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Stephen Chalmers Dump Sites

Stephen Chalmers' photographs of sites where serial killers dumped their victims on the West Coast of America are haunted with the final experiences of the victims that were brutally disposed of. They also tap into our society's fascination with what murder looks like. Obscured by the passage of time and often invoking the natural beauty surrounding them—wilderness areas being ideal dumping places—Chalmers' pictures challenge photography's ability to expose the spectral history of a location and the knowledge of its viewers.

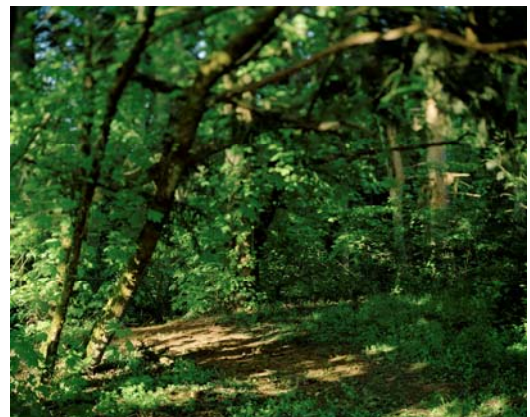
Chalmers is fascinated with how some sites of trauma are memorialized with a plaque, a cross, or flowers, while others simply return to their natural state. In a previous photographic project produced while he was working as an emergency medical technician he returned to accident sites days later to witness and document roadside memorials. In his current "Dump Sites" series there are no memorials. He learns of the locations by reading the public records of closed serial killer cases and looks at the investigative photographs on file. Utilizing Google Earth and GPS coordinates, he determines the exact spot where the bodies were found and visits the location with a large-format camera. In an effort to lure the viewers into his pictures, Chalmers manipulates the plane of focus so that the only sharp area of the picture is the ground where the body was found. The effect produces a slightly eerie, childlike perspective with sensitivity to the victim that was dumped there—a far cry from the photographs made by investigators for purposes of neutral documentation.

Chalmers knows that the victim is often overshadowed by the drama of the killer's story and he would like to refocus respect and attention on the victim and their family. In the words of Eric Schlosser who wrote an in-depth piece on America's fascination with serial murders, "Most serial killers are impelled by a craving for power, by a desire for a sort of control over life and death that is usually attributed to God. When the murderer is the protagonist of a story, we can vicariously experience that power. The victim is a defeated soul, a loser in this contest of strength. Perhaps it is easier to identify with the murderer. To do otherwise means choosing the side of the powerless – and confronting some unsettling

truths.”¹ To draw attention to these complexities, Chalmers, chooses to make the victim the protagonist. He does not record the name of the serial killer or the location of the actual murders.

We normally define physical places with intangible, invisible human experience and knowledge. Without this knowledge, we simply consider pictures of places formally intriguing or picturesque. Take for example Joel Sternfeld’s photographs of eerily familiar sites in America that are socially or politically charged. The sites could have multiple meanings depending upon what the viewer knows about the place, but to control our perceptions, Sternfeld includes a detailed caption regarding the significant event that make his pictures relevant in our media-savvy culture. Taryn Simon’s “Innocents” project, portraits of people wrongfully convicted and imprisoned and later released, also depends on detailed captions. But she often portrays her subjects on the site of the crime of which they were accused. In both Sternfeld and Simon’s work the words give significant weight to the pictures leaving no room for misunderstanding their intent.

In Chalmers’ work the only words he gives to the pictures are the names and ages of the victims. Like photographs themselves, these few words give us the impression that we know more than we do. From the photograph titled *William Neer (10) and Cole Neer (11)* we deduce that brothers, one year apart in age, were murdered and dumped on this site.



We learn no more from the image. The plane of focus leads the viewer down a path reminiscent of Hansel and Gretel, a story both playful and deadly. Chalmers, however, is incapable of seeing this site with naïve eyes. He knows the entire story and why he is there to document it. His goal is to project the story as he knows it without evidence or words allowing the viewers’ imagination to create their version of a story. He knows the boys had spent the afternoon collecting golf balls for money and were on their bikes taking a shortcut through the park because they were late for dinner before being murdered. We don’t know this, but in his view, that might dilute the emotional impact of what we do know. It is Chalmers hope that these well-crafted and engaging pictures will act as the overdue and deserved memorial for the victims and their families. And in a larger sense, cause us to appreciate and question photographic evidence of our capability for both evil and fascination with evil.

¹ Schlosser, Eric, *A Grief Like No Other*, The Atlantic Monthly; September 1997, Volume 280, No 3; pages 37-76.