



Stephen Chalmers • "N 33.26903° W 111.24847°"
 photograph, 24 x 48 inches
 Shift Studio • Pioneer Square / Seattle, WA

En Memoriam

Stephen Chalmers' Photography at Shift Studio

Mourning, by way of roadside memorials, is the subject of this solo show by photographer Stephen Chalmers, on view at Shift Studio from March 3-31. The images are marked by dramatically gorgeous skies, intensely white crosses and a sense of abandonment. The shrines communicate with an anonymous driving public, announcing a loss, marking a dangerous turn or serving as a tangible reminder of the dangers of drinking and driving. Despite, or perhaps because of, their raw subject matter, these images are beautiful, sad, and immediately compelling.

Stephen Chalmers' large color prints are identified by number, with the longitude and latitude of the memorials locations serving as titles. An anonymous mapping device, this navigation code simultaneously reminds us that death is common, and that these remembered deaths are specific to person and location.

In our drive-by culture, mourning is a hidden thing, a subject not talked about, something that we as Americans simply do not know how to do very well. Perhaps that is part of the reason for the public nature of these memorials, the makeshift feel of them. Perhaps a formal funeral didn't provide the solace the family needed, and in order to recognize their loss, and share it, they found it necessary to make their grief physical, public, and highly visible. Offering a way for the family to announce their loss, ask for support and declare the importance of the deceased, these memorials are lovingly made, and tended to by a palpable grief.

"N 33.26903° W 111.24847°" shows three elaborate crosses, red and orange teddy bars attached to their centers, with flowers at the bases of the crosses. We see a smaller triad of crosses closer to the road, against an intensely cloudy sky, with a spot

of clear blue in the distant corner. The road's white dividing line is visible, as is the gravel of the shoulder. The pavement disappears into the hills, as it might if we were going 55 mph.

While one white cross on the side of the road might appear out of nowhere and then disappear again as quickly to an unsuspecting driver, these images are given a permanence that the shrines themselves often do not possess. Stephen Chalmers' work allows us to spend some time with these memorials, and to learn the stories of the deaths they commemorate.

It's difficult subject matter, reading about one highway death after another: drunk driving, a man asleep behind the wheel, children who would be alive had they been wearing their seatbelts. In a country where 42 thousand people die in car accidents every year, it is not surprising that these roadside memorials now number, according to the U. S Department of Transportation, in the tens of thousands.

The practice of erecting roadside memorials is believed to have come to the U. S. from the Southwest. Roadside shrines are common in Mexico and other Roman Catholic countries, where it is considered spiritually important to mark the place where a death took place.

Despite the dark tales they illustrate, many of these images are startlingly pretty, with extra blue skies, intense red flowers, and grass so green it seems caught after a good rainstorm. Chalmers is aware of this contradiction, saying of his photographs "I try to make them as beautiful as possible, to contrast the subject matter."

Another piece depicts a rock with a red spot painted on it, outlined in white. We hardly have to reading the accompanying narrative to know the story. A man, age 49, was killed when his car went off the icy road. He would have survived but for this rock, which now marks the place he died. The sky is too blue, and like many of Chalmers' images, illustrates a respect for

beauty, a nod to the life in the vehicle, parallel to the power lines, speeding away from the viewer. We are reminded that we are getting away with something, and to appreciate the blue blue sky.

Adriana Grant

Adriana Grant is a freelance writer, visual artist and poet. Her work appeared most recently in the Bumbershoot Biennale Consumables show, in LIT magazine, and is forthcoming in The American Book Review.



Stephen Chalmers • "N 30.31480° W 97.73260°"
 photograph, 24 x 48 inches
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Stephen Chalmers' "En Memoriam" opens First Thursday, March 3 at Shift Studio, in the Tashiro Kaplan Building, located at 306 South Washington Street in Seattle. The exhibit is on view until March 31, open Saturdays from noon to 5pm. Shift Studio, which opened in January, is a collaborative studio run by artists Garth Amundson, Pierre Gour, Cara Jaye, Joni Papp, and Stephen Chalmers.

Additional viewing dates: Saturdays, March 5, 12, 19, and 26, 12-5 P.M. For more information, please call (360) 650-3436 or (360) 715-1670 or email shiftgallery@yahoo.com



Stephen Chalmers • "N 37.78028° W 89.00218°"
 photograph, 24 x 48 inches
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