



CRIME UNSEEN

October 28 - January 15, 2012

Richard Barnes / Corinne May Botz / Christopher Dawson

Deborah Luster / Christian Patterson

Taryn Simon / Angela Strassheim / Krista Wortendyke

Angela Strassheim, Evidence #11, 2009

With the invention of the camera, society gained an effective tool for law enforcement—a seemingly infallible way of identifying criminals and garnering evidence. In fighting crime, the notion of truth is imperative, so we put photographs to work as a way of determining the actions and identities of perpetrators, though sometimes such judgments prove to be

inaccurate. Furthermore, with its special capacity for implication and dissemination, photography gives us voyeuristic entry to traumatic events, usually after they have occurred. This unique access affects dramatically how we record and remember violent and unlawful acts, fueling both our outrage—and our fascination.

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As early as the mid 1800s, officials in some European countries used photography to document prison inmates. These early mug shots were precursors to the widespread use of photography as evidence, as police systems became more scientific in the late 19th century. In 1883 French police officer Alphonse Bertillon introduced “anthropometry,” an identification system of cards containing the physical measurements and facial photographs of



Christian Patterson, Storm Cellar, 2008

criminals. The cards could then be filed and easily retrieved. But the process of making them was both labor intensive and flawed, as the police officers would make their measurements in different ways, and often made errors. Fingerprinting eventually emerged as the preferred way to identify criminals, but Bertillon’s invention solidified the use of photography to systematically document crimes. Another of Bertillon’s important contributions to forensics was the systematic use of photography to document crime scenes and evidence. He photographed crime scenes before police and detectives rifled through them, mounting a camera on a high tripod to survey and record the space, and mapping the objects in the room using a grid system.

Also at the turn of the 20th century, crime stories became intrinsic to popular culture. Sales of crime fiction, including detective novels and murder mysteries, flourished. As movie making exploded in the 1930s, gangsters and outlaws became instant film celebrities. In the 1920s and ’30s newspapers and tabloids indulged the public’s fascination with scandal and crime and increased the sensationalism of their reports by including extremely graphic pictures of violent acts and dead bodies. Today, newspapers usually adhere to a certain code of conduct and keep the most graphic images from public view, yet our appetite for the macabre persists. Many of the most popular films, books, and television series in recent decades have been based on crime investigation and murder, as witnessed in the 23-year run of America’s Most Wanted and the 11-year (to date) run of CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, to name just two examples.

All the while, the camera has continued to be our primary tool for recording clues that help solve real mysteries and criminal cases, and photographs remain a prevalent form of forensic evidence allowed in court rooms. We know that photographs can be easily manipulated, yet their role seems only to be increasing, with cell phone pictures, satellite imagery, and surveillance camera footage feeding into how we report and solve crimes.

All of the artists in *Crime Unseen* grapple with a retelling of disturbing crimes. Using photography and other methods, the artists reactivate historical material and open it up to further contemplation. By drawing on techniques of photojournalism, forensic photography, and documentary landscape, the artists actively engage with myth and reality as they question the roles of memory, the media, and evidence in solving and remembering crime.

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Some of the artists document real places and objects associated with violent murder, exploring the notion of the charged landscape. In *Tooth for an Eye*, **Deborah Luster** (American, b. 1951) researches police murder reports in New Orleans, a city with a homicide rate that is nearly eight times the national average. She photographs locations where murders have taken place—a meat market, an empty lot in the Lower Ninth Ward, the City Park. The images are circular, mimicking the shape of a gunshot hole or the view through a gun sight. Luster does not include people in the scenes she photographs, rather the victim's name and age

at the time of the murder become part of the work's title, providing a fragment of information that transforms the photograph into a sort of memorial, or in the artist's own words, "takes a close look at something that no longer exists—an invisible population—in the only way in which one can approach such things, obliquely and through reference."

Angela Strassheim (American, b. 1969) also goes to the sites of real crimes, in her case homes in which violent acts and murders have taken place at some point in the past. Strassheim does extensive research and then approaches the people living at the locations and asks for permission to photograph the room in which the violence occurred. She uses a chemical spray called "Blue Star" to render the remnants of blood visible by activating the remaining proteins on surfaces even after they have been thoroughly cleaned and repainted. Strassheim learned to use Blue Star while working in the field for the Miami Forensic Imaging Bureau. She uses only ambient light to expose her images for as long as ten minutes to one hour, capturing the physical presence of blood as garish, glowing stains. Her



Taryn Simon, CHARLES IRVIN FAIN,
Scene of the crime, the Snake River, Melba, Idaho
Served 18 years of a Death sentence for Murder, Rape, and
Kidnapping, 2002

long exposures allow the rest of the room to be dimly visible as well, creating an eerie portrayal of a past violent action in a cozy domestic space where the occupants are sometimes unaware of the home's lurid past. To this end, Strassheim intersperses color snapshots of the homes' exteriors among the black-and-white images, underscoring the disconnect between the banal, benign surface of things and the histories they sometimes contain.

Taryn Simon (American, b. 1975) retells the stories of people who were mistakenly identified

as a perpetrator by a crime victim or eyewitness, wrongly convicted, and then exonerated through DNA evidence. Photography, often in the form of mug shots, plays a significant role in these convictions. Photographs, composite sketches, and line-ups rely on an eyewitness's memory, which can be swayed by repeated viewings of images, meaning that photography, when used as a tool for identification, has sometimes aided in the prosecution of innocent people. Simon photographs the innocent men and women in places that are significant to their conviction—

the scene of the crime, scene of the alibi, or scene of the arrest. Simon has explained the project this way, “Photography’s ability to blur truth and fiction is one of its most compelling qualities. But when misused as part of a prosecutor’s arsenal, this ambiguity can have severe, even lethal consequences. Photographs in the criminal justice system, and elsewhere, can turn fiction into fact.”

Also looking at violent crime, but taking a less documentary approach, **Christian Patterson** (American, b. 1972) follows the trail of teenage lovers Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, who, in the winter of 1957-58, committed a string of murders in Nebraska and Wyoming. Though Patterson includes some appropriated photographs and documents that stem directly from the crimes, he does not identify them. Rather, he borrows certain points of fact and freely mixes them with fictional elements he creates using photography as his primary tool. By mining a historical archive and injecting the past with possibility, Patterson suggests that the most important implications of the crime are located not in the social or in the collective, but in the interior responses we have to it—emotionally, intellectually, and in our imaginations.

Corinne May Botz (American, b. 1977) also looks at the role of the imagination in reconstructing crimes, as she photographs grisly dollhouses built by Chicagoan Frances Glessner

Lee in the 1940s and '50s. Used to train detectives to evaluate visual evidence, the dollhouses have rooms that contain evidence of violent struggle, such as bloodstains and overturned furniture, and dollhouse figures are often presented as corpses. Lee, a feminist and rarity in her day as the first female police captain appointed in the United States, also used the dollhouses to probe romantic and dystopian notions of the domestic realm and the role of women at the time.



Corinne May Botz, Pink Bathroom, 2004

Interested in exploring the role of evidence, **Richard Barnes** (American, b. 1953) photographs the cabin once inhabited by The Unabomber, now known to be Ted Kaczynski, who threatened the country from 1978 to 1996 by sending untraceable handmade bombs to various locations across the nation. Born in Chicago in 1942, Kaczynski was a child prodigy who eventually earned a PhD



Richard Barnes, Unabomber 01, 1998

in mathematics. In 1971 he moved to a remote cabin in Montana and attempted to be self-sufficient. As a form of protest against development that was destroying the wilderness and technologies that he thought threatened human freedom, Kaczynski started his bombing campaign. His bombs killed three people and injured twenty-three. He was captured after his brother identified him through a manifesto that Kaczynski had written and sent to the FBI. After his capture, Kaczynski's cabin was transported across the country to a storage facility in order to be used as evidence, but was never used in court. Barnes photographs the cabin forensically as it might appear in a police record, underscoring its evidentiary role by shooting it from all four sides in black-and-white with sharp focus and floating against a black background. He also photographs the cabin in the FBI warehouse, on display in a room like a piece of contemporary sculpture in an art gallery, and combines it with a photograph of the location in which the cabin once stood, its former placement now delineated by a chain-link fence. Interested in both the idea of displacement and the ambiguity of representation, Barnes highlights the disconnect between the banal appearance of the cabin and the infamous status it has acquired through circumstance.

In addition to these contemporary works, the exhibition includes photographs from the collection of the Chicago History Museum's Chicago Daily News archive. Chicago Daily News was a daily newspaper published in Chicago between 1876 and 1978. The images on view represent a selection of diverse crime stories from the first few decades of the 20th century, such as murders, bootlegging, and organized crime. One group of images is taken from the 1904 murder of William Bate, whose body was found in his automobile. Another group depicts the 1909 trial of Dr. Haldane Cleminson, who first claimed his wife had been murdered by a burglar, and later retracted his story and tried to make police believe she had committed suicide. The rest of the images date from the heyday of crime in Chicago—the Prohibition era of the 1920s and early '30s, a time when gangsters controlled much of the city and abused their power through extortion and threats. Mobsters such as Al Capone, Frank Nitti, and "Bugs" Malone became famous and helped shape Chicago's worldwide reputation as a haven for gangsters and organized crime.

Contemporary artist **Krista Wortendyke** (American, b. 1979) also provides local context, presenting a version of her *Killing Season: Chicago* installation. The work contains photographs of the sites of every homicide that occurred in the city of Chicago between October 28, 2010 and January 15, 2011 (the dates of the *Crime Unseen* exhibition one year prior). Installing the photographs in a chronological graph that mimics a city skyline, Wortendyke draws attention to the homicides and their frequency in a schematic way. By shooting the crime scenes as the regular city scenes they are today—void of any trace of the violent events that occurred there—she hints at how quickly the events slip from the headlines and popular consciousness. Also interested in the media, and as an update to the historical newspaper photographs, **Christopher Dawson** (American, b. 1972) chronicles the elaborate production required to televise crime stories on 24-hour news channels. His series *Coverage* (2004-present) focuses on the media trucks, satellite dishes, and crowds that accumulate and create hype around events such as the recent Casey Anthony murder investigation or Zacarias Moussaoui's 2006 terrorism trial. Without including images of the implicated criminals, Dawson uses a 4 × 5 large-format camera to capture the massive infrastructure behind these stories, calling attention to the way certain individuals are thrust into the forefront of the nation's attention, for better or for worse. Ultimately they reveal our undying fascination with illicit, sensationalized stories and public notoriety.

All of the work in this exhibition has tragedy at its root; every artist deals with materials and stories that stem from extremely serious crimes and real murders of real people. Yet they approach the idea of violent crime obliquely. There are no graphic images of real dead bodies here. The artists did not witness the crimes, and their photographs were all made after the crimes occurred—in most cases, long after. Their works are thus both contemporaneous and historical, and by mining statistics, archives, and crime scenes, they give the past a life in the present. Partly as a rallying cry against forgetting, they confront us with our perverse attraction to horror by skirting it slightly, bringing stories back to life, and demonstrating that the evil side of human nature unsettles our fundamental notions of security, humanity, and control. We are unable to neatly shelve the events as part of history. By transforming history into something new and

current, the artists discourage us from being passive and distant, and in so doing perhaps leave room for an implicit, liberating acceptance that human nature is sometimes unpredictable and flawed. As Fyodor Dostoevsky, author of *Crime and Punishment*, reportedly once said, “Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing is more difficult than to understand him.”

—Karen Irvine,
Curator and Associate Director

Author's note: Parts of this essay have been adapted from the afterword contributed to Christian Patterson's book *Redheaded Peckerwood* (London:MACK, 2011).

Notes

- 1) Deborah Luster, *Tooth for an Eye* (Twin Palms Publishers: Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2010).
- 2) Taryn Simon, *The Innocent* (New York: Umbrage Editions, 2003), p. 7.
- 3) Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), a famous Russian poet and essayist, is renowned for literary works such as *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*. This quote is often attributed to him, although according to scholars of his work a source cannot be located.