Essay for Christian Patterson's *Redheaded Peckerwood*

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Crime fiction, the genre with murder as its defining event, has enjoyed widespread appeal since the late nineteenth century. One of the most imaginative approaches ever taken to the murder mystery story was the Murder Dossier series created in the 1930s by writer Dennis Wheatley in collaboration with J. G. Links. The dossiers shunned conventional narrative. Produced as cardboard folders reminiscent of a detective's file, they contained text and physical clues—facsimile documents such as letters, newspaper articles, and photographs, as well as cigarette butts, hairs, and ticket stubs – physical clues for the reader to decipher. A cross between a parlor game and a mystery novel, the Murder Dossiers fractured narrative, used of tangible objects to enliven a story and caused quite a sensation.

Christian Patterson's Redheaded Peckerwood also presents a crime story through a complex mix of photographs, text, documents and objects — challenging the viewer to go through the information to navigate moments ranging from the banal to the dramatic, and to decipher clues as if at a real crime scene. But unlike the dossiers, Patterson's project has a tragic, real-life back-story: the string of murders conducted by teenage lovers Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate in the winter of 1957–58. Their crimes do not need to be solved; instead Patterson endeavors to open up their story up to further interpretation and reflection.

In 2005, Patterson saw Terrence Malick's film Badlands (1973). Struck by the film's cinematography and stirred by its storyline, he researched the film and learned that it was inspired by the even more prolific, tragic true story crimes of Starkweather and Fugate. Patterson began researching and retracing the murders through Nebraska and into Wyoming. He quickly discovered extensive documentation of the case. He dug through the archives of the Lincoln Journal-Star and the Nebraska State Historical Society, visited some of the murder sites and other places of significance, and met people associated with the story. He also began borrowing and collecting objects to be photographed, some of which had belonged to or been used by the murderers or their victims. Several of these objects were in the hands of private individuals; a few of them are completely new discoveries made by Patterson and seen here for the first time.

The Starkweather/Fugate story has often been an inspiration for popular culture. Numerous movies, books and songs have been based on the killings. Patterson takes an interpretive approach. Although he includes some appropriated photographs and documents that stem directly from the crimes, he does not attempt to piece together the precise circumstances of the murders or any over-arching narrative. Instead, he photographs places and objects of significance to the story, and other effects that refer to the movies and other cultural adaptations of the crimes. Most of all, he creates images that speak to the themes he considers fundamental to the story—angst, love, rebellion, escape, violence and, ultimately, the loss of innocence. He borrows points of fact and freely and boldly mixes them with fictional elements, using photography as his primary tool.

Like some other artists of his generation, Patterson starts with the assumption that photography is both evidentiary and illusory, and he embraces that paradox. In one revealing picture, Oregon Trail Bottle, an empty bottle of black cherry soda found in Starkweather and Fugate's getaway car has been photographed and then the bottle's surroundings partially masked with gray paint. Isolated from the backdrop, the object is presented in the same way that newspapers once manipulated images, to isolate elements within images, and to rid them of context. In this way, Patterson reveals two cultural conventions of photography—the retouched journalistic image, and the intensely gazed, sharply focused forensic object image. Patterson peels back the layers of complication between artifice and reality and demonstrates that even when seemingly straightforward and depleted of context, photographs cannot deliver unequivocal meaning.

Extremely diverse in style, atmosphere and content, Patterson's photographs ebb and flow between seemingly banal, innocuous scenes and dramatic, disturbing subjects. Black-and-white images mix with color, landscapes mix with still life, constructed images mix with found moments. Patterson's embrace of embellishment and style heightens the sense of drama and mystery and presents a formal diversity that is rare for photographic projects, where a consistent signature style remains the norm. To this mix Patterson also adds images that openly exhibit uniquely photographic aberrations and what are normally perceived as "mistakes," such as a double exposure in House of Cards and a light leak in the wryly-titled image Prairie Grass Leak. These types of images interrupt the illusion of the photograph by including evidence of photography's mechanical and inherently unpredictable nature within the frame. In his manifold stylistic choices, Patterson demonstrates that photographs are highly subjective interpretations of reality, and makes us aware of the seductive power of aesthetic effect even as we succumb to it.

Patterson also shares three documents from the wallet of Bobby Jensen, one of Starkweather's teenage victims: a page of pornographic limericks titled "Confasius Says," (sic) written in a stereotypical 1950s "Chinaman's" voice; a political limerick about "Ike" Eisenhower, who was president at the time; and a sublime poem about life in a little town written by Jensen's father, a general store owner who stamped the verse onto every receipt he issued to his customers. Patterson's inclusion of these tactile documents dramatically alters and shapes our experience of this book. The papers animate the small details of the story, offering the viewer further immersion and identification--in this case with a young, innocent victim and the era in which he lived. They also force us participate. We touch them, we peel them back, and we reveal the images hidden underneath them.

Suddenly documentation looks fluid. In his book Archive Fever (1995), Jacques Derrida writes, "The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come." In this spirit, Patterson approaches the archive as a space of negotiation, not authority. Like the artist Walid Raad, who represents the wars in Lebanon through pseudo-documents that combine factual and fictitious elements, or Taryn Simon, who researches well-known, sensational family stories and presents them as elaborate photographic and text-based installations that probe the limits of journalistic reporting, Patterson revisits and repackages the past, destabilizing the archive and

making it a place of activation and possibility. Through his deft blending of fact, popular cultural elements, and personal vision he seems to be asking, “What are the limitations of the archive? What might it conceal?” Hal Foster has written about artists who mine the archive: “the fact that . . . artists turn the archive from an “excavation site” into a “construction site,” is welcome . . . it suggests a shift away from a melancholic culture that views the historical as little more than the traumatic.” In Patterson’s work, the archive is exposed as being incomplete and improvisatory, and this makes way for the implicit, liberating acceptance that human nature is unpredictable and flawed, not only in a tragic way, but in a strange and almost comic one as well. 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.”

Redheaded Peckerwood is not an artifact of cultural memory. It is an interpretation of history that operates like memory and gives the past life in the present. Patterson mines the archive and injects the past with possibility, making art that is at once both contemporaneous and historical. His refusal to delineate what is real and what is fiction prevents us from mentally shelving the events as part of history. Forget considering them only in a passive, distanced way. We must actively engage with our imaginations and our memories, and in that hazy interior realm where they intersect.

Like memory, whose meaning is carried in the body, our attraction to crime stories stems from our deepest interior concerns. Their appeal is based not only on our voyeuristic fascination, but also reflects our feelings of mortality and vulnerability. Our narrative of control, security, and humanity is shaken by violent events. By opening up possibilities within the past, Redheaded Peckerwood contests the possibility of a fixed interpretation of the event. In this inherent challenge it provides new ways to access a story and discovers more meaning than any fact-focused account can offer us. Charged with the present, it allows us active and deeply personal engagement. In this way Patterson suggests that the most important implications of the crime are located not in the social, not in the collective, but more truly in the interior realm of our individual selves, where we harbor our own truths.