

Tobias Zielony

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Between 1874 and 1996, the Canadian authorities, in concert with various churches, operated so-called Residential Schools—boarding schools designed to reeducate Canada’s aboriginals. During this time, around 250,000 children were forcibly separated from their families, isolated from the indigenous cultures, and remade into “good Christians.” They were forbidden to speak their native languages; sexual abuse and forced sterilizations were widespread; more than 50,000 children died. Recent discoveries of children’s mass graves have been ignored, or investigations were halting. Although the Canadian government apologized for the reeducation program in 2008—the Vatican followed suit in 2009—they deny that a systematic genocide of the indigenous population, through lethal vaccination programs and other means, took place.

The teenagers whose pictures Tobias Zielony has taken in the province of Manitoba and its capital, Winnipeg, since 2008 are the children and grandchildren of those who survived the government’s system of assimilation. Many of them are just as cut off from any path toward integration into Canadian society as from the histories of their forebears, which was usually transmitted in the form of oral traditions and died out together with the banned dialects. So they now seek out old and new myths about tribal culture, heroism, and indigenous resistance, finding stylistic templates in recovered family lore, but also in Hollywood movies and the modern gang cultures of America’s global cities. On reservations, on the peripheries of major cities, or in prison, they grasp at building blocks for new narratives about themselves.

Due to the deliberate destruction of indigenous traditions, reality and fiction are virtually indistinguishable in these stories. As a consequence, Zielony’s portrait of young aboriginals in early twenty-first century Manitoba remains as fragmentary and ambivalent as the stories of their lives. Reservations, suburban housing projects, and the Manitoba Museum, which tries to teach members of the “First Nations” about their roots: these are the settings in which Zielony photographs his teenage subjects as they strike their hip-hop poses. Insecure and tender, but also proud, they seek to define their own image before the camera. In several projects he has undertaken since 2000, Tobias Zielony has discerned the particular opportunity a documentary approach affords in its ability to record moments when people do not neatly fit either into our image of reality or into their own. (See Camera Austria 114/2011)

Comprising fifty photographs, a film, and an audio play, “Manitoba” is Tobias Zielony’s most extensive project to date. The short film “The Deboard” (2008) conveys the account of an aboriginal who was a member of an indigenous gang in the Winnipeg prison. When he wanted to quit the group, he had to undergo a ritual: he had to take five minutes of beating and kicking from the others—anyone who survives that treatment is free to leave. The Super 8 camera barely makes him out in the dark of his cell as he tells the dramatic story of how he broke free. It sounds like the stuff of legend. Truth and epic fiction are hard to tell apart in “Manitoba.” The same is true of Zielony’s one-hour audio play, which begins with the Canadian prime minister’s historic apology for the Residential Schools, but then begins to interweave documentary and literary perspectives:

In 2010, the American writer Andrea Hiott travels the Canadian province at Zielony’s behest. She has seen his film and photographs and carries a tape recorder. She retraces his path, visiting the places and people in his pictures and adding her own view to his. Tobias Zielony later took Hiott’s personal travelogue, in which she also reflects on her own indigenous roots, and created a new audio play, a collage of original recordings, found footage, and studio-recorded dramatic voices. A piece of contemporary oral history emerges in which Zielony himself becomes the coauthor as well as protagonist of a new spoken narrative about the attempt to report about people who want to write their own history.

After Camera Austria, Graz, and MMK Zollamt, Frankfurt, KOW is the third venue to present Zielony’s exhibition; the catalogue has been published by Spector Books, Leipzig. Tobias Zielony was born in 1973 and lives and works in Berlin.

Text: Alexander Koch