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A sad, strange pilgrimage



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Written by Debra Brehmer, Contributing writer
Aug 12, 2011

In the lower level of the Museum of Wisconsin Art in West Bend, nine large-scale (40" x 50") photographs by Wisconsin artist Paul Baker Prindle have been installed. The room in which they are displayed has deep-green walls and contains a boardroom table that occupies most of the floor area. At first glance, the pictures appear to be somewhat vacuous images of park and urban scenes.

But wall labels reveal the actual content. Each photograph is part of a larger series documenting sites where anti-gay, hate-motivated killings have occurred. The project, which Baker Prindle has been working on for three years, has taken him to 26 states and the District of Columbia.

It is a sad and strange pilgrimage.

The Museum of Wisconsin Art must be commended for hosting this exhibition, which was supported by Milwaukee philanthropist Joseph Pabst. West Bend has been in the news way too much lately for its right-wing, anti-gay antics.

Several months ago, the local school board denied a request by students to establish a gay-straight alliance club. The club's mission to "combat bullying and harassment" hardly seems radical or threatening. Yet it took several years and a federal lawsuit to convince the school board to acquiesce and approve the club on June 13.

In 2009, this city of 30,000 also made national news when a band of local religious fundamentalists demanded that the library



2010

remove "Heather Has Two Mommies" from the young adult section.

Baker Prindle's exhibition is a wake up call to this conservative faction. Understanding comes through education, by making these issues approachable, normative and open for discussion. As theorist Susan Sontag stated, "Photographs help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure."

In Baker Prindle's body of work, the description of what occurred at each site is presented with minimal wall text, perhaps only one or two sentences. For example, the label accompanying a photograph of a pretty rural footbridge in Virginia states:

"Northington's severed head had been placed squarely in the center of the walkway, leading many to speculate that the murderer(s) had intended to make an anti-gay statement."

The photograph itself is innocuous, empty. We read the label, digest the essence of the crime, and then look back at the photo and complete it with the new information. Baker Prindle's photographs require this transaction between viewer, image and information. We cannot be passive. We have to implant the gained knowledge and imagined visual image of the physical crime into the subjectless pictures.

Nine photographs are just enough to create a mausoleum. "Like all gestures to remember the dead, I hope that these photographs point us back to an understanding of our own delicate humanity that nurtures a deeper respect for other humans," Baker Prindle said.

While an almost indescribable residue of remorse lingers over this project, the large format and colorful crispness of the images beckons us into what are essentially portraits without people, portraits where the subjects have been violently edited from the images. We immediately feel the sense of loss but are not repelled. Like a visitation, the viewer is drawn into a slow communion with every image. We offer a moment of our thoughts and respect for each terrible death. In this regard, the exhibition functions almost ritualistically.

The installation's first picture (above) is of the site outside of Laramie, Wyo., where college student Matthew Shepard was left following an ultimately fatal beating in October 1998. Perhaps because of the publicity around the case, the image of a sunny, dry, rural landscape with a tree casting a welcome shadow in the heat carries an almost unbearable weight. The text reads simply: "Matthew's major injuries upon arrival consisted of hypothermia and a fracture from behind his head to just in front of the right ear. This has caused bleeding in the brain, as well as pressure on the brain."

The town of Laramie has changed the names of the roads around the murder site to discourage memorial pilgrimages. Leaders refuse to erect a marker. The urge to bury the past rather than dwell on it is powerful.

Baker Prindle says, "Making large prints of the sites helps a viewer enter the site and deal with the reality of these brutal events – to question if they would be bystanders, what it means for humans to do these things to other humans, and how we remember important things in a world that is so throwaway."

A reception and informal presentation featuring Baker Prindle and assistant director Graeme Reid is from 6 to 9 p.m. Sept. 7 at the museum. The exhibition runs through Sept. 25.

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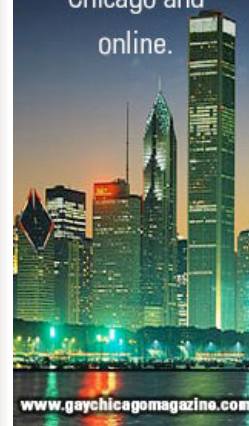
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