

Christian Patterson in Conversation with Remi Coignet, October 2015
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Born in 1972 in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, American photographer Christian Patterson is, to date, the author of three main books: *Sound Affects*, *Redheaded Peckerwood* and *Bottom of the Lake*. In 2012, he received the Rencontres d'Arles Author Book Award. In 2013 he was awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, and he is the recipient of the 2015–2016 Vevey (Switzerland) International Photography Award.

Redheaded Peckerwood was a phenomenal success. A rarity among contemporary photography books, the title is currently in its third edition. Undoubtedly, the reasons for its success are numerous. To start with, an immediately recognizable, highly personal photographic practice, mixing on-site shoots with studio work, complemented by outtakes from archives. But also, artful storytelling and the masterful creation of the book-as-object. Our Paris–Brooklyn Skype conversation coincided with the release of *Bottom of the Lake*. Published in September 2015, the book sold out within one month.

Rémi Coignet: In 2008, you published your first book, *Sound Affects*. It was shot in Memphis, Tennessee, and the subject is music. Many photographers tell me that editing and sequencing is comparable to writing music. Do you agree?

Christian Patterson: Music was my first creative interest. It's a concept I wrapped the *Sound Affects* work in. I was thinking, first and foremost, about the musical qualities that can be contained within a single image. Light and colour have qualities that are analogous to music and sound. They can each be soft or loud, can permeate a room or a space, or invade its corners. There are things that you can think about, in terms of arrangement and composition. Beyond that, as you know, editing and sequencing a book is an art form in itself, and there definitely can be, and I think there should be, a musicality to it, a certain rhythm. I think that's probably the most appropriate term for it. You move through this piece, and there are ups and downs and certain images may be quieter or louder or more forceful or stronger than others. This isn't necessarily the case with *Sound Affects*, but with some of my other work, like *Redheaded Peckerwood*, or now, *Bottom of the Lake*, there are certain image types – or even variations on the same image – that I use in a very rhythmic way, to punctuate the sequence of the work, to establish sections or movements within the work in a more obvious way. So music is very important to me; it's always on my mind. It definitely lends itself very well to analogies with photography.

RC: While you were working on *Sound Affects*, you were also working with William Eggleston. What were you doing with him?

CP: I was his archivist and second assistant. His son was his first assistant. It was a very small operation, a very intimate, family affair. When I began working with him, the Eggleston Artistic Trust was trying to transition into a more structured operation, organizing the vast archive of the work he had produced over roughly 40 years, at that time. When I approached Eggleston about working with them, I was a young photographer, very eager to learn more about not only photography but also the process of being an artist: working with a gallery, interacting with museums or the press. We both had things to offer one another. I could help them become more organized, to begin the transition from analogue into the digital world by creating a digital

database of all the work. What they could offer me in exchange was just the opportunity to be in Memphis, to live in this very interesting place with this very deep, rich musical history, which was another huge attraction for me. And then just to be there and observe the process of being a successful, very active artist. Eggleston was more of a friend than a mentor. He had a special personality. He's a true eccentric artist, and he has a certain lifestyle. We were friends; we would spend time together casually, both inside and outside of official work hours. I would learn by looking and then going out and doing or trying to make my own pictures. Making colour photographs in Memphis at a very early, formative time in my budding young career was a unique experience. It was a very interesting start to things. I became more self-aware and self-critical. I began to think of the work that I made there as something that, even though I was proud of it, was really something I just needed to do.

RC: Eggleston's influence is visible in Sound Affects.

CP: Oh, yes.

RC: I think it's normal for a young artist to be influenced. But what is really noticeable is you get out of this very quickly, as Redheaded Peckerwood is entirely different. How did you find your own voice?

CP: Well it all happened by coincidence. Different things were happening at the same time. Again, I was becoming more self-aware and self-critical. I was beginning to recognize that Eggleston was having this profound influence on my work. Just being there in Memphis was having an influence on the pictures I was able to make. I felt that it was time to break away from all that, to step out of his shadow. I started thinking about returning to New York. I had moved to Memphis from New York. I made plans to move back to New York and try to make work of my own. Sometime before I left Memphis, I just happened to go to a movie theatre and see Terrence Malick's film *Badlands*. I was so taken with the film that I decided to research its making. I learned that it was based on this true crime story that was even more prolific and tragic and strange than what was depicted in the Hollywood version. It was apparent very early on that this story was rich with detail, and filled with some interesting, very heavy themes. It was also a roadmap. I could follow the path that was established by this pre-existing story. So, *Redheaded Peckerwood* started as a very simple idea. As I began to make the work, it led me in a number of different new directions. Unlike the work that I've made since then, or I'm making now, the idea wasn't as fully formed in my head. Now I miss those early days of being able to go out and wander and make pictures. I still love the idea of that way of making photographs, but I don't have the lifestyle or the time for it anymore. So most of what I do is very preconceived, and fairly well thought out in advance.

RC: Do you see a political aspect in Redheaded Peckerwood? I mean, do you consider it, even partially, as contributing to the discussion about gun culture in the US.?

CP: I don't really think about it politically very much. The gun culture in this country is just so omnipresent and so much a part of the fabric of life. It's very unfortunate, but true. I do have strong feelings about it, but this story is so old. It's been told and retold by many different people in many different ways. So it's taken on a feeling of mythology, for me, anyway. Gun culture is an important part, but the story feels somewhat removed from what's happening in America today. It has a relationship: it actually shows how, when and where this kind of thing started,

and how it continues to happen in America today. But I've really never given it too much thought, or made too much comment about it. I think it's obvious.

RC: In Redheaded Peckerwood, you mix pictures you shot in Nebraska, where the crimes occurred, with archival documents, and very emblematic images, like the wheel, for instance. You were one of the first to use this strategy, even though we've seen further examples in recent years, like Laia Abril's The Epilogue or H. said he loved us by Tommaso Tanini. Do you see this trend as a way of finally admitting that photography is not very good at telling a story by simply representing reality?

CP: [Sighs, long pause.] I'm not sure I would go so far. I think photography is actually very adaptable and malleable. I've come to realize that our long-accepted traditional notions of truth and representation in photography are actually a huge gift to photographers. It presents us with the opportunity to use photography's adaptability and its unexpectedness. It's all related to storytelling. There are so many ways to tell a story, and so many ways to use photography to do it. I absolutely love it. Redheaded Peckerwood brought me to the point where I finally understood that there is a whole other world, a whole other way of working and looking and thinking about photography. I arrived at Redheaded Peckerwood from a place where I was interested in artful documentary, that wandering photographer mode of working. Redheaded Peckerwood very quickly took me to a place where I understood that anything was possible. Photography was this amazing tool to take things in a different direction, or many different directions at the same time. And you end up with the opportunity to weave together all of these different threads and layers to tell a story in a more all-encompassing, more immersive way. Digging into the archives and discovering some of the materials I found there, or even found elsewhere in the field – those experiences were so exciting and so charging that I wanted to share those materials, that experience with the viewer. Now, I feel like, I don't know... You get older, you become more experienced. Photography is still the heart of what I do, but I don't necessarily think of it as enough for me anymore. Physical objects have a certain visceral energy.

RC: Yes, in your exhibitions, you show objects too.

CP: Yes. For me, it all starts with photography, with an idea. But when the photographs, the documents and the objects are presented together, they start to speak to one another, they complement and inform one another. To give you a distinct example, I'm not opposed to showing a photograph of something alongside the something itself. I think that lays bare one very important aspect of the nature of photography: what it is and what it does, and how it's like a stage.

RC: It makes me think of Joseph Kosuth's "One and Three Chairs", which is a chair, a picture of a chair and the dictionary definition of a chair.

CP: Yes.

RC: How did you take the success of Redheaded Peckerwood? The first edition was sold out in something like three months. It won the prize in Arles. And it's now in its third edition.

CP: I'm not sure what to say. When I was working on it and thinking about it – not necessarily first and foremost as a book – the physical work itself had always been of equal importance to me. But the book form is such a special thing. I could tell that this work would lend itself very well to the book form, and I wanted to do a very special book. Quite honestly, my goal was to make a book that I hoped would be considered one of the best of its time. But I had no inkling, nor any reason to believe, that it would actually be received that way. As I was working on it, based on my relatively well-informed knowledge of photography books, I felt I was doing something different. That was a good feeling. It kept me going; it kept me excited.

As my work on the book progressed, I felt myself digging a bit deeper and adding these layers that do different things. As you know, the book form is such an amazing thing. It's crazy to think about how long books have been with us. And it's crazy to think about how endlessly versatile it is as a form. We continue to see books that do new things. Will that ever end? I don't know. Every year we all anticipate the new books, we're all looking for something that does something new. We're rarely – I don't think we're ever – disappointed. It's a lot of fun to feel like we're all taking part in this ongoing conversation. We're all fairly fluent in this language of photography and the photography book. And that language is constantly being expanded. And that's great.

RC: You started working on Redheaded Peckerwood in 2005. In 2010, you made an artist's book, and then MACK published it in 2011. How did you work during these years? I've heard you photographed very little and edited a lot.

CP: That's true. That was due, more than anything, to the nature of the story and, in very basic terms, my approach to it. The original crime story took place over a 7-to-10-day period in January. So I would only work for that time period each year. Over five years, five successive, very cold, harsh Januaries, I would travel to Nebraska, make work for 7 to 10 days, and then I would have the rest of those entire years to sit and think and reflect on the work I had made and the direction it was taking. I think a big part of the reason why Redheaded Peckerwood was so different, or such a leap from Sound Affects, was because I had that time. I was looking at a lot of different things, and my interests and influences changed dramatically during that time. I was forced, in a way – by the story and my approach to it – to take that time. In hindsight, I feel very fortunate to have taken that time. It allowed me to think about different approaches, about different things I could do with the work, and incorporate a big part of who I was becoming as an artist.

RC: As I mentioned, you made an artist's book in 10 copies of Redheaded Peckerwood, as you also did with Bottom of the Lake. How important is this step of the work for you?

CP: It's very important. The process of making a book – editing and sequencing, thinking about image types and image treatments and layout – it's an intense, immersive and exhaustive process. It takes a lot of time, and you do it repeatedly. You're continually revisiting and refining the work. But [sighs] you begin to see the work in a whole other way. I feel that, when I finally arrive at the end of that process, I've learned the work inside and out, and upside down... so much better than I did before. And yes, creating an artist's book, or a model for the book you wanted to make, is a very valuable, insightful part of the process. I suppose that my interest in all of that is an extension of what I observed with Eggleston. Unfortunately, it's not as common

as it once was, but back in the 1970s, he created a large number of handmade artist's books and print portfolios. I had a chance to see them and to view them. They're wonderful objects, and a whole other manifestation of the work. They're objects, they have a physicality to them. I really liked that.

RC: A final question about Redheaded Peckerwood: in the second and third editions, you changed small things like the booklet, or a few images in the third edition. How come? Do you see this as a work in progress?

CP: I suppose that's one way of looking at it. I'm a very obsessive person, and I have a hard time letting things go. I have a hard time stopping my brain or not thinking about things anymore. I have dreams. [Small laughs.] I wake up in the middle of the night and I realize that I just had a dream, or I had been thinking about things in a different way. After the book came out, it took on a life of its own, beyond me.

In addition to the ideas I might have had myself, people would sometimes mention things to me. These were new discoveries that I felt warranted inclusion in the work. They had to meet certain criteria for me. But if I found something new and it had a certain strength, then I saw no reason to not include it. I think there's a preciousness to the photography book world. I can understand it and respect it, but it shouldn't constrain the work or its ability to continue to expand or unfold. I'm not familiar with other examples of artists' books that have changed or evolved from one printing to another. For me, it seemed natural, like the right thing to do. I had these things that I felt were strong and deserved to be included.

RC: Coming to Bottom of the Lake, why did you feel the need to look back at your hometown?

CP: That actually came about by invitation. A friend of mine named Paul Schiek has a small imprint called TBW Books and he invited me to make an artist's book. It just so happens that Paul and I are from the same small town. When Paul approached me with the idea of making an artist's book, I immediately thought of Fond du Lac. I had been planning to return home for the holidays. So I said to Paul, "I don't have anything right now, no new work that I feel is ready to be made into a book. But I'm going home, and I'll take a camera. Let's see what happens." There was a lot of luck involved in this. In photography or any art form, there's a lot of dumb luck involved. But you have to be able to recognize that dumb luck when it strikes you, and run with it. When I returned home to my parent's house, I found this telephone book in a box in the basement. That was the starting point: looking back at this specific place during a very specific time, a place about which I have hazy, faded memories. Similar to Redheaded Peckerwood, it started out as a fairly simple idea: taking this pre-existing thing and going out and seeking to reconnect with it, to follow it. But when you're working your way through memory and imagination, there are always interesting things that happen. It's a rich territory for creativity and storytelling. I had no idea what I was going to do. But the telephone book was this wonderfully rich resource.

RC: The phone book was from 1973, the year after you were born.

CP: Yes. I was so lucky to have found this thing. It turned out that my parents had saved this and that they had left traces of themselves in it: at the time, they had made some markings in it,

and I found a few things inserted into the book. Many of those things are not included, but it immediately gave me the idea of continuing that process by adding my own self to it.

RC: On the “Helpful Hints” page, you circled the sentence, “Do not rely on memory.” This book, like Redheaded Peckerwood, deals with the past. As an artist, why is memory – either collective or individual – important for you?

CP: I don’t know. Maybe I’m an old soul. I’ve always been attracted to the past. I grew up listening to older music, introduced to me by my father. It’s a natural human instinct to look back. I think we have this photographic compulsion. A huge part of photography is about the way it can supposedly capture or deal with time. I think there’s an interesting relationship between the very fluid malleability of photography and the slippery nature of the past, memory and imagination. When you start to mix all of those things together, it’s a territory that’s rich with possibility.

I didn’t really address your “do not rely on memory” question. I saw that in the phone book and I wanted to circle that phrase because it speaks so directly to the nature of my work. It starts with memory, but I don’t rely on memory. My work involves memory and imagination, but it’s merely a starting point. There’s another phrase that appears near the beginning of the book, “What lies ahead?” I love wordplay, I love words and phrases that have more than one meaning or more than one potential reading. It’s not just asking you what lies ahead between the covers of this book, but what are we about to experience?

RC: We spoke about objects earlier. When you exhibit Bottom of the Lake, you show an old rotary phone that the audience can use for a sound experience. Do you see this as a kind of re-enactment of John Giorno’s “Dial-A-Poem”?

CP: Again, one thing leads to another. I was flipping through the phone book and seeing the names of people and places I remembered from my childhood and my adolescence. As I said, I think we all have the wish to go back in time for various reasons. I found myself wishing that I could somehow connect or reconnect with some of those people and places. So the telephone book led to the idea of picking up the phone and making an actual telephone object. I was probably more familiar with Janet Cardiff’s work with the telephone than John Giorno’s, although I became aware of that as well. The functionality of “Dial-A-Poem” interested me, because anyone could call a telephone number at any time and hear a voice on the other end of the line. Sound is just so immersive and so transportive. Sound, particularly when experienced through the telephone – something you hold in your hand, something you hold up to your ear, with the sound actually entering your body – is highly visceral. It almost feels like the telephone cord is like an umbilical cord, connecting you to this other thing that’s alive somewhere on the other end of that line. Janet Cardiff’s approach to the telephone examined the narrative possibilities contained within that. Her work was more of an inspiration to me, for what I did.

RC: The matchbook theme is very present in Bottom of the Lake. Why?

CP: Drinking is a big part of culture in Wisconsin, my home state and, by extension, in Fond du Lac. Historically, there were a lot of breweries, beer makers and taverns scattered around

Wisconsin and in my town. It can be a very harsh climate in the winter, there's really not all that much that you can do except stay inside and drink. [Laughs.] Or maybe go ice fishing. So it's a big part of the local culture. For me as a teenager, it was a big part of my experience. That was our recreation: my friends and I would go out into the woods and drink. The telephone book had listings of these drinking establishments, and some of them had wonderful, evocative names, like "Somewhere," "Someplace Else," or "The Never Inn." I began wondering if any of these places were still around, and what they looked like. I was going out into the night in the wintertime and finding these places and taking photographs. There was just something I liked about the feeling of it all. There's a certain eeriness to them, too. I don't know why, but I've always been attracted to things that feel kind of eerie, sinister. The matchbooks are little objects from these places I had found.

RC: I understand. [The matchbooks carry advertising for beer brands or bars]

CP: There are probably three or four matchbooks in Bottom of the Lake, and they all have something interesting to say. It could be something like, "The customer is always wrong" or "Bad food, crummy liquor, horrible service" or something like that. I also managed to find some matchbooks that were advertising the telephone. The book is not really narrative in quality, like Redheaded Peckerwood. There are just these visual layers and ideas that, from time to time, intersect or overlap. That, to me, is fun. It's interesting. It begins to create this little world within the book. Going back to what we were talking about earlier, a sequencing device, or a rhythmic device: the matchbook reappears in the book three times. First, it's open and it's full, untouched. So it's like you're arriving in this place. Then midway through the book you can tell the matchbook has been used, and the writing inside says, "Seeing changes through time." That's another one of those phrases that could be saying that our way of looking changes through time. That's definitely true. It has these subtle, different potential readings. And towards the end it's all burned out.

RC: There is also a series of close-ups of wooden architecture, partly painted blue. What is the meaning of these images?

CP: Returning to one's hometown to make pictures is a cliché. It's something that's been done many times. I tried to remain keenly aware of that as I revisited my own hometown. I wanted to make work that was less expected and maybe a bit harder to figure out. Part of that was to think about clichés, symbols and icons. The symbol of Fond du Lac, "the bottom of the lake", is a lighthouse that sits at the very bottom of the lake, on the very edge of the water. It's the dumbest, most obvious place to go in Fond du Lac to take a picture. But I went there. [Laughs.] When I entered the lighthouse (I hadn't been there since I was a kid), I discovered that it had been painted this beautiful blue that was virtually the same as one of the blues on the front cover of the telephone book. So immediately there was this connection between these two seemingly completely disparate things. It was an interesting intersection, an interesting overlap... I don't know if you know this or not, but most of the pictures in the book were made over the course of only two and a half days. I filled it out with some others I took in the studio, but most of the pictures made in the field were done quickly. This blue rapidly established a very tight, consistent, albeit limited colour palette for the work. The lighthouse is a six – or perhaps eight – sided structure. It's held up by x-bracings, which are really supporting the very symbol of the town. Kids go in and out of the lighthouse, and carve their names, or their lovers' names, or other messages, into the wood of the x-braces. I liked the idea of people making their mark and

leaving a trace of themselves behind. I had begun to think more about the name of the town and what it means. Honestly, I had never thought about it much before, but Fond du Lac means bottom of the lake. So, I went into the lighthouse and I carved BOTL, as if it was two people's names. I thought it would be the start of something. I'm establishing now that this is the Bottom of the Lake. This idea was sitting there in the back of my head for the two years I had spent working on this project, but I kept on thinking about these x-braces. They're yet another thing that recurs within the sequence of the book, the x-braces or other x shapes.

RC: I can't find it right now, but the picture you used for the lighthouse is an archival picture.

CP: It's a postcard.

RC: OK.

CP: I just want to finish with the x-braces. It was the idea for an object. I wanted to remake those things, because I saw the potential for them to be a physical object, something that could have a presence and the installation of the work. They could almost serve as a blank canvas for my own ideas, my own words, my own phrases. There's some relationship there between the markings carved into the x-braces and the marginalia, doodles, drawings and jokes inserted into the telephone book.

RC: I wanted to speak about the jokes, because it's a very funny book. You've written all kinds of little notes with a pen. For instance, there's a company called Black Cat Chimney Builders and you write, "Bad Luck." There's a page starting with "Artist" and ending with "Automation" and you cross out "Automation" and write, "Do it by hand." Are these jokes a way to take a distance from a personal situation?

CP: It's surprising you ask that. The jokes are actually personal in that they're a very accurate reflection of who I am, how I think and what my sense of humour was then and what it is now. So I would say they're more personal than impersonal. It was a chance to have some fun, to insert myself into the book in a greater way. After the success of Redheaded Peckerwood, it was actually a nice opportunity to be less serious, to have some fun, to be irreverent and playful. Quite honestly, this strange little world of ours, be it the art world or the photography world or the photobook world, they're all sort of nested within one another. I don't think we need to take ourselves so seriously all the time. And there are fun and creative ways to be less serious.

RC: Yes, so true. Oh, there's a question I forgot to ask. The three books we're talking about were all published by European publishers. Is it a coincidence? Or haven't you found a US publisher that fits your projects?

CP: I've never thought about it, but that's true. There are some really fine American publishers, and there are many publishers out there. But when you stop and think carefully about their programme, or the artists they work with, or the kind of books they make or how they're designed, they all have their own personalities. I couldn't have wished for anything more than to work with Mack. There was no other publisher with whom I would have liked to make

Redheaded Peckerwood. I also have great respect for König. They're really two of my favourites. I guess I've always been more concerned with who they are and what they do, more than where they're from. I honestly never stopped to think about the European aspect of it.

RC: To conclude, can you say a few words about the project "Gong Co" that you'll be presenting in Vevey?

CP: Yes, I've had this idea for a project for many years now. I think I first discovered this place at least 10 years ago. It's taken a long time for me to come back to it. I think it's work that will allow me to continue along this path that I seem to be on – playing with photography, objects and other things; thinking more about installation as well. It's definitely another story from the past, a different past. There's a greater range and perhaps greater vagueness to the time involved. It's not an archive per se, but it's a place that can be treated like one.

RC: If I'm not mistaken, it's about an old shop.

CP: That's correct. It's an old grocery store I discovered many years ago, that has unintentionally become like a time capsule. When I first encountered it, I couldn't believe that this place actually existed. It was all very strange. The store was open, but everything on the shelf was between 20 and 40 years old. And I just didn't understand why it was still there, why the doors were still open. It's closed now. I immediately thought of Andy Warhol, not only because of his work on popular culture or mass-produced consumer products, but that he famously said, "Every store will become a museum, and every museum will become a store." This place felt like a strange embodiment of that idea. I have a lot of work to do still. I feel very fortunate to have received the Vevey prize and I'm excited by the opportunity to get support for something that is yet to be created. That's a really exceptional opportunity, and it's too bad more opportunities like that for artists don't exist in the world. You know who I am and how I work, and I feel confident in saying that while I should be able to mount an interesting installation for Vevey, the project will be far from finished at that time. I don't know how long it's going to take, but it feels much larger than anything I've ever worked on before.

RC: Wow.

CP: We'll see.