

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Review of *Forensics: An Anatomy of Crime*

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The Wellcome Collection in London is no stranger to the taboo- it has consistently sought to push the boundaries and challenge traditional conventions and preoccupations with exhibiting themes that are 'appropriate' and 'uncontroversial'. Following in a series of exhibitions that have sought to confront the unconventional and the unexhibitible, *Forensics: an Anatomy of Crime* follows the collection's previous exhibition on the *Institute of Sexology* and does not disappoint in its ability to fascinate and shock, and through that provide a platform for further discussion on the topic.

Concealed behind a pair of unassuming doors and past a sign that explicitly discourages photography of the sensitive material within, the exhibition is essentially a commentary both on the emergence and evolution of forensics as a discipline in the nineteenth century and on its applications in modern day crime-solving. To achieve this latter goal, the exhibition follows a narrative that takes the visitor through the different stages of a murder investigation, beginning at the actual event of the crime, and ending with its resolution in a court of law. Thus, the exhibition space is divided into different thematic zones, each representative of a familiar trope, popularised by its prevalence in mainstream media. The *Crime Scene* for instance, is first in a series of stops that the visitor encounters during their journey through

the space, and is followed, quite logically, by the Morgue, the Laboratory, the Search, and the Courtroom- none of which are unfamiliar spaces to the imagination of the visitor.

Thematically, *Forensics* is an interesting blend of the scientific and the social, where standard, laboratory-grade equipment is juxtaposed with artistic representations of crime, unapologetic in their depictions of death and gore. There are intricate reconstructions of murder scenes with *Nutshell Study of Unexplained Death*, which sit side-by-side with an exhibit of scientific equipment- swabs and test tubes, familiar props to anyone who has watched a late-night episode of a police procedural drama. Fragments of bone and organ tissue and morgue equipment co-inhabit the space with material of a more impersonal nature- leather-bound books on Alphonse Bertillon's study on fingerprint analyses, newspaper articles on legal procedures, devoid of the graphic image of death and decay that is inspired by, say the ceramic draining board, sourced from a now defunct mortuary, and a popular exhibit in the 'Morgue' section of the exhibition. The exhibition fascinates, but the fascination is followed by a lingering sense of unease, one that is perpetuated by a realisation of what these pieces of art, that these carefully arranged steel paraphernalia eventually represent. The exhibits themselves are capable of being shocking, and they are unapologetic in their ability to do so. This is demonstrated by the *Lustmord* series by Jenny Holzer, where a table of human bones – clavicles, sternebrae and vertebrae, meticulously ordered

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and arranged – stand witness to the violent, sexual crimes and human rights violations during the Bosnian war in the latter years of the twenty-first century. The curatorial lens here shifts from the clinical to the social as forensic science becomes intrinsically linked to socio-political issues. This reference to real-life events and scenarios is replicated in other exhibits within the gallery – two of the exhibition's video exhibits directly refer to the application of forensic identification and reconstruction techniques in the identification of victims of the massacre under the Pinochet regime in Chile, and in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. This is perhaps the greatest strength of the exhibition – that it manages to provide a balanced view of the subject, without venturing into a territory that is either rigidly clinical or fraught with sensationalisation. The installations and objects in this exhibition remain true and brutally honest to their subject, and successfully side-step the melodrama and shock-value that mainstream media often applies to forensic science.

Forensics: an Anatomy of Crime is an intelligently-curated exhibition, one that showcases an impressive range of objects, ideas and interpretations on the subject of forensics and their contribution to modern

day investigative procedures. It is an exhibition that satiates the inherent fascination many of us have for the macabre, but does so with surprising restraint. It manages to strike a fine balance between the clinical and controversial, where scientific accuracy is not sacrificed for the sake of spectacle. The exhibition's greatest accomplishment lies in its ability to effectively comment upon a scientific topic without isolating the social, human element from the subject, or reducing forensics to a sanitised science, devoid of the brutality and violence that essentially sustain it.

Forensics, an Anatomy of Crime ran at the Wellcome Collection in London from 26 February 2015–21 June 2015. An online archive of the exhibition and its contents can be accessed at <http://wellcomecollection.org/forensics>. The exhibition was also accompanied by a publication, 'Forensics: The Anatomy of Crime' by Val McDermid (Profile Books, £8.99), which can be ordered online, at <http://wellcomecollection.org/forensics-anatomy-crime> or bought in store at the Wellcome Collection at 183 Euston Road, London.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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