

The dirty business of crime photography

Collapsing the boundary between yellow journalism and police snapshots

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The McGill Daily



Emanuelle Leonard's exhibit *Une Sale Affaire* forces a re-examination of the sterility of police photography.

Courtesy of Optica

Walking into this particular gallery, on this particular Tuesday afternoon, the seeming emptiness of the place struck me. What exactly was going on here? Where was everybody? Where was this eerie music coming from?

As I began to wander the small space, I found the music luring me into a dim curtained area to my left that blocked off part of Emanuelle Leonard's newest exhibit, *Une Sale Affaire* [A Dirty Business].

The exhibit was presented as a meditation on the "unemotional" world of police photography, yet even at first glance it was not what I expected. What began to reveal itself here was the necessity – even more so than in your average art exhibition – for the viewers to put pieces together themselves; you could even say one was supposed to play detective. Clever, Ms. Leonard, very clever.

In the small black screening room where the sleuthing was to begin, a short movie, which I can only describe as a cross between a film noir murder mystery and a late night CourtTV program, was looping. Watching intently, I felt chills crawl inadvertently up the notches of my spine, yet my mind was somehow unable to grasp the emotions my senses were sending.

So this was supposed to be an exhibit on police photography? One which explicitly denies emotions, and attempts to create a narrative through the evidence images convey? I think not.

***Une Sale Affaire* revealed itself as a much more involved exhibition than its oversimplified handout implied: it challenged our very relation to crime itself as a product of visual representation.**

Opposing any sort of “unemotional” photography, the opening film, accompanying music, and photographs lining the opposing wall were more than vaguely creepy: they were meant to elicit a response in the viewer. Together, these were orchestrated to implant the melodramatic image of the dark underbelly of crime firmly in the viewer’s mind.

Pushing on into the passage leading to the next room, I was greeted by a giant print taken from the Quebec evidence archives. So here it was, the marked dividing point between the sensationalization of crime and the scientific precision of police investigation.

As I walked into the bright lights, everything changed. The imposed sterility of the back room’s environment shattered the hazy feeling of loathing I experienced in the front space. Still, the unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach tenaciously held on. The sudden sterility of this second environment had brought specific attention to the distinctly emotional reaction elicited by the stylized representations of crime in the first part.

Une Sale Affaire, for all of its confusion, may be questioning just this strange divide. Our outlooks are determined by the many ways in which we are exposed to crime in everyday life. The artistically sensationalized depiction of crime stands in contrast with the concise, purportedly factual journalistic approach; yet should either be taken as absolute?

The true question lies in the power of the camera and the photographer herself. In our culture, which places so much emphasis on the power of the visual, the photograph strikes a perfect example of the tension between truth and fiction. Our immediate and instinctive response is to trust it; a photograph can capture a moment of reality on film and keep it just so, for everyone to see. Yet can it really preserve reality in the way we would want it to? Doesn’t every shot’s preferential framing add a new layer to the scene presented?

When viewing any photograph, we are essentially looking through someone else’s eyes. This very fact reveals the inability of the photograph to reflect absolute reality. The clearly artistic style of the photography in the first part of the exhibition is self-referential; it highlights the nature of the photograph’s framing to reflect the artist’s intention, rather than “Truth.” Meanwhile, the back room’s so-called unemotional photographs are at odds with this notion. All of the works are parts of the same art exhibit; the same artist is responsible for the photography of the first and second rooms, yet the responses are so markedly different.

It is clear that the sterile journalistic photographs of the second room are just as meticulously prepared as the first, but prompt an opposite effect, which brings the viewer to a logical conclusion: there is always bias. While the macabre may be played up in the front space through one type of arty photography, the “unemotional” or “scientific” approach of the other is, in this context at least, just another tool in the photographer’s arsenal. The very juxtaposition of the two different expressions of crime forces the spectator to question their own feelings and perceptions. What you are shown is not reality as is, but reality as presented to you by Emanuelle Leonard, no matter which section of the exhibit you may find yourself standing in.

Une Sale Affaire runs through Oct. 13 at Optica (372 Ste. Catherine O.) as part of the Mois de la Photo.

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