied press—and is made to separate reality from myth, the past from the present, the deranged from the commonplace, to form their own narrative.

Initially intrigued by a viewing of Terrence Malick's 1973 fictionalized version of the events, the cinematic magnum opus *Badlands*, Patterson retraced Charles and Caril Ann's exact route. He drove 500 miles

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from start to end, spending a week or so in Nebraska each January, from 2005 to 2010—January being the month in which the duo's rampage occurred so many years ago. For Patterson, society's longstanding intrigue with murder is simple: "What lies at the heart of all of it is people's fascination with their own mortality. Murder reminds us of our own mortality and our own vulnerability."

An accompanying booklet by Luc Sante and Karen Irvine offers illuminating essays on the details and societal implications of both the crimes and Patterson's montage. The essays explore the notion that popular culture has romanticized the beaten-down youth, calling particular attention to the 1950s, an era dripping with teenage rebellion and angst (n.b. *Rebel Without a Cause* and the beginning of rock 'n' roll). *Redheaded Peckerwood* acknowledges the allure of desperado lovers on the run, though it is starkly contrast-

ed with the inevitability of an undesirable end, which is far from fairytale. Charles Starkweather was sent to the electric chair in June of 1959, while Caril Ann was sentenced to life in prison (later paroled in 1976).

While unconventional, Patterson's piecemeal approach is mesmerizing, and decidedly calculated. His inclusion of images with apparent light leak "mistakes" and multiple exposures slyly points to the deceptive nature of photography. Patterson finds the various ways in which photographs may be interpreted intriguing—indicative of how we readily accept what we see in a captured image as truth. "It might be a situation where something was reenacted, or staged, and you're misled in some way," he explains. "With crime stories, you're always looking for evidence, you're always looking to establish fact. You're looking for truth, but you're using a very untruthful medium to find it."



"Oregon Trail Bottle," (2007). Acrylic on archival pigment print.