



CRIME UNSEEN

GROUP EXHIBITION

Museum of Contemporary Photography

Columbia College Chicago, 600 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60605

October 28, 2011 - January 15, 2012

EXHIBIT A: "CRIME UNSEEN"

BY COURTNEY R. THOMPSON

"Crime Unseen" offers a thoughtful multi-dimensional approach to the genre of crime photography. Artists Richard Barnes, Corinne May Botz, Christopher Dawson, Deborah Luster, Christian Patterson, Taryn Simon, Angela Strassheim, and Krista Wortendyke illuminate the place, space, and time of criminal activity as a way to revisit photography's often complex role in documenting evidence.

Barnes and Strassheim dominate the main floor's central space with mostly large-format prints that contemplate a return to the scene of a crime. Strassheim, a former field worker for the Miami Forensic Imaging Bureau, photographs former sites of violence, capturing invisible traces of blood through a spray known as "Blue Star," a chemical that activates and reveals the remnants of bodily proteins even after a thorough cleaning and fresh coat of paint. In *Evidence #11* (2009), signs of a past struggle are eerily made present in a cozy, tastefully furnished living room setting, prompting an unsightly interruption to the everyday domestic interior.

Barnes displaces the space of crime with Ted Kaczynski's now infamous shack, offering a juxtaposition of locations in *Unabomber Cabin, Lincoln MT* (1998) and *Unabomber Cabin, Sacramento, CA* (1998). The former appears as an excavated site with the cabin removed and replaced with a secure metal fence in a placid forest setting; the second location, a FBI storage warehouse, features the cabin in a white sterile environment (not unlike some larger contemporary art spaces) isolated as a shrine of material evidence. Barnes' interest in the cabin as artifact poses the question of how we see and understand crime as display. Neither image reveals any clues or particular insight into Kaczynski's crimes. This fascination with the criminal artifact continues to this day. In fact, the cabin is currently on display at the Newseum in Washington, D.C. as part of their exhibition "G-Men and Journalists: Top News Stories of the FBI's First Century."

The intimate installation of Corinne May Botz's small C-print photographs on the second floor showcase her fascinating images of Frances Glessner Lee's criminal case study dollhouses. I found myself lost in the details of a delicate print on a carefully crafted storage box, a charming fur ruff on a cloth wool jacket, and a pair of beaded slippers in front of a miniature charcoal valise. It was only later that I spotted the figure on the floor of the closet space, a pale doll with straw colored hair, clear blue eyes and blood stained chest, her throat cut with a knife that completed the crime scene. Glessner Lee was a fascinating figure herself; in 1931 and at the age of fifty-three she began funding Harvard's department of legal medicine for the research and further development of forensic pathology. Her dollhouses were later installed in the department and used as teaching tools for law enforcement. Botz's insightful writing and photographs about Glessner Lee's life and work were published in 2004 in *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death* and she will be presenting a lecture of this material at the Glessner House Museum on [December 1](#).

The installation of Taryn Simon's *The Innocents* (2004) within the space is disappointing, while the work itself is engaging. Her compelling video work chronicles individuals relating stories of being wrongfully accused and sentenced due to misidentification. Police investigations are not without error in the use of composite sketches, blurry crime camera photos and eyewitness accounts to identify suspects. Her accompanying photographs were underwhelming, located as they were in the stairway that connects the second landing and third floor gallery space. With the monitor positioned at the top of the stairs I had to shuffle, yield, and jockey for a vantage point during the exhibition's busy opening, missing an opportunity for work that deserved more contemplation.



Installation view of "Crime Unseen" at the Museum of Contemporary Photography. 2011. Image courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Photography.

While Krista Wortendyke provided a local connection to the show with her project *Killing Season: Chicago*, an installation of photographic images of homicides that took place between October 28, 2010 and January 15, 2011 (the dates of the current exhibition, only one year earlier), the project's execution seemed flat, especially given the presence of Deborah Luster's similar work in the exhibition. Luster's gridded hang of black and white circular photographs focus on sites of crime in New Orleans. The sites are shot devoid of figures, sometimes long after the crime occurred, and the circular form mimics the site view of a gun. Luster's titles are perhaps the most interesting, as she connects the banal location with the victim's name and age at the time of the murder.

I would be remiss not to mention Christian Patterson's lively mining of the archive of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate. During a road trip over the winter of 1957–58, the teenage lovers committed a string of murders in Nebraska and Wyoming. Patterson appropriates and mixes documents, artifacts, and photographs to obscure any clear chronology of events. This invitation to imagine the significance of each image rather than declare it as evidence implicates a larger desire to document and interpret criminal behavior, or as the tagline for many a best-selling beach novel goes, “get inside the mind of a killer.”

Despite the grisly theme of the exhibition, the title declares there is much left open to interpret and consider in our wider relationship to the images that record, define, and construct our perception of traumatic events.

-[Courtney R. Thompson](#), Contributing ArtSlant Writer

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