

Paul Seawright

How does this work challenge the boundaries between documentary and art?

The work itself is titled 'Sectarian Murder' which implies a documentary approach, but the photos themselves are not what would normally be associated with a murder scene – police, ambulance, 'do not cross' tape sealing off an area. Indeed the photos are of very ordinary, unremarkable places.

But then we read the description and find that these are all photos of locations where innocent people were murdered for their religious belief. The text below each image describes what happened there, only the particular religion of the victim had been removed from the description.

The title of the works and the individual descriptions indicate a documentary approach, but the photos are of very ordinary places, but in most instances Seawright has heightened the drama of the scene, e.g.

- The dramatic sky and light and bright red stop sign in Thursday 14/12/72
- The colours and the dog in Friday 25/5/73
- The roundabout leading the eye in Saturday 9/6/73
- The contrasting shapes of foliage and hills in Sunday 9/7/72
- The chiaroscuro of Friday 22/9/72
- The slide leading the eye into Tuesday 3/4/73

It is the contrast of the 'artistic' image and the 'documentary' title and text that blurs the boundaries of this work.

Seawright himself states that he did not want the images to be too journalistic, too explicit.

In the video he describes his aim as 'to make work that visually engages people, that draws them in and then gives itself up, gives its meaning up slowly'.

Talking about art he says:

'The construction of meaning is not done by me it is done by the person looking at the artwork and you must leave space for that to happen, if you don't then you really are back to an editorial picture in a magazine that has to function in a different way. It has to be quick and it has to give its meaning quickly'.

If we define a piece of documentary photography as art, does this change its meaning?

To consider this in more depth I want to look at a couple of examples from the American Civil War.

The first is a painting 'Prisoners from the Front' by Winslow Homer (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/22.207>). This represents an actual scene from 1864 of Brigadier General Barlow capturing several confederate prisoners. There is a great deal of

meaning in this painting – the stance and demeanour of the capturing officer compared and contrasted with the different stances of the prisoners, the devastation of the battlefield behind. The whole painting seems to encapsulate the divisions between the North and the South at the time of the Civil War, the victory of the North but also the problems that would continue (summed up in the stance of the Confederate officer). This is unquestionably a work of art hung in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Next I want to look at a photograph called ‘Confederate prisoners, Gettysburg, Pa, July 1863’ (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cwp.4a40909/>) held in the US Library of Congress. This photo also shows three confederate prisoners (albeit without the capturing Northern officer). The photo seems posed in a deliberate triangular fashion, the men adopting somewhat defiant stances. The setting is interesting with the large pile of timber and countryside beyond. Without the title would you have known these were prisoners? It is possible (particularly with the title) to read into this photo some of the meanings attached to the Homer painting – the stance and attitude of the prisoners indicates the problems the country would continue to face despite the victory of the Unionist cause.

So the painting by Homer is a work of art, but I would also argue serves a documentary purpose as it comments on a specific event (and its consequences). The photograph of the three Confederate prisoners is a documentary photograph but I would contend that it is also a work of art.

Does this mean that we should look at them differently if they were intended as documentary pieces or as works of art? I don’t think so. I think that Paul Seawright is correct when he talks of works of art giving up their meaning slowly rather than ‘editorial pieces’ which are designed for a different purpose and give their meaning up quickly.