

The photographs in Paul Van Hoy's *Bystander* series seem a strange mixture of modern portraiture and unflinching reportage of an accident or terrorist attack. Yet the faces they depict range in expression from almost impassive to vaguely stunned, as if these people simply cannot register the horror of what they've seen. Whatever their apparent emotional state, they have just witnessed a terrible event.

The idea of being a witness lies at the heart of these images, created for Van Hoy's MFA thesis project at Rochester Institute of Technology. To draw us into the pictures the photographer exploits our simultaneous attraction to and revulsion for blood, as well as the almost painterly effect of its spatter. Indeed, those who witness violence, says Van Hoy, "become the corporeal canvas upon which the values and beliefs of the civilized world explode."

To find his subjects, Van Hoy placed an advertisement on a local online message board. It attracted a wide variety of people, including housewives, lawyers, war veterans, and fellow artists. To date Van Hoy has photographed over 300 people for the project. (See them at fotoimpressions.com.)

All of his subjects agreed to be covered with "prop" blood for their sessions, which involved anywhere from 80 to 200 shots. Getting that blood to look right was more complicated than it seems: Van Hoy worked with a Hollywood visual effects studio for almost a year to get the liquid splatter patterns just the way he wanted them. It is somehow fitting that he ended up creating them with an unspecified piece of medical equipment.

Van Hoy's images offer no answers to the obvious questions posed by his bloody witnesses: What exactly happened? Who did it? Why? That's because he wants his viewers to walk away from them with an uneasy feeling—one that reflects our culture's very mixed feelings about senseless violence. —MARY GOODWIN

Paul D. Van Hoy

TAKING A BRAVE AND UNFLINCHING LOOK AT WHAT VIOLENCE DOES TO OUR COLLECTIVE PSYCHE.
BY MARY GOODWIN



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Images from Van Hoy's *Bystander* series, clockwise from here: "Craig," "Joe," "John," "Ashley."