

At the Picture Show With Mark Bennett

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There is no better way to celebrate the gallery's fourth anniversary than with an exhibit of new drawings by Mark Bennett, who returns to Washington, D.C. this month for his fourth show at Conner Contemporary Art: *At the Picture Show*. In his exciting new series this Los Angeles artist presents architectural drawings of movie homes from big-screen hits like "Psycho", "In Cold Blood", and "What Ever Happened to Baby Jane". Along with these classics Bennett also explores his fascination with the sets of lesser known B-movies, such as "Kitten with a Whip". Working in India ink and graphite on graph paper, Bennett applies the signature style he introduced in his blue-print renderings of TV sitcom homes - exhibited here and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2000, and at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1997 - featuring "The Honeymooners" and "The Beverly Hillbillies" among other small-screen favorites.¹

Bennett has now turned his attention to cinematic dramas in which, he explains, "The houses are not merely backdrops but are just as important as the characters"². The artist's central concept for "At the Picture Show" is that, in each of these movies, the specific architectural setting actually dictates aspects of the plot and structures the actions played out within its spaces. For example, the landscaped yard of Mrs. Claire Marrable provided the perfect place to dispose of the bodies of her murdered housekeepers in "Whatever Happened to Aunt Alice."

Creating installations, like the "Valley of the Dolls" exhibition here in 2000³, initially sparked Bennett's interest in vintage movie sets. This interest intensified early in 2003 as he curated "The Art of Luxury: Mark Bennett presents Nine Hollywood Homes by John Elgin Woolf" at the University Art Museum: University of California, Santa Barbara⁴. He explains, "Working closely with physical props which reflect their period prompted me to consider the amazingly detailed nature of original movie sets and the incredible effort it took to create them"⁵. This approach is evident in Bennett's carefully-labeled drawings of each furnished interior. Through attention to details like Hi-fi stereos and rotary dial phones Bennett situates each drama within its own niche of cultural history. His nuanced references to decor reveal psychological insights about the movies' characters, such as the chic actress, Lora Meredith, whose home in "Imitation of Life" is appointed with a semi-circular bar and several cigarette boxes⁶. Yet, these drawings reflect, above all, the

¹ See: F. Protzman, "Camp at Conner", *The Washington Post* (May 11, 2000) D5. *Mark Bennett: TV Sets and the Suburban Dream*, exh. cat., The Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C. 1997); M. Bennett, *How to Live a Sitcom Life: A Guide to TV Etiquette* (New York 1999); M. Bennett, *TV Sets: Fantasy Blueprints of Classic TV Homes* (New York 1996).

² Conversation with the artist on February 21, 2003.

³ Featured by W. Dunlap on "Around Town" WETA November 2000.

⁴ M. Bennett, *The Art of Luxury: Mark Bennett Presents 9 Hollywood Homes by John Elgin Woolf*, exh. cat. University Art Museum, UCSB (Santa Barbara Jan. 14- March 2, 2003).

⁵ Conversation with the artist on February 21, 2003.

⁶ In a recent interview Bennett mused, "I've thought of several TV or movie houses to live in, but I think I would probably choose the apartment for "The Bad Seed...When you know you have a limited amount of income, you know you're not going to get the house from "Imitation of Life" but you might get the apartment from "The Bad Seed." B. Moylan, "Home is Where the Art Is", *Washington Blade* (March 28, 2003) p. 65.

penetrating candor and sparkling wit of an artist with the uncanny ability to excite the collective memories of our culture.

Happily, I had the opportunity to discuss these works at length with Bennett in a recent conversation, which he has agreed to let me present here in interview format⁷. Much of our conversation focused on the contents of a photo album the artist sent to me and Leigh Conner in order to facilitate our understanding of the profound themes and concepts that shaped his drawings⁸. The album is a personal possession of the artist and contains snapshots, newspaper clippings, and other memorabilia from his driving tour of sites of serial murders from New York to California in May of 1982.

J.S.: I'm blown away by your *Mass Murder Tour of America '82* album. It's amazing and fascinating. The rare opportunity to study this kind of source material is an art historian's wildest fantasy! Several themes resonate with your new series of drawings and many seem to hinge on your visit the Clutter farm [the actual home where the Clutter family was murdered in the case which inspired the movie "In Cold Blood"].⁹ Would you please comment on the relation of your drawing of this movie set to the trip you made to Clutter farm?

M.B.: That was a labor of love. I re-read the book several times and followed the directions exactly as they were given to the murderers, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, by a fellow inmate. I even went to the same motel where Perry stayed and tried to figure out which room he had.

J.S.: Would you say that mapping out this and other murders gave you insight into what may have been going through the minds of the killers?

M.B.: That is the *whole point!* I've never had the heart - or the energy - to kill someone, but these cases trigger something in me and make me wonder: *What was going through their minds?* I mean, in the Clutter case, Perry was so pitiful and the ring-leader, Dick, was such a hoodlum. I tried to put myself in their place and mindset, in Kansas, back in 1959. I even made a side-trip while I was in Kansas to find the home of their fellow inmate, Lowell Lee Andrews, who killed his whole family on Thanksgiving day. Their house was abandoned just as it was- furniture, clothes, and everything- still there. It was very strange.

J.S.: Do you consider your drawings to be memorials to the victims who died at these sites?

M. B.: Yes. The drawings are memorials in every sense and I consider the actual sites to be sacred places. I was thrilled when I got to go in the guest house at Sharon Tate's property, the scene of the Manson murders. I was terribly upset when they tore down her house and built a Spanish-style monstrosity in its place. I wanted to live in the house she was murdered in because I knew it would *never happen again*.

J.S.: On your New York-to-California trip you toured Universal Studios. What were your impressions?

M.B.: It broke my heart to go on that tour. I saw Beaver's house ["Leave It to Beaver] and was so disappointed that it was just a façade. The "Psycho" house is so much smaller than it looks in the movie and

⁷ Conversation with the artist on April 2, 2003.

⁸ M. Bennett, *Mass Murder Tour of America '82* (unpublished).

⁹ Along with snapshots of the Clutter farm, Bennett made the following entry in his album: "*In Cold Blood*- true story of murdered family; inmate drew map of farm and floorplan of house "The River Valley Farm was the scene of the tragic deaths of Herb Clutter, his wife, Bonnie, and the two youngest children, Nancy, 16, and Kenyon, 15. The brutal killings, by rifle and knife, were the work of two ex-convicts, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. On a tip from a cellmate that Clutter had once employed, the murderers were expecting to find about \$10,000 in a safe. Their take from the excursion: \$45 and Kenyon's portable radio." See: *Ibid.*, no pagination.

that bothered me. It's sad that it's on a back lot now. I'd much rather see these houses as they look on film, as I remember them. I'd much rather live in the fantasy.

J.S.: In your approach to your movie set drawings where does true crime end and fictional murder begin?

M.B.: That's an important point. I believe that most, if not all, of these films were based, in part, on true events. For example, Norman Bates's character in "Psycho" was based on the story of Ed Gien from the 1940s in Wisconsin. He murdered his mother, and, after she was buried, dug up her body and made a coat of her skin, which he wore around the house. That's where the taxidermy thing in "Psycho" came from. In fact, when the authorities finally searched Gien's house they found his mother's severed breasts still intact. I'm telling you, you just *can't* make this kind of stuff up!

J.S.: Would you elaborate on the relation of fictional characters in movies to your interest in real-life killers?

M.B.: For me it all reveals something profound about the American psyche. This notion took root when I was a kid. I'd be watching a TV show and, all of a sudden, the program would be interrupted by a newflash. In July of 1966, for example, I still remember hearing the newflash about the eight nurses murdered in Chicago. I was watching "I Love Lucy" at the time. I guess these dramatic interruptions caused me to overlay serial murder and human tragedy onto the concepts of entertainment and frivolous fun that TV sitcoms engender. But I think they are both integral parts of life experience which is uniquely American.

J.S.: Of the movies you selected for this series of drawings most of the plots involve murders, and all feature psychologically disturbed characters. This common thread, the strong psychological element, really comes across in your blue-print drawings where you label the interior furnishings and belongings of the characters who lived there and reveal some of their personal traits¹⁰.

M.B.: Thank you! I'm glad it does, because the concept of psychological instability has been *key* throughout the whole process of creating these drawings. Just the idea that there are people among us who may be disturbed enough to commit murder is enough to give anyone pause. You know how you get involved in certain typical situations where you might be talking to someone you've met but don't know very well, and at a certain point in the conversation you realize that this person's not quite sane? *That's* the sort of thing I mean. Real life is *always* much more shocking than fiction. I stay away from science fiction and supernatural stuff, because to me, there's plenty of strangeness in the world just as it is. "Star Wars" seems really dated when I watch it now, but some of these old black and white dramas contain timeless insights into human psychology. Remember the scene in "Autumn Leaves" when Joan Crawford is just pounding out some manuscript on her typewriter and her crazy husband is in bed in the next room just wailing? That close-up shot of her face - particularly her eye movements - it's just *magic!*

J.S.: You included some really famous hit films, like "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane", which nearly everyone has seen and will be able to relate to immediately. Other titles, like "Hush, Hush, Sweet Charlotte", may sound familiar, but might not have been seen by many of your viewers. Then there are some more obscure B-movies, like "Kitten With a Whip", which are likely to be unfamiliar to most of us, but sound intriguing enough that, after viewing your drawings, people may be inspired to watch them.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Bennett intuitively employs two classical modes of mapping in his drawings: a) the plotting of spatial relations of features in topographical sites and b) detailed pictorial descriptions of architectural structures and their and their contents which are labeled with text. On the use of these modes in antiquity see: J. Moffitt, "The Palestrina Mosaic with a Nile Scene: Philostratus and Ekphrasis; Ptolemy and Chorographia", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* (no. 2, 1997) pp. 227-247.

M.B.: Oh, I hope so. I want people to see these films because I think each one is fantastic in its own way. I had never heard of "Kitten With a Whip" until Belinda Carlisle of the GO-GOs said in an interview that she wanted her hair to be like Jody's in "Kitten With a Whip". I'm really intrigued, too, by the idea of the audiences who saw these movies when they were first released. In the early '60s, people didn't go out to the movies as often as folks do today, and when they did, they got all dressed up. I really wonder about what people thought when "The Bad Seed" was released, in 1956, because that's the year I was born. The idea that children could be cold-blooded murderers must have been absolutely shocking.

J.S.: Was your *Mass Murder Tour of America '82* trip something that you had been planning for a long time?

M.B.: Yes, for years.

J.S.: What circumstances led you to take the trip in 1982?

M.B.: Back in 1975 I was working in a textile factory in Tennessee and a co-worker's Mom went to Kansas to see the Clutter house. She couldn't get in, though. Ten years later, I was living in New York. I had read everything about the murders I could get hold of and I wanted to see where it happened. I applied to a car-delivery service and lined up deliveries across the whole country so I could visit Kansas and a number of other murder sites. It was *perfect* because there is a whole subculture of people who transport cars and this added another quirky dimension to the trip. There was something quintessentially American about the whole thing. When I drove to some of these little, out of the way places, I'd stop at gas stations where they'd have a map of the town taped up on the window. My whole orientation was: I don't want to see the Grand Canyon, and, as for historical sites, I don't care about Betsy Ross's house. What I'm interested in are the places where these famous, and some not so famous, murders occurred.

J.S.: Is that because these sites, and the events that occurred in them, seem more real to you than typical Americana tourist spots?

M.B.: They *definitely* seem more real. As a child, murder had a huge impact on me personally. You know, in 1968 my Aunt Kitty murdered her husband, my Uncle Gordon.

J.S.: Are you serious?

M.B.: Yes, it happened after a terrible drunken Thanksgiving-day row. My parents got a call at 10pm that evening and were told that she had shot him, and my mother said, "Well, that just ruins our family Thanksgiving!" But I thought it was fabulous and exciting because everyone was crying and screaming. My cousin, Twig, who was in the house at the time of the murder, took the stand and testified that he "didn't hear anything", even though the furniture was destroyed and the house had been completely wrecked during their fight!. In the end, my aunt was acquitted on the basis of self-defense. The whole thing was really incredible.

J.S.: It must have been incredible, indeed!

M.B.: Yes, well, speaking of aunts, "Whatever Happened To Aunt Alice" is a movie *all about aunts*. There are three relationships between characters and their aunts, one of whom is a serial murderer. That's one of the reasons I like it so much, but also because, for the time, the characters were just so *progressive*. I mean, like the swinging couple who are wife-swappers, I watch them and think: My, aren't *they* sophisticated!

J.S.: You documented your trip in a very systematic way in the *Mass Murder Tour of America '82* album. In some cases you included aerial and topographical photographs of murder scenes, like Sharon Tate's house and the site where the Hillside strangler victims were found. In others, you included maps (as in the Son of Sam case) or listed directions to the sites by car (as in the Clutter murders). Do you consider the process of mapping to be an important element of your work?¹¹

M.B.: *Exactly!* It's all about *geography*, and *American* geography, in particular. It's not very different from houses really, because geographical boundaries are like walls. In fact, I'm planning to draw a new map, something like I did for "The Fugitive", but this time for "Thelma and Louise". I'm going to plot the route that they drove. It would have been easier for them to go through Texas, but Louise didn't *want* to go to Texas, because something bad had happened to her there and she *just couldn't* go back. It's all about mileage and territory. These ideas are connected with the notions of property and where we live. When I make maps and blue-print drawings, I feel that I'm taking someone else's property. It's about me trying to take hold of these structures in their time and place and *make them mine*. This is especially true of my drawings of houses from movie sets because in them I create something that, outside of the illusion of film, *never actually existed before*.

¹¹ The importance of mapping in the history of art is considerable and well established in the literature. On the practice of mapping in the art of the Renaissance and Baroque periods see: Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing* (Chicago 1983); Walter Melion, "'Ego enim quasi obdormivi': Salvation and the Blessed Sleep in Philip Galle's *Death of the Virgin* after Pieter Bruegel" *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* (vol. 46 1996) pp. 15-52; and Jamie Smith, chapter 9: "Christian Cartography and Noah's Ark as a *mappa mundi*" in *Reconstructing Noah's Ark in Sixteenth-Century Germany: Mnemonic and Dynastic Themes of Boxes Designed by Nuremberg Goldsmith Wenzel Jamnitzer*, M.A. Thesis, The George Washington University (Washington, D.C.: May 1998).