



Claire Beckett / MATRIX 163

Artist's First Solo Museum Exhibition Connects America's Military Past and Present

Upcoming MATRIX Artists Include Jan Tichy, Ahmed Alsoudani, and Deb Sokolow

HARTFORD, Conn., October 26, 2011 – Boston-based artist Claire Beckett will be the focus of a new exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, featuring work depicting American military training sites for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Beckett's first solo museum exhibition, *Claire Beckett/MATRIX 163* will feature "Simulating Iraq" (2007–2009), a series of large-scale photographs taken at fabricated Middle Eastern-like settlements created within U.S. military training centers for role-playing exercises. As the year 2011 marks the tenth anniversary of 9/11 and the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, Beckett's photographs provide timely subject matter, raising issues of identity and perceptions of cultural difference.

Part of the Wadsworth's ongoing MATRIX contemporary art series, which has showcased more than 150 artists since 1975, "Simulating Iraq" will be on view from November 3, 2011 through March 4, 2012. The Wadsworth has also announced that Jan Tichy, Ahmed Alsoudani, and Deb Sokolow will be the next MATRIX artists, presenting single-artist exhibitions at the museum in 2012 and 2013.

Claire Beckett's "Simulating Iraq" is intended to provide a counterpart to the exhibition *Colts & Quilts: The Civil War Remembered*, which is focused on the impact of the Civil War on American society. On view from November 16, 2011 – May 6, 2012, *Colts & Quilts* commemorates the 150th anniversary of the Civil War by highlighting the public's response to pivotal political and military events. The juxtaposition of these exhibitions will bring contemporary relevance to the historical exhibition and enable visitors to think critically about the cultural impact of our present wars in the Middle East.

"Beckett's series captures a powerful sense of humanity in her American subjects when she could easily have addressed the military theme with criticism and irony," said Patricia Hickson, the museum's Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art. "The viewer feels her personal connection with her subjects, which brings an interesting psychological layer to the images and narrative. This connection is mirrored in *Colts & Quilts*, which includes highly personal commemorative objects that have a similar effect on visitors."

"Simulating Iraq" will feature 18 large scale (32 x 40 in) color portraits, interiors, and landscapes taken over three years at U.S. military training centers in California, where simulated Iraqi and Afghan settlements

were built and utilized by soldiers for role-playing war games in preparation for deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan. In these simulated towns, both military personnel and civilians play various “parts” from Iraqi villagers and medical staff to enemy combatants, dressed in approximations of traditional Middle-Eastern clothing, including headdresses, tunics, and robes. Although the military activities and sites are intended to familiarize troops with a foreign culture and unknown terrain, Beckett’s photographs present the viewer with a bizarre, alternate reality.

In military training, live role-playing games serve a critical purpose, but they also pervade popular and contemporary culture. Civil War reenactments, Dungeons & Dragons, and avatars of the virtual game world all relate to the blurred lines between reality and fantasy. Beckett’s photographs initially appear to be straightforward, documentary images. However, she works with a 4-x-5 view camera, which requires a lengthy setup, so she collaborates with her subjects to stage the portraits. In addition, the images are complicated by the “falseness” of the depictions, with blue-eyed, white-skinned subjects in head wraps and the clumsy plywood constructions of mosques.

About MATRIX

The Wadsworth was the first to embrace the idea of contemporary art in an encyclopedic museum through its MATRIX program, which began in 1975 as a series of single-artist exhibitions that have showcased more than 150 artists, providing many with their first solo museum exhibition in the United States—including Adrian Piper, Louise Lawler, Janine Antoni, and Dawoud Bey. Many MATRIX artists, such as Sol LeWitt, Willem de Kooning, Christo, Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman and Gerhard Richter, are now considered seminal figures in contemporary art.

“The new MATRIX series brings an exciting roster of emerging artists to the Wadsworth, and allows us to present work that is distinctive and new, yet still strongly influenced by the history of art,” said Susan Talbott, Director of the Wadsworth Atheneum. “As the series progresses I am excited to see how each artist builds on the tradition of past MATRIX artists who have been inspired by the Wadsworth’s long history of engaging with contemporary art, dating back to the museum’s inception in the 1840s.”

Upcoming MATRIX Artists:

Jan Tichy / MATRIX 164

April 5 – August 5, 2012

Tichy explores his interests in architecture, politics and the evocation of power through his art. Part architectural model and part video installation, his eerie sculptural nightscapes resemble covert military sites, top-secret nuclear facilities, and alien lunar surfaces. In darkened spaces, slow-moving light projections travel irregularly across Tichy’s sculptural paper constructions suggesting eases of security surveillance, the seen and unseen, and the visible and invisible.



Ahmed Alsoudani / MATRIX 165

September 6, 2012 – January 6, 2013

Alsoudani's tumultuous paintings imagine horrific scenes from the current war in Iraq. In actuality, the artist grew up in that country during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) before fleeing to America in 1999. The chaotic images in Alsoudani's large-scale canvases reveal violence, devastation and carnage in wildly active compositions. In a technique using equal parts vibrantly-colored acrylic paint and expressive charcoal drawing, distorted figures and grotesque beasts emerge from surreal landscapes that communicate a universal understanding of human conflict and infinite suffering.

Deb Sokolow / MATRIX 166

February 7 – January 2, 2013

Based in drawing and storytelling, Sokolow takes a comic-book approach to her art as if pulling the pages out of a book and spreading the outrageous and complex stories across the walls of a gallery—some exceeding 50 feet in length. In directional drawings and text, she explores a variety of subjects—from a longstanding conspiracy theory surrounding the Denver International Airport, where she suggests a secret underground bunker was built for the New World Order Headquarters, to the possibility that the US Post Office outside the window of her Chicago studio doubles as a site for illegal drug trafficking. All of her paranoid tales are based in well-researched facts, which are expanded by the wild imagination of the narrator who implicates the viewer—"you"—in the stimulating drama.

About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is located at 600 Main St. in Hartford, Connecticut. The Museum is open Wednesdays to Fridays, 11 am to 5 pm and Saturdays and Sundays, 10 am to 5 pm. For more information, please visit www.wadsworthatheneum.org.

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