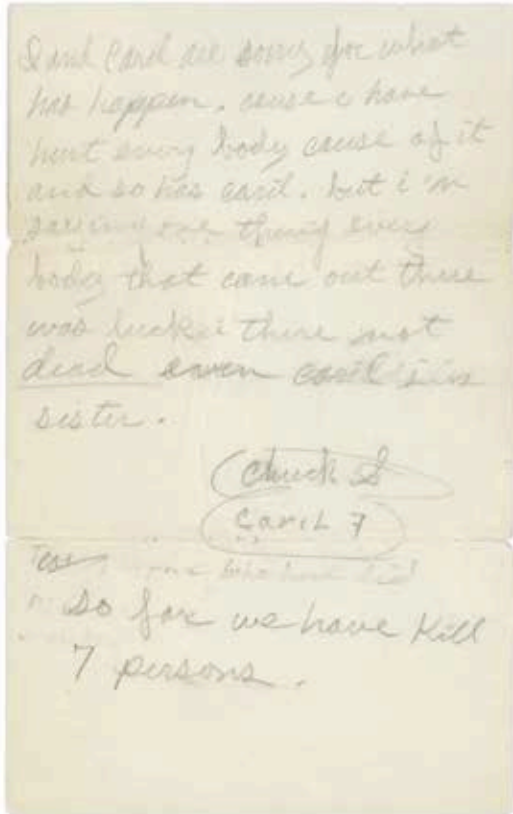




Shotgun Blast #2 2010



Confession Letter, 2007 (Note: This is an excerpt)



Charlie's Bloody Ear, 2007

Christian Patterson: On the case

Interview by Tiffany Jones

Setting out on a road trip to follow the trail of an infamous American crime spree that took place 50 years earlier, Christian Patterson's original intention was to revisit relevant sites and document the landscape. He soon realised that the real world had moved on and so changed his approach, taking facts from historical case research and using those as sparks for interpretive image making; leads for presenting this mysterious story in new visual ways. The resulting book, *Redheaded Peckerwood*, set the photographic world abuzz; an experiential object that compels its audience to take part in an investigation, trying to determine fact from fiction by navigating a series of Patterson's illustrated clues. Now in its third edition, each follow-up book has added new material for consideration. This spring Patterson was awarded a coveted Guggenheim Fellowship, which means a new and highly anticipated project is in the works.

Could you talk a bit about your approach to photographing? Are you methodical from the outset concerning a project you want to create, the pictures you want to make? Or are you led more by intuition?

When I first began making photographs, I was anything but methodical. I was a wanderer, working intuitively, plucking moments from the real world. I still love that way of making photographs but over time I have become quite methodical. I like to work both ways, and different ideas call for different approaches.

With a larger project like *Redheaded Peckerwood*, I start with a concept but the early stages of making the work involve a lot of experimentation and wandering. Then slowly, over time, I begin to identify certain layers, motifs and ideas to be explored and refined.

Over ten years ago you went to Memphis to work with William Eggleston. How did that come about, and in what ways has that period influenced you? I was interested in William Eggleston's work so I flew to Memphis and visited the Eggleston Artistic Trust. I became friends with Eggleston over the following year and eventually proposed that I move to Memphis to work as his archivist and assistant. Thankfully, he agreed.

Memphis was a wonderful experience. I worked closely with Eggleston, had access to his archive and was intimately involved in the Trust's work. >



'I relished the isolation of Nebraska and the satisfaction that came with each of my detective discoveries'

< I learned by observing a successful artist. I also spent my free time making my first a series of photographs, *Sound Affects*, which takes Memphis and its music as its muse.

I am proud of that work but it bears a certain influence. And as I became increasingly conscious of that influence, I decided to return to New York and begin making work that was completely my own. That is how I got started on *Redheaded Peckerwood*.

Redheaded Peckerwood is based on the crime story of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, a killing spree that happened more than 50 years ago and inspired a number of films including *Natural Born Killers* and *Kalifornia*. You have said that in addition to working as a photographer to create this body of work, you also worked as a detective. Could you tell about your experiences in chasing this story of the past, and the complexities you faced in telling your version of events, visually? What initially attracted me to this work was its story; a true crime story involving the heavy themes of teenage angst, young love, confusion, panic and fear, escape, violence and death - and ultimately, the loss of innocence. It also involved travel through



Day of Terror, 2007



Storm Cellar, 2008



House of Cards, 2010

the vast, empty landscape of Nebraska in the dead of winter. I knew that it would be a difficult undertaking, working 50 years after the original events of the story, completely after the fact, in an unfamiliar landscape, under harsh conditions.

But I needed this challenge, and I relished the isolation of Nebraska and the satisfaction that came with each of my detective discoveries. I researched the story intensely, revisited its crime scenes and other places of significance where possible, and searched for other traces of it that remained out there in the world. I met people along the way and found things that I never imagined I would find, including personal belongings and pieces of evidence that were never recovered by the detectives who originally worked the case. All of this came as a chilling and thrilling surprise.

For five years, I spent between seven and ten days working in Nebraska. I carried with me long lists of visual ideas and obsessively followed every lead and chased after every idea. If an idea eluded me one year, I'd pick up the case and continue my chase the following year. Finally, if I couldn't execute an idea in the field, I'd shine a light on it and interrogate it in my studio. And for the rest of those five years, I edited, re-edited and sequenced the work I had made, and continued my research and revised my lists.

The book is a reflection of this process. Its photographs, documents and objects are often highly specific and true to the story but are at other times highly interpretative and subjective. Oddly enough, I feel that all of my detective work brought more mystery back into the story. Not everything in *Redheaded Peckerwood* is what it may seem. What may appear to be old may be new. What may appear to be fact may (in fact) be fiction. >



Charlie's Boots, 2010

< Ultimately, I wanted the work to act as a more complex, enigmatic visual crime dossier — a mixed collection of cryptic clues, random facts and fictions that the viewer had to deal with on their own, to some extent. A certain amount of mystery was essential, as it is to any good crime story.

The case research involved must clearly have been time-consuming, but it's interesting to hear the time you spent actually making photographs over those years was just a small fraction of your work overall. It does suggest your ideas were drilled down and focused before opening the shutter. Were there many dead ends in terms of ideas you photographed that didn't get used in the book? Did you have strict editing criteria?

There were a few detours, dead ends and u-turns along the way, but that is often part of the process, and not an entirely bad thing — if you turn onto a random side street, you never know what you will find. But I continually reassessed my work and that helped me to maintain my focus.

I would not say that I had strict editing criteria, but I did always have a loose chronology and narrative of the story in mind, and that helped. I also had a standard that each piece of the puzzle had to meet. I did not include a photograph, document or object unless it was strong enough to stand on its own.

Developing your ideas in a studio allows for that element of control, which can be so elusive when working within the real world. The approach also fits so well within the framework of examining evidence. Did you specifically set up your studio as a need in response to your investigations?

I began working in the studio for two reasons. First, there were specific visual ideas that I was not able



Bloody Snow, 2008



'I wanted the work to act as a complex, enigmatic visual crime dossier - a collection of cryptic clues, random facts and fictions...'

to execute in the field and so I had to try to deal with them in the studio. Second, there were objects that were best dealt with as objects unto themselves, and not as pieces of a larger scene - and yes, this approach related well to the idea of pieces of evidence related to the crimes.

With the massive success of Redheaded Peckwood, you seem to have invested an incredible amount of energy in furthering the work over several years, long after your investigative pursuit came to an end and all the pictures were made. It must involve a lot of hard work beyond just being a photographer! Can you describe some of what is entailed in continuously promoting a completed project, while also trying to move on with photographing new and ongoing series?

I painstakingly produced this work over a long, five-year period so there was some advance awareness of the work I was making and perhaps some anticipation for seeing it. The book debuted at Paris Photo and received a great response; everything else took off from there. I think a lot of the work's success has occurred organically and through word-of-mouth.

I am also very fortunate to have made my >



You Can't Run Away from Anything, 2011



Broken-Down Door, 2006

'The new work will hopefully adventurously expand on the multifaceted approach I began to develop with *Redheaded Peckerwood*'

< book with MACK, a publisher who makes intellectually challenging books with some of today's strongest photographic artists. I think people look to MACK for challenging and stimulating work and anticipate their new titles. I also work with galleries who share and support my vision for my work in exhibition form. Each of these parties brings their experience, expertise and reputation to bear in sharing and promoting my work.

I have been very fortunate that *Redheaded Peckerwood* has been successful and well received. One thing that people never tell you is that if you are fortunate enough to achieve some success with your work, exhibitions, signings, artist talks and workshops can take up a lot of your time and make it challenging to have the necessary time to make new work. But we all make our work to share it with the world so I'm trying to take it all in stride and enjoy the experience.

I recently received a Guggenheim Fellowship to pursue my next work; I am excited about that and it is encouraging me to direct more attention to making new work.



Stuffed Toy Poodle, 2010

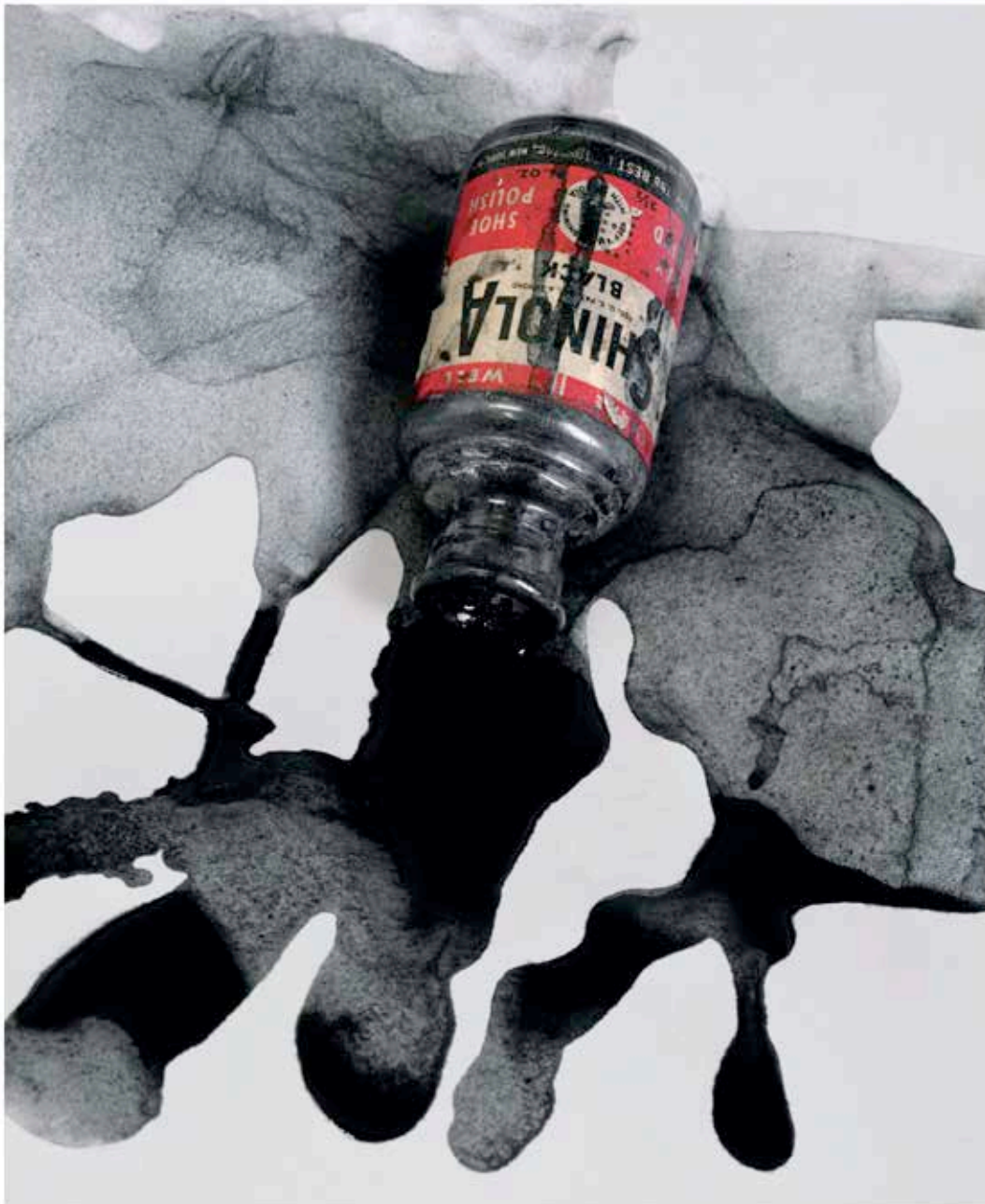
Congratulations on your Guggenheim Fellowship! At this stage can you see ways that your new work may evolve; different approaches, methods or presentation mediums that appeal to you now? Thank you. The Guggenheim Fellowship is based in part on my previous work, and in part on new work that I've proposed, which I really can't say too much about at this still very early stage. I will say that the new work will deal with a completely different subject matter, weave together several different conceptual threads, apply and hopefully adventurously expand upon the multifaceted approach I began to develop with *Redheaded Peckerwood*.

The upcoming booklet *Bottom of the Lake* is based in Fond du Lac, and you state that its purpose is to 'present an honest and clear picture' of this prosperous section of Wisconsin. Are you just a visitor to the area? How is it possible to represent what is 'honest and clear' if you are in essence just passing through a place?

I was born and raised in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, a small town with a name that is French for 'bottom of the lake.'

Since *Redheaded Peckerwood* came out I have been invited by a few publishers to make a new book, but I do not have any work that I consider ready for publishing. One of those publishers, Paul Schiek of TBW Books, coincidentally also grew up in Fond du Lac, though we did not meet until we both left home – I moved to New York and Paul moved to Oakland.

I decided to return to Fond du Lac and investigate the possibility of making new work for the book, and a series of fortunate coincidences led me to discover a few overlapping conceptual and visual threads to explore. The text on my website is appropriated from a document I discovered in a historical



Shit from Shinola, 2010

Images © Christian Patterson, courtesy MACK / mackbooks.co.uk

archive in Fond du Lac – a small pamphlet introducing the town to outsiders. I like the ridiculously serious tone it attempts to convey, but the work I made is not meant to be taken too seriously.

Making work in one's hometown is a photographic cliché – a trope or common and overused theme or device. I was very mindful of this and feel that the thematic layers and visual threads in this book are enigmatic and unexpected enough to validate the work.

It is a series of photographs, documents and objects that explores overlapping themes in a multi-faceted way. It has been nice to have a smaller project to work on, and with a deadline for making the work. In the end, I produced all of the work in the book in just one week. The book will be one of four books produced by four different artists for the next instalment of TBW Books' 'Subscription Series' and I believe that it will be available in summer 2013. www.christianpatterson.com