

Los Angeles Times

Christian Patterson on the Tenuousness of Knowing



All photographs serve as evidence, but not necessarily in support of the most obvious questions put to them.

Often they seem more like pointers than fixed points, arrows extended in multiple directions. Front-loaded with credibility, though, photographs bear a weighty load of expectations, some reasonable, many not. As filmmaker Errol Morris has written, "Photographs attract false beliefs the way flypaper attracts flies."

"Redheaded Peckerwood" (2005-11), a potent, time-release project by Christian Patterson, is based on a specific incident, the 1958 murder of 10 people, including relatives and friends, by Charles Starkweather, 19, and his girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate, 14.

Their killing spree in Nebraska and capture three days later in Wyoming has spurred several films (most notably "Badlands") as well as a Bruce Springsteen song.

Patterson's take, now at Rose Gallery, is a radical redefinition of the documentary photo-essay as fragmentary, episodic, speculative, unanchored to the time and facts of the presumptive main event. It centers less on information about the particular crimes committed by the teenagers than on knowledge itself as a tenuous prospect.

Ollman, Leah. "Christian Patterson on the Tenuousness of Knowing," [Los Angeles Times](#), 18 Jul 2013.

The show and its accompanying book keenly meditate, through photographs and assorted other objects, on extrapolation, projection, fabrication and imagination as the raw ingredients of visual perception.

The images borrow from familiar idioms. There is a small black-and-white archival news shot of Fugate in custody, grasped by her forearm, teary and defiant. There is a crisp, color, studio-style still life of a Zippo lighter, full-flame. There is a large, Eggleston-like photograph of a rumpled bed, its sheets and pillow a sallow brown.

And there are word paintings, a la Ruscha and Baldessari, lettered like commercial signage: "Helluva Mess," "Fruit Cake 98¢" and stacked in a column, "Drop Dead Drop Dead." There are also sheets of heavy paper stock that have been blasted by a shotgun, leaving ash-rimmed holes.

Every image is trailed by a story, or at least bits of one -- details related to the killings and their aftermath, or to Patterson's own endeavor to piece the tale together and yet affirm its provocative value as fragments that will be assembled in different order and with different emphasis in every viewer/reader's mind.

The work "... From Shinola" is one such glimpse. The photograph shows a bottle of black shoe polish tipped and spilled, a reference to the dye that the redheaded Starkweather used to disguise himself while on the run. The liquid seeps out of the bottle in an inky, calligraphic spread, much like a Rorschach test image that in itself means nothing but takes on whatever significance is projected onto it.

And the title's snippet of the old colloquial expression reminds us that with a random inkblot, as with Patterson's pictures and, by extension, nearly every photographic image, we don't know the difference between fact and fake, art and artifact, what we see and what we know.

Rose Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 264-8440, through Aug. 3. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.rosegallery.net

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