

Dead Cowboy

By Stephen Shore



I was given this print in the late 60s by the District Attorney of Amarillo, Texas. It is a police photograph of a murder scene. While it was made to record this scene, without aesthetic intent, the officer who took this picture seems to have been momentarily captivated by his own shadow and the raking, late afternoon, High Plains light, and tilted the camera slightly down. Perhaps, as an artist, I'm reading too much into the framing. Perhaps the explanation is simpler: the officer wanted to include the tire track in the picture. Though it retains a blank, evidentiary quality, the image shows very little: the cowboy's face is hidden by the photographer's shadow; we have difficulty placing this setting. And, while it shows little, it explains even less. It asks more questions than it answers: Why was he killed? How was he killed? (Perhaps there's a neat bullet hole in his forehead that's obscured by the shadow). Was his body dumped here? Where are his boots? Nonetheless, for all this, the image is rich in allusion. I see the the brick wall above the photographer's shadow, the mass of weeds, and the tire track in loose dirt, and I imagine that this is in a field behind a commercial building at the edge of town. I imagine the killer backing his pick-up truck into this field and pulling the body out. (Are there drag marks in the dirt?). I relish the incidental details: the worn Levi's, the exposed chest, the cowboy's Stetson cradled by his body. I think about the three people (officers?) on the right, witnessing this scene. I think about the footprints (the killer's?) in the dirt. I imagine that the police are standing back to avoid disturbing these footprints. Finally, I imagine that the murderer couldn't let a perfectly good pair of boots go to waste and yanked them off his victim, pulling a sock off with one of them.