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Object Lessons: A Conversation with Christian Patterson



Sissy Spacek in *Badlands*, 1973. By permission of Criterion Collection.

*Lovers on the run tend to travel light. Generally speaking, in our collective imagination, accoutrements tend to be limited to car (probably stolen), gun (also stolen), clothes on their backs. Yet Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate (captured in 1958 after a violent shooting spree in Nebraska and Wyoming that left eleven dead) become legend in part by leaving behind a physical trail. Of the multiple films inspired by the Starkweather-Fugate killings, Terrence Malick's 1973 *Badlands* (newly released by the Criterion Collection), is the one that—even as it takes dramatic liberties—most explicitly focuses on*

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these tangible objects. Kit and Holly (Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek) cart along a birdcage, a copy of Kon-Tiki, and a Maxfield Parrish painting; the film's art director, Jack Fisk, filled one character's house with \$100 worth of random pieces—a jar of black widows, a giant ball of twine—he'd bought from the relatives of a dead man. Just prior to their capture, Kit buries a few of their belongings, described in deadpan voice-over: "He said no one else would know where we put 'em, and that we'd come back some day, maybe, and they'd still be sitting here just the same, but we'd be different, and if we never got back, well, somebody might dig 'em up a thousand years from now and wouldn't they wonder." Nearly forty years later, [Christian Patterson's](#) 2011 book of photographs, [Redheaded Peckerwood](#), continues down a similar path. Already in its third edition, with a thoughtful introduction by Luc Sante and curator Karen Irvine, Patterson's is a work that defies the easy definition of photo book, approaching as it does the Starkweather narrative from a number of vantage points: newspaper clippings, interviews, ephemera. The photographs of bits of evidence, or of things belonging to the killers and victim—a hood ornament from the getaway car, the teenage Fugate's stuffed toy poodle—have the aura of a saint's relics. Tucked into the binding of the book are more souvenirs, reproductions of documents related to Starkweather (a store receipt with a poem printed on its reverse side; a typed list of dirty aphorisms). Even those things that are not directly related to Starkweather and Fugate take on the air of authenticity; the effect of seeing all these effects, in the context of the photographer's present-day mapping of their journey, is transcendent and shocking, the objects themselves acting as witnesses.

What struck you most about Badlands when you first saw the film?

I was taken with the film in every way. Visually, it was just so damn beautiful, with its big, painterly skies and endless, romantic landscapes. And thematically, well ... it was one hell of a crazy story. Sheen and Spacek were great too. It's a great film.

What were some of the first pictures you made that appear in the book? And when you arrived in Nebraska, what were some of your early impressions?

House at Night and Ray of Light stand out in my mind. The former is the first of my photographs that appears in Redheaded Peckerwood and the latter is one of the last.

This story is quite well documented, and parts of it are well preserved in these various archives. But after all of my research, I felt that there was still plenty of room for me to step into this story, to attempt to reconstruct, then deconstruct, and ultimately fragment it. A new vision for the work began to form in my head—the idea of presenting this true crime story through a mix of photographs, documents, and objects, challenging the viewer to sift through the information, to decipher the visual clues—to deal with the crime story in a similar way an investigator or researcher would.

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House at Night, 2007.

How did those you approached in the course of your research respond?

The Starkweather-Fugate story is one of the biggest news stories in the history of Nebraska. There, the story is one of those events like the Kennedy assassination— anyone who was alive at the time remembers exactly what they were doing when the story first broke, and they remember that week of terror very clearly. Lincoln, Nebraska, is a relatively small city and Nebraska is a sparsely populated state.

For all of these reasons, it's not hard to find people who have very personal connections to the story— family members of the killers and their victims, people who worked for the newspaper or police department, or who were somehow involved in the eventual trial. There's still a lot of raw emotion surrounding the story. Some people are very eager to share their stories. Other people just want it all to go away.

I was also able to find people in the possession of various personal objects outside official archives— photo booth portraits of Caril Ann, Charlie's cowboy boots, and even the car they drove as they fled Lincoln for Washington State, among other things. The people who now own these things were initially cautious about sharing them, but once I was able to explain my intentions, they shared them enthusiastically.



Map of Lincoln (Erased), 2010.

Objects related to killers, whether actual evidence or simply things they touched, weirdly take on the quality of relics, and they certainly do in *Badlands*, from the things Kit and Holly carry with them on their journey to the comb and lighter that Kit, in his moment of celebrity, gives away like party favors or souvenirs to the officers after his capture. In your book, without pointing out what is “authentic” and what is not, you depict both actual ephemera and places related to Fugate and Starkweather, as well as things that look like they might have been theirs, or touched by them. What was your thinking behind the ephemera you chose to photograph and that which you include, in reproduction form, in the book?

As I said, I researched the story intensely. I read every book I could get my hands on and took note of anything of interest or potential. I began with factual information—dates, times, and places of the crimes, and every other known location involved in the story. But I also included many random ideas—long lists of visual ideas, objects, random words and phrases, anything that painted a picture in my mind.

Two of my favorite scenes in *Badlands* involve the objects that Kit and Holly carry with them—the scene where they bury a metal bucket containing some of these things and launch a red balloon, and the scene towards the end of the film when Kit is on the run alone, stops at a gas station and opens up a suitcase from the car. We catch a glimpse of clothes, cigarettes, and a magnifying glass.

My friend Luc Sante says murder charges everything it touches, and he’s right. I’m fascinated with the idea of the object as relic or talisman—an object taking on significance as a result of something other than itself.

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Redheaded Peckerwood open to I Pledge Allegation, 2010.

But you also handled one of the weapons, and you saw Caril Ann’s photo diaries, as well as walking into and photographing some of the murder sites, correct? What was that like? Did it have a markedly different feel than some of the other places you visited on the trip?

Yes, these experiences were chilling and strangely thrilling. But most importantly they really brought home the fact that I was dealing with something very real, and very serious, not just something that I had seen in a movie or read about in a book.

One of the most resonant images in Redheaded Peckerwood is that of a house aflame, burning down to its foundations. You didn’t set a house on fire, as Malick memorably did in the film—when Kit turns over a gas can on Holly’s piano and they flee her childhood home—but that scene certainly comes to mind. It feels like it may have been one of the perfect “right place, right time” accidents that happen in art—like another famous shot in Badlands, when Malick pulled over the car he was driving Martin Sheen in one day, grabbed the camera, and captured Sheen looking out at the moonrise, a shotgun slung under both arms. What’s the story behind your burning house photograph, say, versus a later image of a fire blazing at the base of a tree?

I allowed my ideas to come from almost anywhere, including my own imagination, so some of the images are very close and true to the story while others are more mythical or atmospheric in effect. Badlands includes the famous fire scene, but the Starkweather story involved no fire at all.

The House on Fire image was one of those dumb luck “right place, right time” moments. I was driving through Nebraska on a very cold, snow-covered day and saw a plume of very black smoke on the horizon. I drove toward the smoke and when I arrived at its source I found a small house burning down, in the middle of nowhere. I arrived before the small local volunteer fire department and was able to get off a few shots before the house was completely gone.

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The Tree on Fire image was shot in a different place, and in another year. The Nebraska Land Management Bureau has a prescribed burn program where well-controlled fires are deliberately set to clear brush and debris on the land, mostly in farming areas. I happened to catch a crew of burners finishing a field at the very end of a day. They had piled up some debris at the base of this tree, set it on fire, and driven away. But what I like about the image is that you can't tell if the fire is just starting or ending.

I included the fire images in my work because they are obviously a fitting metaphor for the destruction Starkweather caused as he traveled through this same landscape.



House on Fire, 2008.

Malick wanted the movie to “set up like a fairy tale, outside time.” Your pictures also have a timeless feel—actual documents are mixed in with contemporary photographs, period objects photographed in present day are shot as if they’re intended to appear dated. I’m interested in your choice to make them consciously anachronistic.

I often try to make photographs that have a classic or timeless feeling. I don’t say this as a value judgment, but a visual one. I often try to avoid time signals in my images—things that give away the time period in which the image is made.

Malick made *Badlands* in 1973—only fifteen years after the Starkweather spree. I made *Redheaded Peckerwood* fifty years after the fact, so I had to work carefully and strive for a certain timeless look. I think I was successful, with one exception. There is an image called *Telephone*, which includes a push-button telephone that didn’t exist in 1958. But I felt the image was so eerie and powerful that it

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overcame that concern. When I saw that phone, I just imagined that if I picked up the receiver I'd hear the most horrible news.



Telephone, 2008.

On the other hand, you did heavy research not only into the news stories surrounding the actual Starkweather story, but also into the vernacular of the period. Some of those examples are incorporated as ephemera bound into the book. And the title, *Redheaded Peckerwood*, comes from an insult lobbed at Charles Starkweather when he was growing up, right? How did what you discovered in your language research inform the book?

I've always been a fan of slang, and I became fascinated with the teenage slang of the time period— words and phrases like cherry, cool as a cucumber, daddy-o, drop dead twice, and kooky, just to name a very few. I made lists of these words and phrases, just like my lists of more obviously visual ideas. For the longest time, I didn't know what to do with them. But I finally came up with the idea of painting the words and phrases by hand, in a traditional sign maker's typeface evocative of the time, utilizing colors that directly complemented those contained within my photographs.

One of the most successful things about the book is the way humor pervades the violence. Was that always there, or was there a point when you felt like you were deliberately introducing a sort of macabre into the narrative?

Much of the perceived humor in the book comes directly from the story. I didn't make it up. "The Election Is Over," a political poem, and "Confusais Say" [sic], a list of dirty limericks, both came from

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one of the victim's wallets. "I pledge allegation" was actually a phrase uttered by Starkweather when he meant to say the Pledge of Allegiance. It's a beautiful mistake.

I did try to have a little fun with the titles of some of the work—Shit from Shinola, Stairway to Nowhere, Switcheroo, and The Writing on the Wall, to name a few.

I wasn't so interested in being funny—I was interested in the strange feelings that result from the combination of other feelings, how humor and sadness can combine to be bittersweet, and how humor and death or violence can combine to be macabre.



Shit from Shinola, 2010.

Let's talk about the way that signs and advertising language work in *Redheaded Peckerwood*. In the film, Holly's father, played by Warren Oates, is a stern and forbidding man who kills her dog as punishment, yet paints sunny, bright advertising signs and billboards for a living. When written language appears in your photos in this book, it has that sharp-intake effect of delivering both laughter and shock—the painted words *What happens after the SHOT was fired?* sequenced just before a photograph of a bullet-riddled car, for instance. The last photograph in the book is of the words *Let's go out and get a STEAK*—with painted flames smoke arising from the word *STEAK* in a way that's both funny and haunting.

I'm known more as a photographer, so it's important to point out that the signs were designed and painted by hand, and only photographed for the purposes of the book. There are three signs in my book but I created several more that are sometimes shown in exhibitions.

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The “Fruit Cake 98 Cents” and “Ask for Ethyl” signs were inspired by similar signs that appear in a black-and-white police photograph of a gas station that I discovered in an archive. Starkweather robbed the station, stole a stuffed toy poodle for Caril Ann, then kidnapped and executed the attendant.

The end piece, Let’s All Go Out and Get a Steak, was supposedly said by Starkweather’s father moments after his son was sentenced to die in the electric chair. How’s that for macabre?



Stuffed Toy Poodle, 2007.

Redheaded Peckerwood has just come out in its third edition—congratulations! Tell me about the additions and changes in the later editions. Do you think it will keep evolving in future editions?

The second edition has improved reproductions incorporating different inks and varnishes, and the booklet tucked into the back of the book includes a few courtroom sketches of Starkweather. Between the second and third editions, I learned of a man who was working on an old house near Lincoln, Nebraska, and discovered a stash of photographic negatives and prints hidden inside one of the walls of the house. I spent a day tracking him down on the phone, and he very kindly sent the prints to me. Most of the images were gruesome crime scene photos, and I’ve never wanted to include anything to gory or sensational. Surprisingly, this story continues to unfold, now more than fifty years later. The third edition includes one of the photographs found in the wall of the house, along with three new archival images and one new insert—a facsimile of a postcard with a message written on the back.

I made this work to share it, and I see no reason to not share new material as it comes my way—as long as it adds to the work in what I feel is a compelling way. I can’t imagine a fourth edition of the book but if that opportunity presents itself I’ll consider adding any worthy new discoveries to the mix.

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