

LEFT BEHIND THE WHEEL

Miki Baird Traces Interrupted Journeys

by Steve Walker

We are what we drive.

Our vehicles speak volumes about our collective constitution. Not unlike the standard sermon of the fashion industry, the one coming from car-porn television series like *Pimp My Ride* tout that it is really what is on the outside that counts.

Countering that philosophy with a healthy amount of heart and brio is photographer Miki Baird. During a chance encounter with a Kansas City, Missouri, tow lot, she immediately saw something true and haunting, like the modern equivalent of an elephant graveyard — a tableaux of steel, glass, and rubber that was richer for what was not there than for what still was. With the collection of photographs at Paragraph called *Tow Lot Vanitas*, Baird's lenses allowed intimate entry into the psyche of the unknown lives behind a field of wrecked or abandoned carcasses.

Between January and March of 2007, Baird repeatedly visited the municipal tow lot on Stadium Drive with the full cooperation (and, tangentially, the intense curiosity) of the staff. Her only rule was that she could not touch anything, fortuitously forcing her to operate her camera like a metal detector intent on finding treasure among trash. *Truths and Tales*, for example, features a four-square court of images in and around four different cars: a random splayed key ring; a convenience store cup still bearing condensation on its lid; a photograph, lying on the asphalt, of what appears to be groomsman at a wedding; and some artificial roses. The combination was one of those fantastic accidents of purpose, with the roses and groomsman connoting the ephemeral nature of love and promise.

Cross-word, an abstract floor-to-ceiling grid composed of pieces from 44 different images, was the result of Baird's cutting them into quarters and purposefully yet idiosyncratically affixing them to the wall. Among the shots are abandoned beer bottles and soda cans, jagged triangles of shattered windshields, stained upholstery, and other evocative signs of untold narratives. Ironic are the words left behind on a mangled remnant of a sticker that, in its day in the sun,



BulletWall

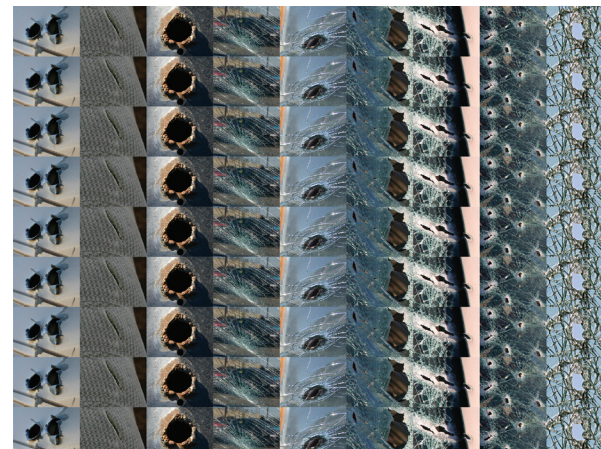
proudly trumpeted how “Good churches” and “Good schools” supernaturally provide “protection.” Beware false prophets.

A series of untitled works reveals objects so resonant of their prior owners that they probably still hold DNA. In one shot, socks, jeans, and a bra are nestled up against a phallic red cylinder of vague origin. (Even Baird did not know what it was.) In *Pink*, two pillows are found meticulously arranged as if they were part of a Bed, Bath & Beyond display window.

Baird used 60 different images the size of drugstore photo booth shots for the most riveting piece, *BulletWall*. Displayed vertically, row-after-row, were extreme close-ups of the damage bullets can do to auto skin. The results meet at an axis both violent and organic, a place where bullet holes through rusty metal look disturbingly akin to forensic evidence culled from an autopsy. Baird recalled her first witnessing of the wounds, saying, “The beauty was almost alarming.”

The Paragraph exhibition was long in the making. Baird has said that, throughout her career, she has “always been the proverbial fly on the wall” and, further, “interested in what people leave behind.” Her skills as such an observer were the focus of her 2006 installation *Under Your Shoe*, a collection of repeated

Tow Lot Vanitas: Miki Baird
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BulletWall (detail)



Cross-word (detail)

images of what she called “sidewalk confetti” — litter, cigarette butts, dead bugs — that was displayed on the Jenkins Building in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. Like *Tow Lot Vanitas*, it was an unexpectedly poignant examination of local flotsam and jetsam, underscored by the proposition that art, when it is not contemplating the big picture, finds sustenance in the little details. •

Steve Walker's work has appeared regularly in *Review*, *Kansas City Magazine*, *The Advocate*, and *The Pitch*. An arts reporter for KCUR 89.3 FM, Walker also teaches creative writing at the Kansas City Art Institute.