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CHRISTIAN PATTERSON AND ROSE GALLERY, SANTA MONICA

“Somebody like Christian Patterson comes out of the generation raised on conceptual artists like John Baldessari.”

ANNE WILKES TUCKER, CURATOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON, ON WORKS SUCH AS PATTERSON'S ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT *HOUSE OF CARDS*, 2010.

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REENVISIONING REALITY

FIVE PHOTOGRAPHERS PUSH THE BOUNDARIES OF THE MEDIUM BY USING FAUX DOCUMENTARY IMAGES TO CREATE A NEW KIND OF CULTURAL CRITIQUE BY RACHEL SOMERSTEIN

The photographs in *Blisner, IL*, the book Daniel Shea published under London's Fourteen Nineteen imprimatur last month, seem to depict an industrial American town that has fallen on hard times. Palimpsests of a once-vital public life show faded murals painted on brick walls, a blank marquee, dried roses in a red bucket. Most compelling is a plate that appears toward the book's end, showing two traffic signals hanging from a wire, glowing a yellow that looks almost red. In *Blisner*, the photograph suggests, a slow pace is indistinguishable from a full stop. On its face, the book reads like the epitaph of a once-bustling town. But a read through Walter Benn Michaels's essay reveals there is no such town as *Blisner*. Shea made it up.

Shea's project is a hybrid form of documentary and conceptual photography. Neither fakes nor composites, the images show real scenes, objects, and people the artist photographed and assembled to create a fiction—but a fiction that represents a reality, giving a face to vast regions of the deindustrialized United States and towns you've never heard of.

Cindy Sherman, of course, has long moved between fact and fiction, exploring notions of authentic self and performance to great success, while Joan Fontcuberta has been creating "hoaxes" and photographing them for decades. Like the work of other emerging photographers such as Richard Mosse, Cristina De Middel, Christian Patterson, and Sara Macel, *Blisner, IL*, questions the capabilities of photography as a medium. "Somebody like Patterson comes out of the generation raised on conceptual artists like John Baldessari," explains Anne Wilkes Tucker, curator of photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

The boundary pushing has also cropped up in popular media that blur the line between fiction and documentary. Most controversially, Kathryn Bigelow's film *Zero Dark Thirty*, 2012, provoked government censure in part because it was at once too true and not true enough. Hilary Mantel's Booker Prize-winning *Bring Up the Bodies*, also 2012, fictionalized the affairs of King Henry VIII's court so effectively it prompted *New Yorker* book critic James Wood to describe it as creating "a third category of reality, the plausibly hypothetical. It's what Aristotle claimed was the difference between the historian and the poet: the former describes what happened, and the latter what might happen."

In photography, the trend toward the plausibly hypothetical can be explained by a number of cultural shifts in news delivery. "Many documentary photographers are frustrated with the images that will run and those that won't," says Tucker. The limitations include boundaries on graphicness and the paltry number of images used to narrate a news story. Additionally, the mass media typically circulate only certain kinds of stories about certain places. "About Africa, you only get wars and starving children," says De Middel, who worked as a photojournalist for years before embarking on "The Afronauts," a documentary-fiction project based on a schoolteacher's

attempt to launch a national space program in Zambia in the 1960s.

Valerie Dillon, whose Dillon Gallery in New York represents De Middel, points to the culture's ever-growing obsession with transparency as another influence on this work. On the one hand, she says, technology has made it possible for people to comb through all kinds of resources in search of the real story. At the same time, "so much information we thought was a de facto truth isn't," thanks to whistle-blowers who have lifted the veil on the inner workings of corporations and governments—questioning, in the process, the images that sell them. "Things are so transparent they've almost become opaque. Our sense of solid ground has completely disappeared," Dillon says.

Ariel Shanberg, director of the Center for Photography at Woodstock, New York, which showed Macel last spring, agrees. "Now we're in an era when fact is fiction, when anybody can be anything through the Internet, where identity is more morphable than it was 20 years ago."

Although many artists and critics accept that photographs, whether as journalism or fine art, are never purely objective, documentary photographs "still have some purchase on the plain truth," says Karsten Lund of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, who, as a guest curator, included Shea and Mosse in "Phantoms in the Dirt" at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Photography, on view through October 5. Photography's legacy as a forensic tool is further evidence of our faith in the medium's capacity to tell the truth. A firewall persists between photographic fiction and photographic reality that divides photos into news or art, truth or artifice, forensic evidence or fictional invention. "Artists are supposed to be on one

side or the other," says Andrew Rafacz, the Chicago gallerist who represents Shea. This may be why photography that blurs the lines between the two makes some people uncomfortable.

Collectors, however, seem more than willing to blur boundaries. "Photo collectors are more interested in incorporating different kinds of works into their classic collections," says Vanessa Hallett,

worldwide head of photographs at Phillips, which pioneered secondary markets for artists such as Gregory Crewdson and Loretta Lux. "As collectors go deeper, they become more curious about photography as an ever-evolving medium." Works by such conceptualists, however, hold weight in sales of both contemporary art and photography. "We place pieces in the sale we feel will garner the best result for the consignor."

This fictional photography questions the medium as evidence and truth, but while it destabilizes, tweaks, or even invents, it maintains its relationship to reality. "Reality has a place in engaging our emotional life," says Tucker. "But to really convey it, [these artists] have to figure out new paths to push us into different perspectives. They ask what images can and can't do . . . They push the parameters outside the picture frame," sometimes even working in objects. Such work, adds Lund, "is as much a question about photography as what it is to be an observer."

"THINGS ARE SO TRANSPARENT THEY'VE ALMOST BECOME OPAQUE," SAYS DEALER VALERIE DILLON. "OUR SENSE OF SOLID GROUND HAS DISAPPEARED."



CHRISTIAN PATTERSON

■ PATTERSON WAS WORKING as a studio assistant for William Eggleston when he learned about Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, the Midwestern teenagers whose 1958 murder spree inspired numerous feature films, including *Badlands*, 1973, and *Natural Born Killers*, 1994. The artist began researching the murders, combing local history and newspaper archives and making multiple visits to Lincoln, Nebraska, where most of the events occurred. The resulting book, *Redheaded Peckerwood*, 2011, includes straight crime-scene photos as well as images of artifacts associated with the killings, such as a blue stuffed poodle said to have belonged to one of the victims, photographed in the artist's studio. A black-and-white photograph of a shotgun shell that looks like a forensic photograph used as evidence in a trial is a fabrication.

Patterson, a 2013 Guggenheim Fellow, will show a project inspired by a 1973 phone book he liberated from the public library in his native Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, at Paris Photo November 13 to 16. A telephone will accompany a handwritten directory with listings from the 40-year-old record. After dialing a number, viewers will hear recorded sounds, from real dial tones and busy signals to an answering machine that tells callers they have reached the Never Inn, an actual tavern in Fond du Lac. Patterson's work is "about things that have a reality—that are in fact tagged to something that happened," says MFA Houston's Tucker. "It's not excessive or overt; it's so quietly done. You have to figure it out." At Rose Gallery in Santa Monica and Robert Morat in Hamburg, prints sell for \$2,000 to \$6,000.

Patterson reexamines photography as a forensic tool in two books. *House at Night*, 2005–11, top, from *Redheaded Peckerwood*, investigates the murders committed by Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate in 1958. Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, Patterson's hometown, comes under his microscope in *Bottom of the Lake*, 2013–14, of which *X1*, right, is a part.

