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The ceaseless crusade against injustice

Jan Banning

There is no country in the world with such a high incarceration rate as the United States. Many citizens are unjustly imprisoned every day, and in extreme cases, for life. The Dutch photographer, Jan Banning made the project *Law & Order* about prisons in four different countries, including the United States. Recently, his new book *The Verdict: The Christina Boyer Case* was published, in which he examines a particular case of extreme injustice.

© Jan Banning | portrait of Christina Boyer in Pulaski prison

Documentary photographer, Jan Banning is known for his other projects like *Bureaucrats* and *Comfort Women*. His recent projects, *Law & Order* and *The Verdict*, continue his lifelong themes and topics concerning the injustice of social and political systems. “In the Western society, you have the ‘trias politica’, three separate political powers: the legislative, the executive and the judiciary. For *Bureaucrats*, showing civil servants behind their desks, I photographed the executive power. Afterwards, I wondered how I could photograph the judiciary power. As a legacy of my history studies, I am particularly interested in social systems. In *Down and Out in the South*, I discovered that some homeless people were psychiatric patients who ended up in prison when they actually needed treatment. They were the indirect victims of a bad functioning social system.”

Public debate

The book *Law & Order* contains both photographs and texts. For Jan Banning, photography is not enough to make a convincing statement about his complex topic. So, the photographs are published along with academic texts. “I want my project to become part of the public debate. It is rooted in the triangle of art, science

and media. The knowledge comes from the academic world, the form of art, and you need the media to bring the subject into the public domain. As an autonomous and activist artist, I do not limit myself to photography. I always add an intellectual foundation to my work.”

With his project *Law & Order*, Banning wants to evoke the public to ask themselves questions about the purpose of imprisonment. “I am not trying to dictate how countries should handle crime. My book offers no solutions, but I ask questions about the current system and its effectiveness. In the US, punishment is excessive, even for minor offences. Yet, the greater the income inequality in a country; the higher the crime rate. Prison sentences do not help against that.”

The prison system pretends to have the idea of isolation, retribution, and punishment as of correction. “How can you correct someone by locking him up for ten or more years? Would you think someone will come out of the prison as a better person?”

According to artist Jan Banning, photography should evoke the viewer to ask himself questions. “The photos have to confuse. If you photograph a poor child to show poverty, you are using a cliché. You then add nothing new for the viewer.

“ I want my project to become part of the public debate.



Private photo Christina Boyer, 1991 © Jan Banning