

Catalogue *Mac Adams, Crimes of Perception*, Editions du Regard, Paris, 2002.

Cluedo Photo

« A cross between an Anthony Caro sculpture and an Agatha Christie murder mystery. »
With that keen depiction, Mac Adams describes one of his works in his *Mysteries* series: highlighting the contrast between abstraction and realism, and placing violence at the core of an aesthetic tug of war or an unexpected juncture. But it is possible to accept rival contradictions that shock the natural order ? No, one must immediatly reassign them to logical and reassuring concepts. And Adams plays with that urgent need for coherence, at one triggerring it, confusing it and encouraging it.

His images tell a story and then turn around and question its meaning, opening the opportunity for all kinds of interpretation. The scenarios toy with both the anticipation and the recollection of their theme—violence—giving them a non-figurative, non-descriptive dimension. As such, their value isn't limited to a contemplation of the scene that is shown; rather their meaning comes from the juxtaposition of distinct moments, separate in time. Each diptych from “Mysteries” has a chronology: the scene on the left is the past of the scene on the right, which is its future. But the chronology is incomplete. The time in the pictures is as broken up as the space. And each bit of time gives a clue to understanding photographs that refuse to acknowledge performances or platitudes. What happens to a fictional crime story that doesn't get solved, or may not even have taken place? What happens to a story without an ending?

Mac Adams takes pictures of an event. According to Gilles Deleuze, an event is something that has just happened or that is going to happen, but never that is happening right now. He also said that in regard to an event, a person is never dying right now, but rather has just died, or will die.¹ In the same way, Adams' photos eschew the gore of an event, yet he doesn't avoid dramatizations typical of the noir genre. Some of the archetypes can't be missed: the use of black and white is a throwback to Hollywood noir thrillers of the 1940s. Other cliches complete the picture: curlicues of smoke from a femme fatale's

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du Sens*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1969, p. 17.

cigarette, a dark cloud filled sky, an empty lot after dusk--all elements of the genre. Even if he isn't referring to a specific film, Adams nonetheless produces a feeling of déjà-vu. And like the work of his predecessors - from Chandler to Bret Easton Ellis, from Howard Hawks to the Cohen Brothers - these pictures, based in fiction, are the solemn expression of the fears and problems they address.

The methods of the noir genre don't constrain Mac Adams. He plays with their inner workings, and without taking away the suspense he frustrates any hope of getting definitive answers to the key questions: who is the killer? How and why? Odd detective stories, these diptychs, which offer solutions but never solve the case. Focusing on both the pleasures and limits of interpretation, the photographer refrains from giving answers, putting unequivocal solutions into perspective. On Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Pierre Bayard has said that evidence of the truth, no matter how it is hidden, is subjective and not generalizable, it is less a textual fact than an observed reality which one can support or not.²

Based on the possibilities that the combination of photographs suggests, you will find a plausible explanation for the death of a young man in one picture shown embracing a girl in the previous image. The power of invention of Mac Adams, director of the scenario, triggers that conjecture. In other words, any solution is one among several hypotheses that are acceptable as long as the story is not complete—and in fact, it never will be. As such, the work creates a model of multiple meanings, whose circumstances--forever changing-- remain in doubt. Each Mystery seems to make both sense and non-sense. Even with a plot and clues that lead to legitimate suspicions, the images also point to unlimited scenarios made possible by persistent dissembling.

There is a double action in the *Mysteries*, certain details are overexposed while others disappear. Cover-ups and evasions vs. highlights and emphasis. Storytelling and framing the image achieve these goals, but they are also a diabolical invention that makes the scene of the crime as twisted as possible.

² Pierre Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1998, p. 48.

The nature of the diptych is the basis for this dramatization: a never-ending sliding back and forth between two images, one modifying the understanding of the other with each new move. The investigation is wholly linked to the movement, risking a slippage into euphoria over the “reversal of the future and the past, active to passive, cause and effect.”³ The movement is unlimited but binary, the investigation restricted to two images (rarely three) because overloading the work might impose a fixed order. Here is one of the reasons Adams doesn’t work in film where “the understanding of each image depends on the ones that came before it.”

Nonetheless, even if it is hard to find or gets lost in the investigation, there is urgent meaning to Adams’ “Mysteries”. As Walter Benjamin wrote about the photographs of Eugene Atget: “...free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way. At the same time picture magazines begin to put up signposts for him...”⁴ In the diptychs, certain elements take on the role of signpost, and succumb (quickly) to the maxim that if the photographer repeats them, it is because he wants them to say something. In some cases, repetition makes it possible to identify characters that only show a part of themselves: a watch, a tattoo, a lock of hair. But by reducing elements to fragments, even parts of the body, doubt is fostered and evidence of change is presented; from simple character, a person becomes victim or criminal. This is straight out of detective stories where “every important event is the result of something banal, familiar...the smallest clue solves the mystery.”⁵ It is what creates the “panicky feeling that clues are everywhere, and that anything can be a clue.”⁶

In the case of the diptychs, that mindset confounds the viewer’s approach. With awareness of an event or its imminence, a once harmless scene gets scrutinized for every clue. It is a world ripe for paranoia, like in the Philip Dick novel where a group travels in imaginary worlds haunted by its own members.⁷ Paranoid delusions lead to mortal fear of a toaster that starts by itself, cans that fall in a cupboard, a house that turns into a blob. By searching for a solution in the photographs, Adam’s viewers waver between the

³ Gilles Deleuze, *op.cit.*

⁴ Walter Benjamin, Paris, *L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée*, in *Écrits Français*, Gallimard, Paris, 1991, p. 150.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Structure du fait divers*, in *Essais critiques*, Points Seuil, Paris, 1964, p. 199.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Philip K. Dick, *L’œil dans le ciel*, 10/18, Paris, 1957.

rational and the fantastic, nurtured by the paranoid confusion that comes from the “false innocence of things” as they are called by Barthes.

By offering multiple clues without providing any ultimate clarification, Adams denies the role of things as evidence. Instead, they take on an “aura of criminality”⁸ He doesn’t turn the proof into fetishes. Rather, they plant the germ of an event, as if a cigarette, a necklace, a bottle of perfume, or a doll was filled with macabre possibilities. It is as if the places where the pictures are taken—the bars, cars, and parks--are filled with the stench of the event, penetrating entire cities and converting them into generalized crime scenes. Space is under the control of the photographer as he distorts it. Adams uses reflection to warp perspective with broken mirrors, and window transparencies to confuse the point of view. In the diptych *The Sofa* Adams breaks up space by breaking apart the unity of a human body, separating it across two pictures. And just like bodies and space, information is broken apart too. Adams gives up any attempt to tell a complete story of a crime.

Mad interpretation... problematic meanings...the dearth of solutions or the key moments are all at the heart of Adam’s photographs. But paradoxically, so is excess (of clues). It is a jubilant paradox that is an assault on the working of fiction: the event breaks free from its expected story. Whereas traditionally the artist provided all the answers from his objective perspective, Mac Adams leaves the unknown hanging, in a panic-filled unmeaning that grows as the images increase (like in *One Hundred Eyes*) along with our certainties.

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Translated from French by Miles Hankin

⁸ cf Anthony Vilder, *The Exhaustion of Space at the Scene of the Crime*, in *Scene of the Crime*, UCLA/Hammer, Los Angeles, 1997.