

“Churches of Tuscaloosa County, at Night”: Artist’s Statement from Jeremy

My lack of spiritual convictions has meant I’ve often felt alienated from the community in which I’ve resided for over 40 years—Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. But one thing I’ve learned is that Southern Christianity is not as monolithic as I had initially assumed. Southern churches are separated into congregations based on denomination, race, ethnicity, language, economics, tolerance of gender fluidity, and other cultural markers. In particular, I’ve become fascinated with the many small churches in my area. Who attends these churches? How large are their congregations? What distinguishes their Christian beliefs from other Christian denominations?

“Churches of Tuscaloosa County, at Night” documents churches’ facades as a step toward understanding the institutions’ cultural function and significance—focusing on the more modest institutions in my county. The buildings’ appearances often disconnect from the aspirations of the churches’ names. The grandiose sounding Glorious Pentecostal Church of God’s title is emblazoned on the front of a plain brick building that could not possibly hold more than 20 or 30 congregants. This is obviously a very different religious experience than one would have in a massive cathedral.

I captured these photographs as “neutrally” as possible—framing them strictly from a front, perpendicular view and avoiding dynamic compositions. I also endeavored to create high-resolution images so that printing them in large formats would reward close inspection.

And, after shooting over 30 churches during the daytime, I decided to reshoot several of them at night and to limit my future efforts to nighttime images. Partially, I made this choice to challenge my photographic skills—having limited experience with long exposures in low light. But also the inky gloom surrounding the churches can elicit myriad emotions. Shooting at night, when the churches were closed, made them seem strange and perhaps even a little foreboding.

By turning a concentrated gaze on these familiar sights in unfamiliar contexts, I hope to provide the spectator with a new way of looking at and appreciating them.

Jeremy Butler
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