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CLAIRE BECKETT MATRIX 163 SIMULATING IRAQ

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WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART



SIMULATING IRAQ

In "Simulating Iraq," I look at American military training for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These photographs were made on military bases within the United States in fabricated spaces designed to mimic Iraq and Afghanistan. The simulations include the use of specific architecture, objects and costumes, and Americans (both soldiers and civilians) who role-play as Iraqis and Afghans. I am interested in the ways that the imagination is at work in these spaces. In some respects, a visit to these places can be confusing. These spaces are meant as imitations of reality, but they take on their own realities, especially because they are, after all, preparations for soldiers who will shortly be in a real war zone.

—CLAIRE BECKETT¹

Claire Beckett's large-scale photographs make you feel uneasy. In a portrait, a young man with fair skin, blue eyes and light hair establishes direct eye contact without expression. His clothing consists of a dark head wrap, olive scarf and white tunic. The combination of subject and attire seems incompatible. The photograph's title, though, provides illumination: *Marine Lance Corporal Joshua Stevens playing the role of a Taliban fighter, Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center, California* (2009). In another image, a white mosque with gold domes sits within a desolate desert village. The uniform, rectangular box-like structures of the town's buildings dispel any illusion of a real settlement. *Above Medina Jabal Town, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California* (2009) depicts the modified storage containers that make up the "town," a military training ground for role-playing exercises. So, the portraits and landscapes of Beckett's "Simulating Iraq" are reality, but not truthful. The term "conceptual documentary"² has been used to characterize Beckett's genre, in an attempt to define its straightforward approach and basis in a more complex idea, an additional thematic thread. However, this term falls short. Beckett's highly nuanced work defies any specific categorization.³

War is a complicated subject. Beckett's interest in the military grew from her personal experiences. After graduating from college with a Bachelor's degree in Anthropology (and a minor in Sociology), the artist served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Republic of Benin in West Africa. From 2002 to 2004, she worked in a rural community health center, focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention and girls' education. Upon her return to the United States to attend graduate school for photography, Beckett felt a sense of culture shock and alienation, as well as a heightened awareness of her American

COVER IMAGE:

MARINE LANCE CORPORAL JOSHUA STEVENS PLAYING THE
ROLE OF A TALIBAN FIGHTER, MARINE CORPS MOUNTAIN
WARFARE TRAINING CENTER, CA, 2009. COURTESY THE
ARTIST AND CARROLL AND SONS, BOSTON

ABOVE MEDINA JABAL TOWN, NATIONAL TRAINING CENTER, FORT IRWIN, CA, 2009. COURTESY DAVE GREENBLATT, BOSTON



friends and colleagues' general lack of interest in the Iraq war.⁴ National news headlines, reporting the shortage of armored vehicles and proper body armor available to American soldiers, compelled the artist to explore the subject of war in her photographs. Focusing on the pre-war experience—unlike the many war and post-war photo narratives—her first series, “In Training” (2004–2007), highlighted the young, newly enlisted soldiers in pre-basic and basic training. The powerful portraits show the surprising youth of these soon-to-be active soldiers, complete with teenage acne and adolescent awkwardness.

“Simulating Iraq” naturally evolved from “In Training.” Beckett encountered some role-playing exercises in the first project, and subsequently learned of the specialized military training centers with fabricated Iraqi and Afghan villages. Of course, access to any military training site as an “embedded artist” is a complex process, requiring many months of conducting research, writing proposals, making phone calls, sending emails, and proving credentials. After receiving military clearance, Beckett lived on the actual Army and Marine training sites, with up to 500 military personnel and civilians, for a week at a time. She had full access throughout the sites, with permission to photograph almost anything, including the live training exercises. However, the action

*MARINE LANCE CORPORAL NICOLE CAMALA VEEN PLAYING
THE ROLE OF AN IRAQI NURSE, WADI AL-SAHARA, MARINE
CORPS AIR GROUND COMBAT CENTER, CA, 2008.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CARROLL AND SONS, BOSTON*



didn't interest her—she had proposed a portraiture project about American soldiers. “There was something about suspending the place and people in frozen moments, making it all very still that helped make my point.”⁵ Being on site with the military trainees allowed Beckett to establish relationships, fit in, and earn the soldiers' trust and respect, so that she could obtain permission to photograph them individually.

The camera set-up Beckett uses also contributes to her winning the trust of her sitters. She works with a large-format camera—a 4x5 Wista view camera—along with a tripod and a black hood (to block out the strong desert light). Setting up the equipment can take ten minutes—valuable time for a conversation, during which the subject becomes comfortable and can relax. Due to the importance of maintaining a rapport between artist and subject, Beckett considers her photographs a collaboration. The portraits are generally shot head on, with the subject's expression neutral. This detached, matter-of-fact style of portraiture relates to the deadpan aesthetic popularized in German contemporary photography in the 1990s by the students of Bernd and Hilla Becher, including Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth. But where these artists denied the subjective and sentimental in their art, Beckett does not. She somehow encourages deeper emotional and psychological readings of her initially neutral photographic content.

Each portrait is complicated by the character, costume, and setting illustrated. The military personnel and hired civilians are assigned specific parts in the live-action role-playing exercises. They are given names, profiles and well-defined sets of skills. The cast includes a Taliban fighter, Iraqi nurse, injured Marine, Al-Qaeda terrorist, Iraqi civilians, and members of The Sons of Iraq. They dress in military uniforms and loose approximations of traditional Iraqi and Afghan garb—head scarves, tunics, and robes. In spite of the role-playing fiction, Beckett depicts truth in her photographs; but it is a feigned reality filled with the incongruities of cultural simulation. A portrait of a fair-skinned Caucasian in the role of an Al-Qaeda terrorist quite simply “looks” wrong. However, such thinking pushes the viewer to confront problematic social and political issues, such as prejudice and racial profiling. Despite this tricky territory, Beckett's approach is completely open and lacks irony. Her American subjects' normality shines through the provisional costumes and accessories. Beckett captures her subjects where the illusion collapses and the humanity emerges, leading to the deeper question—what does it mean to be an American?

In addition to political issues, Beckett's art offers strong formal qualities and art historical references. She displays a masterful hand with color and light. In one portrait, a female Marine as an Iraqi nurse looks like a serene Madonna figure in an embroidered blue tunic, a lightweight white head scarf, and a freshly made-up face—a harmony of composition, soft color, and light. In another work, a young civilian amputee plays an injured Marine. In military fatigues, she stands calmly in

CIVILIAN KRISTA GALYEAN PLAYING THE ROLE OF AN AMERICAN MARINE INJURED IN AN IED BLAST, WADI AL-SAHARA, MARINE CORPS AIR GROUND COMBAT CENTER, CA, 2008. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CARROLL AND SONS, BOSTON



ARMY SPECIALIST GARY MCCORKLE PLAYING THE ROLE OF "JIBRIL IHSAN HAMAL," A KEY MEMBER OF THE LEADING TERRORIST GROUP IN TOWN, WITH AN IED, MEDINA WASL VILLAGE, NATIONAL TRAINING CENTER, FORT IRWIN, CA, 2009. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CARROLL AND SONS, BOSTON



FRANCISCO DE ZURBARÁN, *Saint Serapion*, 1628. Oil on canvas, 47 5/16 x 40 15/16 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art; the Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1951.40



front of a plywood backdrop with a dirty face and a freshly bound, bloody stump. Even in this curious interior setting, Beckett's innocent-faced woman, bathed in a warm natural light, draws comparisons to seventeenth-century Dutch artist Jan Vermeer's iconic painting *The Milkmaid* (1658). And finally, an Army Specialist playing a terrorist wears a hooded white tunic and kneels at a plywood table working on an IED. The dark background contrasts with his bright tunic, which features strong shadows in the folds of the fabric. Beckett's image evokes the masterpieces of seventeenth-century Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán, specifically the Wadsworth Atheneum's own *Saint Serapion* (1628).

Beckett's portrait project expanded organically to include the equally engaging and unusual interiors and landscapes of the military training sites. The images are empty of people. Beckett documented a number of buildings that were constructed to represent the different mosques of the Sunni and Shi'a Muslim sects. In *Jabal Village Mosque* (2008), she isolates and emphasizes the clumsy-looking building in its desert setting, with its crooked minaret, jumbled color palette, and raw plywood exterior wall. Although fashioned by Hollywood set builders (Fort Irwin is just 150 miles from Los Angeles), there are no illusions with the bare basic architecture. Even less finished are the interiors. *Shi'a mosque interior* (2008) features a straight view into a long, tight rectangular space with unfinished walls, ceiling, and floor. At the end of the cramped space sits a bulky wooden throne painted bright green, representing the mosque's *minbar*, or pulpit. A bright orange extension cord snakes incongruously across the floor and through a slice of lit doorway.

Another interior, *Butcher Shop* (2009), brings to mind seventeenth-century Dutch still life compositions, with its tabletop of raw meat. Yet simultaneously, the red, fleshy image evokes the real-life carnage of war. Although Beckett's "Simulating Iraq" comprises beautifully realized portraits, landscapes and interiors in the surreal settings of military training centers, the site's purpose must be remembered—to prepare soldiers for deployment to active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. With this in mind, *Butcher Shop* can be interpreted as a *memento mori* (Latin for "remember your mortality")—a genre of still life painting that emphasized the transitory nature of earthly things; a grim declaration on human fragility and the brevity of life. Having just marked the ten-year anniversary of 9/11—and the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War—*Butcher Shop* serves as a reminder of the real life-and-death situations these young soldiers were yet to face in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Patricia Hickson

Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

*BUTCHER SHOP, MEDINA WASL VILLAGE, NATIONAL
TRAINING CENTER, FORT IRWIN, CA, 2009. COURTESY THE
ARTIST AND CARROLL AND SONS, BOSTON*



CLAIRE BECKETT

EDUCATION

- 2000 BA Anthropology, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH
- 2002-2004 Peace Corps, Rural Community Healthcare, Benin, West Africa
- 2006 MFA Photography, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston, MA

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Claire Beckett/ MATRIX 163*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT
You Are..., Carroll and Sons Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2007 *Simulating Iraq*, Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston, MA
In Training, Soldiers Before War, University of Rhode Island Photography Gallery, Kingston, RI
- 2006 *MFA Thesis Exhibition*, Bakalar Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston, MA.
Claire Beckett at the Boston Drawing Project, Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston, MA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *HomeFrontLine, Reflections on Ten Years of War since 9/11*, Silver Eye Center for Photography, Pittsburgh, PA
The Workers, MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA
The Truth Is Not in the Mirror, Haggerty Museum, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI
Reality Check, FOTODOK, Utrecht, The Netherlands
Artadia Boston Awardees, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA
- 2010 *Trying Them On*, Hendershot Gallery, New York, NY
Humble Arts' 31 Women in Art Photography, Affirmation Arts, New York, NY
Artadia Boston 2009, Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts, Boston, MA
Warzone, Noorderlicht Photofestival, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands
Flash Forward Festival 2010, organized by the Magenta Foundation, Toronto, Canada
- 2009 *UN-SCR-1325*, Chelsea Art Museum, New York, NY
Bad Moon Rising, Boots Contemporary Art Space, Saint Louis, MO
- 2008 *Exposure 2008*, The Photographic Resource Center at Boston University, Boston, MA
Visado de Artista: Imagen Latente, Galeria Cerro Nutibara, Medellin, Colombia
- 2007 *Massachusetts Cultural Council Photography Grant Recipients*, Arsenal Center for the Arts, Watertown, MA
- 2006 *Document: Contemporary Social Documentary Work*, The Photographic Resource Center at Boston University, Boston, MA
Boston Young Contemporaries, Boston University Gallery, Boston, MA

Born 1978, Chicago, IL
Lives and works in Boston, MA

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are archival inkjet prints and, unless otherwise noted, courtesy of the artist & Carroll and Sons, Boston.

Army Private Stephen Miller playing the role of "Nasih Sa'd Sulaman," and Specialist Justin Duron playing the role of "Kameen Jubar Fawzi," members of the Taliban in Iraq, Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2008
30 x 40 in.

Army Specialist Brighton Knotts, Private First Class Kevin Shark and Sergeant Miguel Rodriguez role playing as members of the armed civilian group The Sons of Iraq, and occupying the Tall Allowa Mosque, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2008
30 x 40 in.

Civilian Joshua Osborne playing the role of an Iraqi civilian, Wadi Al-Sahara, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, CA, 2008
30 x 40 in.

Civilian Krista Galyean playing the role of an American Marine injured in an IED blast, Wadi Al-Sahara, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, CA, 2008
40 x 30 in.

Jabal Village Mosque, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2008
40 x 30 in.

Lookout above Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2008
30 x 40 in.
Courtesy Dave Greenblatt, Boston

Marine Lance Corporal Nicole Camala Veen playing the role of an Iraqi nurse, Wadi Al-Sahara, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, CA, 2008
40 x 30 in.

Shi'a mosque interior, Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2008
40 x 30 in.

American civilians playing the roles of Iraqi village women drinking tea: Karen Davis as "Salihah Asad Hatim," Verna Povesi as "Amira Rough," Randa Matgyo as "Kawthar Amid," and Faye Ugapo as "Rim Duqaq Barakah," Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009
30 x 40 in.

Army Private Kathleen Jones playing the role of "Sabirah Ni'mat Kalim," Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009
40 x 30 in.

Army Specialist Gary Louis Sims playing the role of "Safah Mehdi Faris," a 21 year old terrorist and member of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009
40 x 30 in.

Army Specialist Gary McCorkle playing the role of "Jibril Ihsan Hamal," a key member of the leading terrorist group in town, with an IED, Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009
40 x 30 in.

Army Specialists John Griffin playing the role of "Muhsin Talib Faihan," and Bobby Kirby playing the role of "Imithal Ibrahim," members of the Madhi Army, a paramilitary Shi'a group founded by Muqtada Al-Sadr, responsible for small arms attacks, suicide vests, and kidnapping, Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009
40 x 30 in.

Butcher Shop, Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009
30 x 40 in.

Civilian Afghan-American women role playing as Afghan villagers during Marine Corps training, Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center, CA, 2009
30 x 40 in.

Marine Lance Corporal Joshua Stevens playing the role of a Taliban fighter, Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center, CA, 2009
40 x 30 in.

Above Medina Jabal Town, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009
30 x 40 in.
Courtesy Dave Greenblatt, Boston

Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009
30 x 40 in.

CHARACTER NAMES AND PROFILES

as described by the subjects to the artist

Omar Baneean Baghel Iraqi Police, Captain of Patrols. Anti-American forces. High Value Target.

Sabirah Ni'mat Kalim DOB April 4, 1988. Sunni/Arab, single, pro-American. Helps at family restaurant, dreams of being married and having a family of her own to take care of. Also dreams of going to America someday.

Muhsin Talib Faihan JAM (Jaish al-Mahdi) foot soldier. Small arms attacks, suicide vests, kidnapping.

Salihah Asad Hatim Seventeen years old, single, unemployed. Father is an Imam, grandmother killed by suicide bomber.

Zakiyy Kareem Farraj In charge of the Office of Muqtada al-Sadr.

Hedeer Hasouni Tribal name is Al Juburi, DOB March 28, 1983. I'm not married, I believe it will interfere with my educational goals. I'm attending classes in hopes to be a pharmacist. When I'm not in class I help my bro in his shop. He's a local electrician. I am pro-America but want to see them leave.

Rough Amira Anti-American, born Baghdad, an orphan. Waiting for an assignment to do whatever it takes for the cause.

Jihad Hanif Alrawi Shop owner, pro-American. Four brothers. Lost wife in suicide bomb attack and this is why he supports Americans.

Safah Mehdi Faris Twenty-one years old. Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Foreign fighter, born Jordan.

Hanif Hakeem Shoemaker. Upper class family. Father. One of two engineers in town. Neutral to America. I tell the Americans that they need to fix the water and sewage pipes in town.

Rim Duqq Barakah My family consists of myself, my son, daughter-in-law Sama, and grandchildren. Husband was killed in 2007. We own a café, which is run by my son. Pro-US, grateful for The Sons of Iraq. Tribe: Shi'a. Moved to Medina Wasl from Al-Jeff.

Ihsan Katib Hamal Unemployed. Paramilitary. Wife dead. Justified. Ruthless Republican Guard Captain. Bitter for losing power and prestige of rank. No mercy for townspeople and disliked in town. You long for the day you have infidel blood on your hands. Wants to recreate slaying of Blackwater contractors.

ARTIST TALK

MATRIX Gallery Talk

Claire Beckett

Thursday, November 3, 2011

6:00 pm

Claire Beckett will discuss "Simulating Iraq" in the Eleanor H. Bunce Gallery.



Wadsworth
Atheneum
Museum of Art

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¹ Claire Beckett, from artist statement posted for Photolucida's Critical Mass Top 50, 2010. See www.photolucida.org.

² According to the artist, Leslie K. Brown utilized the term "conceptual documentary" photography to describe Beckett's work. See Jess T. Dugan, "9 Questions with Claire Beckett," Big, Red & Shiny, 11 May 2008. See www.bigredandshiny.com.

³ Written comment from artist to author, 30 September 2011.

⁴ Ibid. While in Benin, Beckett was often asked why America was harming innocent Afghan and Iraqi civilians. She felt accountable for America's actions.

⁵ Ibid.