South Station Hoard: Imagining, Creating and Empowering Violent Remains

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Making South Station: Processes for Visualization and Construction

Karie Edwards
Photography encompasses much more than just a click of the shutter. It involves physical work constructing, collecting, scrounging, and staging items. Though my medium is photography, process is my passion. All of my art includes periods of conception, collection, and creation. For me, conception is a mental construction of what the work will be aesthetically, emotionally, and physically. The collecting aspect is where I derive the most pleasure. During the hunt for specific elements of the work, I constantly adapt or change my concept to work with the objects I am finding. When I finally find those perfect items, it is a feeling of puzzle pieces falling into place. I gather objects that become my treasures and the visualized piece of work begins to come to life. Putting all my pieces together and creating my vision is the most exciting aspect. This is complete satisfaction and enjoyment—literally, making what I find work in the art I am making.

My role in this project was to visualize and construct a subterranean archaeological site. I compiled a hoard of objects that tween girls would want to own, to covet and to steal. The items needed to be a variety of objects that held religious meaning, were shiny and “blingy,” evoke a feeling of power and value, and most importantly show social status. I also included items that emphasized the internal struggle tweens experience during adolescence, giving up the childish items and progress to becoming young women.

I first needed to realize and create a dark, dreary, subterranean environment that had been untouched for hundreds
of years. Our fictional narrative was a nuclear explosion at MIT in Cambridge, MA that left Boston in rubble. After about 800 years archaeologists from Oxford begin excavation of South Station Subway Station and discover a bank of lockers that yield a hoard of luxury objects. Our scene needed to look old and dusty, but relatively intact. Careful consideration was needed to give the illusion this space had been buried, but not totally destroyed. I wanted viewers to “discover” the objects in a relatively undamaged and whole, rather perfect state, which was in direct opposition to how the individual objects from Staffordshire Hoard were found. The medieval warrior hoarders left items to fend for themselves against the natural elements; as well, they destroyed other pieces beyond recognition. Our objects needed to show mild physical violence of bullying not warrior
driven rage. Our objects needed to convey a more subtle, internalized viciousness.

We had very particular criteria for the hoarded items. We wanted to address issues of money, status, power, gender, and religion through the layered and complex problem of bullying. Our objects needed to be small, easily taken, and have monetary value.

Everything had to be decorated, brightly colored objects that gave the implication of desirability, preciousness, and personalization. A smart phone is the perfect example. They are small, valuable, and easy to steal. Phones are tangible objects of importance, popularity, and prestige and are the desire of every tween. They are coveted items that tweens personalize to ensure everyone knows whose it is. These embellishments hold as much importance to tween’s youth culture as initiation tattoos do to gang members. If a tween’s smart phone were stolen, it would be like losing their own identity.
The majority of the objects were overtly religious because the girls in our narrative were from a Catholic school. This collection needed to represent the struggles of adolescents and the wide gamut of emotions, positive as well as negative, associated with this stage in life. Some items needed to carry some juvenile appeal to the "little girl" still present in our tweens, i.e., the dolls, the troll, the purse. The defacement of the dolls represented the internal struggle of needing to grow-up and wanting to stay a little girl. Using eye shadow, make-up, lip-gloss, and hair adornments as visual fillers gave the locker the feeling of an overflowing treasure trunk. Even these small objects would have held importance for our tween girls, as badges of evolution from girl to tween. The overabundance of items was to represent a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment for the bully tweens, conveying that their efforts had paid off and they had been successful. The fundamental goal was that all objects held a comparative relationship, to represent the.
socially, emotionally, and defensively, to the items found in the Staffordshire Hoard.

I created the South Station locker bank in my basement studio. The subterranean scene was a plastic rock wall background so it would look like somewhere in the sprawling subway station. Banks of lockers from Radford University’s darkroom were the focal point of the installation. The cinder blocks added a look of disorder rather destruction, leaving our bank of lockers with minimum damage. The old chair added color and the recessed lighting hanging from the ceiling to make it look like this space had undergone some serious shaking. I lit the entire scene with studio lights as if it were a stage.

The placement of our hoard items in locker was very precise. I did not want it to look as if things were just thrown in there:

**our bullies took pains to collect these objects,**

so I wanted to show care in their placement, as well as having as many items as visibly possible. This is evident by the storage containers the items were found in, for example all the coins were place in a small purse, give the impression that they needed to kept together and not scattered throughout the locker. The make-up was placed in a simple decorative tin but the religious objects were kept in a silver heart shaped jewelry box. Having such drastically different storage vessels shows the importance
the bullies placed on the items held in these reliquaries.

For the appearance of time passage, I used dryer lint to create the dust bunnies and wood ash for dust. The arrangements of these props were key to creating the illusion that this space had undergone a disaster. Banks of lockers leaning to the side, lights and wires hanging from the ceiling, cinder blocks juxtaposed around the scene produced an illusion of mild disorder rather than destruction.

**Because we could not venture a guess as to what the style of clothing would be in 2812**, I chose HAZMAT suits, hard hats, gloves, and goggles as the apparel. This served to protect our archaeological team against the “possibility” of radioactivity as well as solved the costume conundrum. Finding the HAZMAT suits was quite an exciting day for the collaboration team. Here is an email excerpt regarding this amazing discovery:

Subject: Thrift store find

Carlee,

You won’t believe this, but I found HAZMAT suits at the thrift store for 50 cents. I bought 4; do you think we’ll need more?

Karie

RE: Thrift store find

Karie,

AMAZING!! 4 should be plenty - more soon - can’t believe that!!!

Take care,
Carlee
The archaeologists were played by my neighbor’s teenage sons, Austin Acord and Matt Acord, who were totally psyched to participate! When they found out they were wearing HAZMAT suits, they could hardly contain themselves. Austin said he was going to wear his to school. I had them dress up and discover the hoard in a painfully slow process, wanting to catalog each item as it was “discovered.” As each item was taken out of the locker I had them show me, for the “original” find shot, then they looked at each item in a questioning way, to give the illusion that these items were totally foreign and fascinating to them, objects that belonged to the past. Each time they picked an object they had to act like they had never before seen objects of this kind. And make a perplexing face in order convey this sentiment in the photograph. It was an amazingly creative endeavor and I believe the boys enjoyed taking center stage.

This entire project was produced in reverse. The post-clean shots were done first, the items were already clean and so I shot those photographs first. Then I set up the scene and created the find of the lockers. I dusted the entire set to show that there had been no human presence since the accident. These were the original shots of the lockers, closed and awaiting discovery. Then I opened the locker and shot detail images of the locker contents. After that, I re-dusted the entire scene, removing the footprints with dryer lint and fireplace ash and had the boys act out the excavation of the locker. I shot the catalog pictures of each item as it was discovered. For the
documentary shots of the dirty objects I again dusted them with dryer lint and fireplace ash. I defaced or altered the objects for these documentary shots.

For every image included in this body of work, an average of 8-10 images were shot per item. There were 50 different items in the locker, between the post-clean shots; the discovery shots, the dirty/documentary inventory shots, there were over 1200 photos taken.

These images provided visual representations of a glittering treasure that addressed issues of money, status, power, gender, religion, and the problem of bullying of tweens during the 21st Century. This was a thrilling collaborative project of treasure hunting, artistic work, and brainstorming that addressed serious emotional issue our young women face every day.