



From Berlin: Cady Noland / Santiago Sierra

CADY NOLAND AND SANTIAGO SIERRA

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by *Daily Serving*

Like a newspaper in its matter-of-fact presentation of content, *Cady Noland / Santiago Sierra* at KOW Berlin, curated by Alexander Koch and Nikolaus Oberhuber, appears purposefully removed of emotion. We never make eye contact with other humans, backs are often turned, or we find ourselves averting our eyes for our own protection. We stand on the outside looking in. No one makes a human gesture towards us as viewers; our presence is not acknowledged or regarded with any sort of value. Just as we may be blind to others' suffering, we are made invisible and unimportant.

Sierra's video, *Burned Buildings (Found Scene)* (2008), starts with a hectic, first-person shot approaching a fire. We hear sirens, and see the unsteadiness of the handheld camcorder. We arrive behind a wall—shielding our view of the actual building—the camera is set down, and the video transforms into a contemplative, moving grisaille of smoke in the wind. Any standard journalistic questions linger and remain unanswered.

Monochromatic in its curation, the visual aesthetic of the show easily captivates. This is a purposeful distraction. If we just look at the pictures without bothering to read the story, we don't need to concern ourselves with the reality of the situations presented. Considering how many images and texts present themselves to us each day, disregarding most of them may be the best coping mechanism for fulfilling our day-to-day tasks and pursuing our own lives.

It is difficult, however, not to be struck by two of Sierra's photographs, *Teeth of the Last Gypsies of Ponticelli* (2008). Two open mouths of teeth, ground down and deformed, give evidence of the psychological stress and physical condition of the sitters. They are both captivating and devastating in their spectacle. The time-intensive process of wearing teeth down so severely brings more questions than emotional concern. Awareness of this state implicates the viewer as partial perpetrator, despite the victim being foreign and obtuse.

Violence is an ever-present undercurrent of the show, and is most overt in Noland's piece, *Enquirer with Eyes Cut Out* (1990). The removal of the image's eyes points to a sort of Hollywood version of psychopathy. The type of story presented, involving the private lives of celebrities, exists in

our culture not for its importance or affect on society at large, but rather to knock down people above us in the social hierarchy. Celebrity 'rag mags' seem to exist solely for this eventual purpose. Removing the eyes dehumanizes, and by taking away a celebrity's humanity, we are able to freely violate and judge them, therefore purposefully making ourselves the offenders to their victimhood.

We've all heard stories of exploitation, just as we've all at times chosen not to act or to rebel against various human atrocities. Seeing documentation of this, be it in a paper or on a gallery's walls, allows us distance and freedom from any sense of responsibility. The content of the show, however, remains commonplace. It's delivered to us daily in our mailboxes, or is readily available at the corner newsstand. In *89 Huichols* (2006), Sierra highlights particular examples from our world that act as stand-ins for the marginalized figures that give regular society its "other" of the moment. Coupled with Noland's work, the curators have moved us from the Sierra conversation "Why would he do that?" to "Why do we allow this?" The stories Sierra covers here don't get a lot of news time when contrasted against Jaclyn Smith's divorce, due to a lack of interest from the general public. This sentiment is subtle, but apparent throughout the exhibition.

There is a detached quality between both Noland and Sierra and their work. They're no Sarah McLachlan, who appeals to our emotions to garner donations for abused animals. Instead, Coland and Sierra offer fodder for intellectual study. They have selected specific victims for examination, but instead of inciting activism, the non-sensationalism of the exhibition is at times apathetic, and thus calls us out for our own apathy toward the details of the content. The power of this show relies on having a calm and ordered appearance, as well as projecting a tone of rationalism.

While a sort of historicizing happens with the pieces that involve particular groups of people, the object-based pieces in the show exist with a sort of timelessness. These pieces treat the viewer as both victim and perpetrator. We cause our own unease by walking through an imposing gate, and yet we subject ourselves to the onslaught of bright buzzing lights with the visceral awareness that even though we're in control, we're contributing to our own discomfort.

We know the wince and moment of anticipation all too well, but we continue to rubberneck at the sight of a car crash. For all the controversy that Noland and Sierra are known for, the show's sense of violence or exploitation is severely reserved when pitted against any real story of human suffering. Noland and Sierra's approaches to victimization in our society complicate our individual roles and responsibilities in playing on either side. While no one wants to be a victim, we seem to find ourselves in a position where victimization is natural or necessary, so we prefer the alternative, perhaps despite the moral implications of it, in order to survive.