

HYPERRALLERGIC

Can We Trust a Photograph?

Phillp A Hartigan November 25, 2011

CHICAGO — I was standing in front of a large black and white photograph by Angela Strassheim in the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago. It appeared to show the interior of a boring suburban home, complete with bad furniture and family photos in ugly frames. Everything seemed normal, nothing was out of place — except for the tidal splatter of white marks, like someone had hurled a can of paint at the walls.

After a quick reading of the text beside the photo, it turned out that those splashes were bloodstains, which Strassheim revealed by spraying the room with a chemical compound used in forensic science called Blue Star. This enables the bloodstains to be captured by the camera even after the rooms have been scrubbed clean and repainted. Strassheim uses long exposures in ambient lighting, which partly explains the strong contrasts between dark areas and the brightness of the bloodstains. After absorbing this information, I was struck by two things: the artistry and patience of the photography, with its noticeable attention to tonal balance and symmetry of the different picture areas; and a feeling of guilt, of being slightly appalled at myself for looking at evidence of such a grisly act and getting a real aesthetic pleasure from it. Death is horrible, the photograph seems to say, but blood is beautiful.



Christian Patterson, "House on Fire" (2010) (Courtesy of the artist)

That is without question Strassheim's point — a point that is well made by most of the work on display in *Crime Unseen* curated by Karen Irvine. It put me in mind of all the structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructionist and feminist criticism I've read, from Roland Barthe's *Camera Lucida* to Susan Sontag's *On Photography* — the theorizing about the camera as gaze, the gaze as never entirely innocent, the gaze as caught in some variation of guilt-laden complicity in the exploitation of the camera's subject. I thought of all the work that purports to express these ideas, and how little of it actually does (because it's a lot easier to quote Derrida than to illustrate him). And I thought: wow, this is the real thing. I'm enjoying these photographs and I feel guilty about it. Sontag was right!

There are works by eight contemporary photographers on the museum's three levels, with the addition of some great pictures of 1920s mob-ridden Chicago from the archive of the *Chicago Daily News*. Each photographer shows a different kind of crime scene. Some of them are real, some of them are imaginary, and some of them are re-imagined. Christian Patterson's pieces use a mixture of his own photos, found photos and objects, drawings and his own small paintings to allude to a series of murders from the 1950s. The actual inspiration remains hidden, I think, unless you read the accompanying text, but that doesn't lessen the originality of the approach, and the sinister intimations of the images, even if you can't quite work out what those bloodstains in the snow come from.

Turning from Patterson's work to Corinne May Botz, we see images of brightly-colored rooms showing evidence of burglary or murder: blood on the carpet, a figure lying face down, the contents of a desk spilling out onto the floor.

My first mistaken assumption was that they were real rooms, when on closer inspection they were doll's-house-sized reproductions. My second mistaken assumption was that Botz had constructed these miniature crime scenes to mess with our perceptions of what's real and what's not. In fact, it turns out that they were constructed in the 1940s by a Chicagoan called Frances Glessner Lee, and they were used in training detectives to hone their observational skills. So the photographs end up being slightly hilarious and disturbing at the same time, in a novel interpretation of the show's investigation into voyeurism.



Corinne May Botz. "Three Room Dwelling (Knocked Over Chair)" (2004) (Courtesy of the artist)

The more documentary side of crime scenes is well represented by Krista Wortendyke, who photographed the site of every murder in Chicago during a three month period and then mounted the photos on the wall in a bar-graph arrangement. The theme here seems to be the banality of each crime scene, and the fact that all those sidewalks and parking lots combine to become just a series of numbers. Compare this to the emotional impact of Taryn Simon's film, consisting of interviews with people wrongly convicted of terrible crimes, often on the basis of photographic "identification." Listening to the harrowing experiences of innocent men who spent years in jail, watching as they move from barely-concealed anger to unrestrained sobbing, we are ashamed to be watching their moments of grief, but more ashamed of the system that brought them to this place.



Krista

Wortendyke, "Killing Season Chicago" (October 28, 2010 – January 15, 2011) (Courtesy of the artist)

So what is evident in these places? What crimes were committed? Were they even crimes at all? Are they even pictures of real places? Is a photograph an absolutely unimpeachable record of an object or an event, or is it as untrustworthy as any first person account? Why do we flinch from the spray of blood on the wall, while secretly enjoying what it implies? These are some of the questions raised by this show, and for me the images brought those ideas to life in ways I haven't seen before. The photographers' answers are not at all comforting or reassuring — for which they should be thanked.

Crime Unseen continues at the Museum of Contemporary Photography (600 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois) until January 15, 2012.