

OBSESSION

PART
IX

IN THE NEWS

NEWS STORIES

have always fascinated writers and artists alike because they propel the unexpected into everyday life. Photographer

CHRISTIAN PATTERSON

followed the trail of two young serial killers in the Midwest, who also inspired Terrence Malick's

1973 film **BADLANDS**.

Patterson's exquisite book, "Redheaded Peckerwood", published in 2011, is now a

CULT OBJECT.

BY PHILIPPE AZOURY

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It's already being referred to as "the Monster". And on the scale of the (small) world of photography, Christian Patterson's *Redheaded Peckerwood* is indeed a monster. Since the book was published in November 2011, it has been a topic of much conversation, heated debate, and argument. The publisher, Mack, is an independent London-based house, set up by a perfectionist and former Steidl employee. The books in its catalogue are, as connoisseurs know, among the most exquisite ever produced. But this volume, in particular, immediately triggered a feverish rush among collectors. So much so that barely a month after its publication, it was completely sold out. There are still a few copies available on Amazon, but at ten times the original price. Not one of the 300 books of photos published last year has created such a stir, or anything like the speculation.

The reasons for this sudden fascination don't stem from the author's fame. Christian Patterson, 39, was a little-known photographer up until then. Only a handful of eminent members of the photography world could have told you that he was once William Eggleston's assistant. He previously had one book to his name, *Sound Affects* (2008, FKS, 700 copies), in which he explored – albeit rather evasively – the musical legend of Memphis, hoping to walk in his master's footsteps.

This series of photos depicts PATTERSON'S obsession with the trail of bloodletting left behind by a teenage couple in 1958.



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So, what made his second work an instant classic? The sheer quality. Perhaps, but that's usually not enough to empty the shelves. The scale of the project? Undoubtedly. But above all, *Redheaded Peckerwood* had something far more alluring than most books, before it was even opened: its cover. When you look at it from a distance, all you can make out is grey – grey splotches, as though someone has tried to remove the stains from an old rug using hydrochloric acid. You start to stare at the pattern, until, as if mesmerised, you can't look away. It can take a while, quite a while sometimes, until the blurred silhouettes of a man and a woman emerge from the grey stain. Even from underneath the acid, they look like two mad dogs, ghosts carrying the cursed signs of America past. The America of the 1950s, rooted in the laws and customs of the Wild West, where the taciturn gunslinger's motto, "Look at me and you're dead", is a way of life. The America of redneck country and legends, of romantic renderings of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, films with evocative titles such as *They Live by Night*, *Thieves Like Us* or, in 1973, *Badlands*, Terrence Malick's first full-length feature. His film of pastoral carnage starred a very young Martin Sheen (Kit) and an even younger Sissy Spacek (Holly), who, freckled and redheaded, was a perfect choice for the part.

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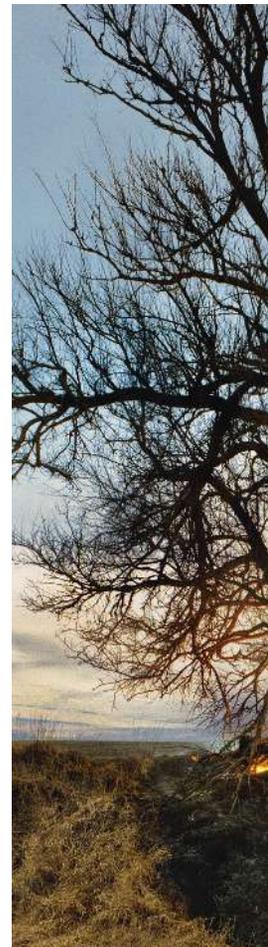
This leads us quite naturally to *Redheaded Peckerwood*, which is based on *Badlands* or, more precisely, the events that inspired it. The book of photos returns to the violent America depicted in the film. There's a pair of electric-blue cowboy boots (worn by Sheen in the film), the insides of derelict farms, traces of blood on tyre marks in the snow, Seven-Up bottle tops, and a jack-knife planted in a wall. The journey takes us a hundred pages or so along the highways of America, stopping off occasionally at a sordid diner. In the window of one establishment, a sign reads: "No guns, no fighting, no food & drinks, no alcohol, no tobacco, no smoking". We carry on our journey under the divine protection of fiery sunsets, adrift, (in and) out of the frying pan into the fire. All you can see is snow and sky. And then, here and there a piece of hanging flypaper entraps the viewer, who gets caught up in the book, taken in by the mystery. There are gaps everywhere, ellipses between the images. What brings them together to create a whole? The photos appear to want to tell us something, but it's impossible to make out what it is. The disparate sequences of *Redheaded Peckerwood* are in an order to which only Patterson has the key. It is rare to trust a young photographer to this extent, but from time to time you have to be able to lower your



guard and let the photos speak for themselves.

And Christian Patterson knows perfectly well when he's lost us and where he brings us back to reality. Everything in the way he has arranged the sequences in *Redheaded Peckerwood* works towards an enduring X-ray of deepest America, slowly and meticulously dissecting the violence. The book is like a museum of redneck life, a Midwest subculture that both frightens and fascinates, and that, over the past 50 years, has given rise to countless books and films and thousands of "country death songs", all of which tell the story of an America proud to remain untamed. Because *Redheaded Peckerwood* comes after so many

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The book, which features archive documents and photos, including one of a pair of blue boots worn by **MARTIN SHEEN** in "Badlands", dissects American violence.



stories, everything in it acquires extraordinary narrative power. A blue wall covered with pin-ups, a reddened shotgun shell photographed against a neutral background, instantly summoning up images of the film, *Gun Crazy*.



In the first pages of the book, Patterson has included a facsimile of a handwritten confession penned in January 1958 by a boy and a girl on the run. Like in *Badlands*, the boy was 19 and the girl 14 or 15. Like everyone else, we only read the text after we'd looked at the photos. We were wrong, as the theme of the photos is right here in these lines, in which Charles Starkweather and his girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate confess to killing seven people. Charles has murdered Caril Ann's

entire family, as her father didn't like the idea of his daughter going around with an older boy.

The other crimes occur like dominoes falling one after another to form a terrifying line, which, like Charles and Caril Ann's route, runs from Nebraska to Wyoming.

Malick was inspired by the two young criminals, and *Redheaded Peckerwood* goes back in time to follow their trail. The first 90 plates in the book are of objects and landscapes. Each in its own way, and in sequence, tells the tale. The first human face appears just ten pages from the end, with an archive photo-booth shot of a 14-year-old sticking her tongue out. This is the real Caril Ann, more beautiful – it's the way she holds her head – more of a rebel, more arrogant than Sissy Spacek in the film. The second photo of her was taken a few months later, in court, but the events in her life had taken place so quickly that she now looks like a woman, not a teenager. She wears her hair curled, with a dark look in her eyes. She pouts, which in other circumstances might have been considered sexy but,

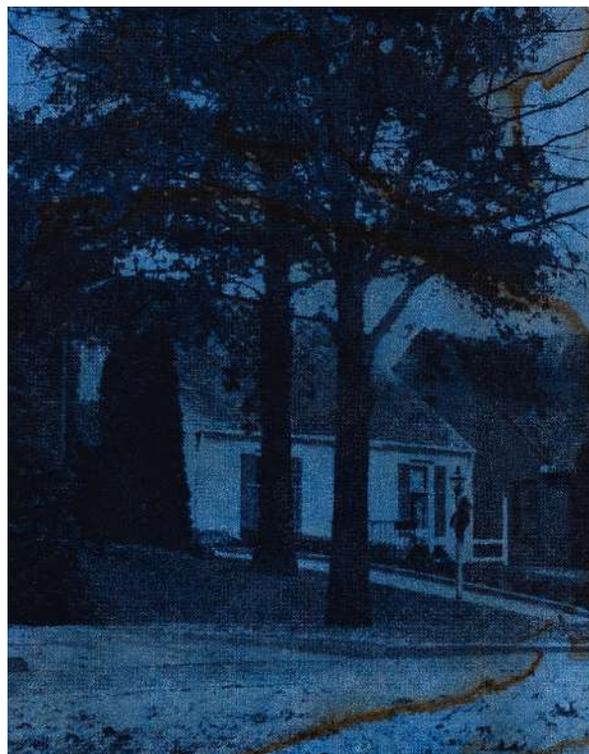


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here, it conveys no more than a profound contempt for the jury who will be trying her case.

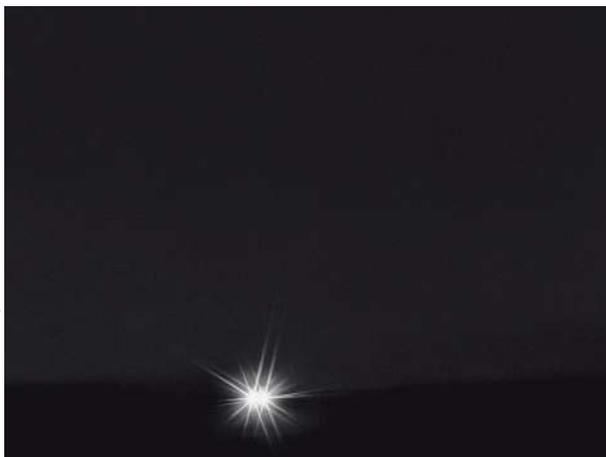
A third archive shot shows a man photographed with his back to the camera. He has a powerful neck and an earring, which bears out what was said about him at the time. Even from behind, Charles Starkweather looked like James Dean. The reproduction of a telex announces the verdict: the electric chair for him, life imprisonment for her. One last photo closes the book: it's night-time, and a group of 18 or 19-year-old guys walk towards the camera. They are all wearing pleated-front trousers and white T-shirts. Their hair is like Chet Baker's in 1958. They have that air of class peculiar to pariahs, mavericks and outsiders. And as long as there are Saturday evenings, with the boredom, the beers to down, the girls to pick up and other men to confront, they'll hold out. —



THE LEGEND OF CHARLES
STARKWEATHER AND CARIL ANN
FUGATE IS AS ENDURING AS
THE MIDWEST.
FOR “VOGUE
HOMMES”, STAR
PHOTOGRAPHER
CHRISTIAN
PATTERSON, 39,
RECALLS THE
ADVENTURE
BEHIND
“REDHEADED
PECKERWOOD”.
SEVEN YEARS UNDER
THE MICROSCOPE.

When did you start the “Redheaded Peckerwood” project?

When I first saw Terrence Malick’s film, *Badlands*, nearly ten years ago. The tragic, violent and romantic aspects of this killer duo made such an impression on me that I started doing my own research, which led me to Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate. I hunted for the tiniest details on that terrible month of January 1958, during which the two teenagers killed Caril Ann’s mother, stepfather and little sister before fleeing and leaving in their wake a trail of terror across Nebraska, murdering ten people in seven days. I even ended up going to Nebraska in January 2005 at the same time of year that they were there. I wanted to walk in their footsteps.

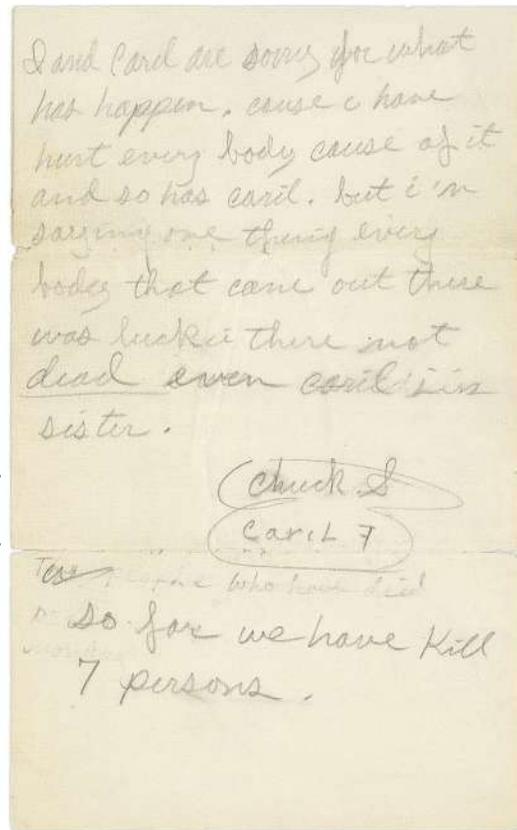


You seem to proceed by lists.

Yes, I listed everything I could – the places, the people. Then, my list spread to objects, consumer goods, types of clothes – their world. I then made the same trip from Nebraska to Wyoming, from west to east, then east to west, every year, for five years. Five successive months of January. Five very cold, very tough, severe winters. Living in the same conditions as if I were on the run. It was then, and there, that I took all the photos that are in the book.

“Redheaded Peckerwood” combines your photos with archive documents...

While I was working on the project, I started doing some really in-depth research. Little by little, I became a real detective working backwards. I spent hours in the archives of the *Lincoln Journal Star*, the main daily to have covered the story. That’s where I discovered all the photos taken at the time by the police. At the Nebraska State Historical Society, I was able to read Caril Ann’s personal diary. The photo-booth shot of her at 14, sticking her tongue out, comes from this diary, which was very visual. I found other things too, like the wallet of one of their victims. I made lists of all these pieces of evidence. It took me some time to not get lost in this mass of archives, to stop myself drowning. I think that everything finally became “fluid” the day I realised that at this stage even a photo of the Nebraska sky





had become a photo for the archives, a photo that could document the story.

The eternal landscape of violence with no timeframe?

My project is a mix of archive and fiction, of the past and what is contemporary for us, so that, ultimately, it all becomes timeless. Perhaps this project ends up inventing a neutral timeline, with something forensic in the way of looking at it. Which is why, in the end, it's not just the story of the couple that I have dissected, but possibly that of a whole American subculture, what it is to be a "peckerwood", a "redneck".

Where do you live?

I live in Brooklyn now, but I was born and grew up in the Midwest. My first girlfriend's father hated me, too. I know these landscapes and I'm familiar with this type of violence. Even though today it frightens me. But while I don't understand American violence on this level, I am no doubt one of the majority of people who are still fascinated by it, there's no denying it.

Which photographers do you feel close to?

I worked with William Eggleston for three years. I was both his assistant and his archivist. *William Eggleston's Guide* will always be the book on photography that has had the most lasting influence on me. Today,



I admire photographers like Adam Broomberg & Olivier Chanarin (*War Primer 2* is my favourite photography book this year), John Divola, Roe Ethridge, Paul Graham, David Lynch, Lebanese artist Walid Raad (who's a member of Atlas Group), Ed Ruscha...

What do you think about the lightning success of your book?

It took me a long time to find a publisher capable of putting this project into book form. The result has gone well beyond my expectations. But all this feverishness is completely foreign to me. I'm savouring it, but recently I have been concentrating on what comes next. —

Christian Patterson, "Redheaded Peckerwood", Mack, 2011 (reprint out this Spring).



As this photo taken from behind shows, **CHARLES STARKWEATHER** looked like James Dean. After his handwritten confession, he was sentenced to death and **CARIL ANN FUGATE** to life imprisonment.

