

SCENE OF THE CRIME

Behind these seemingly sweet paintings lies a much darker story.

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Twenty-five years ago, David Lynch asked the question 'Who killed Laura Palmer?' but it didn't really matter. What was genuinely chilling about the cult-classic TV show *Twin Peaks* was how someone as pure and good as a small-town prom queen could be caught up in something so unwholesome. Artists have always been obsessed with the threat lurking beneath the tranquil facade, that if you dig beneath the perfectly manicured lawns of the suburbs you will always uncover some slithering, slimy horror. Lynch showed us that the perfection of the American dream was a front for something much more disturbing.

Uncovering the homicidal malice hiding behind the shiny exterior is all artist Airco Caravan seems to think about – judging by her work, at least. "I wonder sometimes why it is," she says, laughing. "My daddy wasn't a killer." The Dutch painter and mixed-media artist revels in macabre stories in her series *Crime Scene*, a collection of eerily calm paintings of hotel and motel rooms where gruesome deaths have taken place. In one, a motel in Seattle with dusty pink wallpaper, two teenagers viciously murdered a 47-year-old man. In another in Maryland, one man fractured another's skull with a chair leg among daisy print bedspreads. A 26-year-old man stabbed his father in a well-lit room with bright yellow armchairs. Every meticulously detailed death in *Crime Scene* actually happened.

Although much of her work is concerned with American stories, Caravan lives in Amsterdam and only visits New York for a few months a year to study art. "If you lived there it would be a bit too busy," she says. "A bit too overwhelming." Talking with the softly spoken Caravan, it's easy to forget about the terrible scenes

she paints (although interestingly only one painting, in which a woman stabs her partner with a steak knife, features blood). She doesn't seem like someone who spends a lot of time imagining violent deaths.

Caravan's series began when she noticed how casually murder was being reported on the news. "Horrible things like the IS are in my head all the time. The beheadings... it's horrible," she says. "It freaks me out that people are so happy to kill each other. I don't understand it."

Crime Scene is far more disturbing for what you don't see. Reading the descriptions forces you to imagine each incident happening blow-by-blow on the canvas. It's easy to see why the subject interested Caravan. Whether we like to admit it or not, most humans have a morbid fascination with crime and murder. There's a reason why *This American Life*'s 'whodunnit' *Serial* podcast is the fastest downloaded podcast in iTunes history; we can't help but be interested in the motivations behind horrible crimes. "I think I was already fascinated by murder for years," Caravan says. "After a crime has been committed the room is still there. It just looks like an ordinary motel room. But what does it do to your view when you know what happened there?"

Before she put paint to canvas, Caravan researched extensively, spending late nights looking up online newspaper archives detailing horrific stories and occasionally getting lost reading trails of articles about specific deaths. When it came time to create *Crime Scene*, she often worked from photographs and infused her own colour palette into the spaces.

In the same way as David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, *Crime Scene*



Overdose



Suicide by Gun



Boyfriend Held in Motel Killing



Fractured Skull



Lifeless Bodies of Two Children

is menacing because it is such a familiar setting – the '70s-style swirling print wallpaper; the kind of plain, blinding white lampshades that you'd find in everyone's family home; that short, dense carpet. It's hard to imagine anything unexpected happening in these artificial, suburban spaces. Caravan says that as a child growing up in Europe she was fascinated by these sort of rooms, particularly as that kind of comfort symbolised the American dream. "Having a big house, a colour TV and a car, being happy with a vacuum cleaner... Those images were already in my head," she says. "Maybe it's the nostalgic feeling I have for those kind of rooms. I'm wondering myself." More than the murders themselves, Caravan seems interested in the aftermath and the way that these shared spaces continue to be used, despite the horrendous events that took place there. In another series called 100 Murders, she photographs innocuous footpaths in New York where people have been killed. "Other people just walk all over it, having fun, being a tourist, whatever," she says. "But somebody actually died there." The gore aspect is of no interest to Caravan, suggesting that the deadly themes of her work are more a way to navigate the violence she sees in the world, than of exploitation. She also seems bewildered that murder keeps cropping up in her art. "I'm not sure what I'm doing!" she says. "I'm a peaceful person." In a way it makes sense, someone who despises violence choosing to unpack it and question the human cost of it all. Crime Scene is just as much

about everyday life as it is about death. "[My work] is always about religion, freedom, emancipation, fear... it's always the struggle between those things," Caravan says. "Murder is about fear and power, but also love. The basic emotions everybody lives with. And a lot of things that happen can be brought back to those basic contradictions."

There were times during the creation of Crime Scene that Caravan had to work through her discomfort. One story involving two deceased children and another with two adults overdosing from a cocktail of prescription and non-prescription drugs at a 'pill party' ("I had never heard anything like that – you're crazy when you start doing that.") particularly disturbed her. And yet she also says that more than any other series she's done, Crime Scene is the one that she will revisit and contribute to in coming years.

Until she once again re-enters the seedy, blood-soaked underbelly of the American dream, Caravan has a new aim – actually staying in the hotel and motel rooms around America that had her googling homicides into the small hours. From her house in Amsterdam, Caravan wondered if these rooms "reflect [their] past", and now she's intent on finding that out for herself. It sounds straight out of a David Lynch film: a European artist going on a murder tour of America. "It's one of my plans," she says. "I think I would love it!" ⚡

See more of the series at aircocaravan.com.