

Feature Shoot, March 20, 2014

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GRIPPING PHOTOS OF FORENSIC FACIAL RECONSTRUCTION SCULPTURES OF SUSPECTED MURDER VICTIMS

March 20, 2014 by Alyssa Coppelman



At first glance, NYC-based photographer Arne Svenson's stark portraits of sculpted heads are deceptively amusing. However, "Unspeakable Likeness" is a series of deeply unfunny photographs of forensic facial reconstruction sculptures of suspected murder victims. They are made when victims are unidentifiable, which happens when their "...soft tissue and facial features have been obliterated by either trauma prior to death or postmortem decomposition. The forensic artist is given the skull of the victim and, using fiberglass, clay, statistical averages, and intuition, sculpts directly onto a cast of the skull or onto the skull itself what is presumably a likeness of the unidentified subject. This reconstruction is then photographed and the pictures are circulated in the hope that an identification will emerge."

After coming across his first forensic reconstruction at the Mütter Museum, Svenson spent four years traveling across the United States and Mexico, photographing reconstructions made by various forensic artists. Because many build their reconstructions directly onto the victims' skulls, they also must deconstruct them once they have been photographed so the skull can be returned to the rest of the remains. Still-existing sculptures are few and far between, and despite the antique look of the sculptures in the photographs, this is a technique that is still actively taught and used.

Svenson is a self-taught photographer who, for his work in photography, drew on his previous career as a therapist and educator working with severely disabled children. One could say this has especially empowered him with the capability to approach a subject as horrible as "Unspeakable Likeness" with the necessary, heightened degree of sensitivity. And indeed, Svenson says his goal is to humanize these heads so that the viewer relates them to the horrible fate that resulted in their appearance in these pictures.