

# CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE

PDN explores how some of the most influential projects—and people—in photography this year rose to the top.

Understanding how and why certain photographers and certain bodies of work manage to stick in our collective consciousness is a challenge in today's what's-next culture. Photographers now have more ways to get their work seen, but it's also harder than ever to know what kind of exposure is most likely to help them achieve their goals. So what makes a photographer's style or a body of work stick in people's minds? How does their audience grow and expand? How does an idea in the head of a photographer spawn ideas in the heads of viewers and, eventually, make a mark on the medium?

In an effort to answer these questions we looked at six photographers and projects that seemed to be on everyone's mind this year, and considered how and why. We also spoke with a handful of people—from editors to curators to branding experts—to find out how they discovered the projects they've championed.

BOOK

## CHRISTIAN PATTERSON'S REDHEADED PECKERWOOD

BY CONOR RISCH

THE 1,500-COPY FIRST EDITION of Christian Patterson's book *Redheaded Peckerwood*, published by MACK, sold out in January 2012, roughly two months after it debuted at Paris Photo in November 2011. A photographic retelling of the story of a two-month, multi-state killing spree undertaken by Charles Starkweather



In his highly acclaimed book *Redheaded Peckerwood*, Christian Patterson utilized different photographic styles and historical images and documents to create a psuedo-history of a killing spree.

© 2012 PDN, Photo District News, Nielsen Company, All Rights Reserved.

and his 14-year-old accomplice, Caril Ann Fugate, in 1958, the heavily researched book combines Patterson's original photographs with historical documents and images, creating a subjective pseudo-history that plumbs the intersection of fiction and non-fiction storytelling.

Almost immediately after its publication, the book was included on the 2011 "best book" lists of several critics, noted collectors and other photography book experts. Patterson has since been busy with exhibitions and talks, and *Redheaded Peckerwood* has received numerous plaudits as well as a Rencontres d'Arles Author Book Award. Media outlets as diverse as *The New York Times*, *Vogue Hommes* and American Public Media's "The Story" program, among many others, have also featured it this year.

There is little doubt that *Redheaded Peckerwood* is an accomplished work of art—MACK books publisher Michael Mack compares it to Michael Schmidt's *U-NI-TY*, Paul Graham's *A Shimmer of Possibility* and Alec Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi* in its ability to carry the book form "into a new space." But Patterson also believes other major factors have contributed to the book's success.

The true crime subject matter and the themes of "teenage angst and love and confusion and escape and violence and the loss of innocence" have fascinated and engaged people, Patterson says. And building awareness of the project among friends and colleagues has also played a major role.

Mack first saw the work in 2010 when a mutual friend recommended it to him. Patterson showed Mack an artist's book version of the project, which he'd produced in an edition of ten, and sold and showed to people to gin up interest for the project. Mack, who receives a lot of recommendations—only a small number of which pan out—knew immediately that he wanted to publish the book. "There was a certainty in terms of his editing," Mack says. "The story that he wanted to tell was there and clearly visible through the sequence, through the structure and through the visual elements."

Patterson shared work from the project on his website and through social media as it was in progress. He also made and shared videos and photographs of his creation of the artist's books, showing his network the printing and binding process. The artist's books were included in book exhibitions and sold by Robert Morat Galerie at AIPAD in 2011. When he went on press as MACK printed the trade edition of the book, he documented and shared that experience as well.

A mutual friend was also responsible for introducing Patterson and his project to writer Luc Sante, who wrote one of two

essays that accompany the book. "Luc was really great, very responsive, and was on board long before I had someone to publish the book," Patterson recalls.

Karen Irvine, curator of the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago, wrote the other essay. Patterson connected with her early in his work on the project through Chicago-based artist friends who knew Irvine. When he would travel to Nebraska—where Starkweather and Fugate began the two-month killing spree that would end in Wyoming—to work, he stopped a couple of times in Chicago to talk with Irvine about the in-progress project. "She knew the work very well before the book was completed and I just made a point of continuing to share it with her," Patterson recalls. "As it turned out, she was putting together an exhibition that dealt with crime, so this work turned out to be a perfect fit." Some of the *Redheaded Peckerwood* work appeared in "Crime Unseen" at MoCP in October 2011.

Patterson had come to know Jeffrey Henson Scales, the photography editor of *The New York Times's* Sunday Review section, while he was working for William Eggleston as an archivist. Patterson told Scales about *Redheaded Peckerwood*, and in September of this year, Scales published the work in the Sunday Review, which Scales says was a bit of a risk because of the highly conceptual nature of the book and the difficulty of representing the project using a limited number of images. "We got a lot of positive response, which was refreshing because that one was very different," Scales notes.

Stories in places like *The New York Times* have continued to increase awareness for the book, the second edition of which was released in April 2012. "Everything started in the photography world and it has slowly expanded from there," Patterson explains. "I've been invited to speak to classes that are not photography classes. They're painting classes, philosophy classes, anthropology classes, so there are other people in other worlds that seem to be taking an interest in the book."

The success of the book notwithstanding, Patterson believes it's fair to call *Redheaded Peckerwood* a breakthrough for him as an artist. "There are certain people who knew of me or knew of my earlier work, but I feel like I have grown and matured as an artist and reached a new level with this work," Patterson says.

"Coming from somebody who wasn't known prior to the publication of this book, it's been a great success by people seeing it, looking at it, reading it and realizing, 'Wow this is really something quite special,'" Mack says. "That's down to his work and the way that he's seen it."