

Embedded Artist

By [ANDREA SHEA](#)

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BOSTON, Mass. — Over recent years, we've become familiar with the term "embedded journalist." What about "embedded artist?"

WBUR's Andrea Shea has this story about Claire Beckett, a Boston photographer who hunkered down at military training camps to shoot newly enlisted soldiers getting ready for combat in Iraq.

One more thing: this artist uses a very unique camera.

TEXT OF STORY:

ANDREA SHEA: Claire Beckett admits she's obsessed with military preparedness. A small sampling of images she shot at training camps line the foyer in her Jamaica Plain studio. Soon they'll be hanging in a South End gallery show titled, 'Simulating Iraq.' One of the most powerful is a portrait of a young soldier lying prone in the mud. His right cheek is flush against the wet, brown earth. Beckett refers to this drill position as the 'low crawl.'

CLAIRE BECKETT: Some of these kids were literally crying by the time the exercise was over. And you can see he's really fatigued but you can also tell he's pretty proud and he's accomplished something.

ANDREA SHEA: You can tell because Beckett's photographs are almost, but not quite, life-size. Beckett says she renders them large for a reason.

CLAIRE BECKETT: When we stand and look at them they're looking at us and we're sort of in a one-to-one relationship which I really like because I want to provoke you to look at the people and think about what it would be to be in their shoes.

ANDREA SHEA: Beckett's photographs are her response to public apathy about the war in Iraq...and news reports about American soldiers lacking armored vehicles and body armor. Three years ago the National Guard gave the then 26 year-old artist access to basic trainees only a few years younger than herself. Leslie Brown, Curator at the Photographic Resource Center in Boston says Beckett's work documents the transition from civilian to soldier artfully.

LESLIE BROWN: One of the things that I think makes her work so important is simply showing this, and showing it in a different way than say a photojournalist that's going over there.

ANDREA SHEA: For Brown, Beckett's intimate photographs also capture the awkwardness of the youth.

LESLIE BROWN: The body language and the skin and the, you know even one younger soldier he sort of has, some pimples, so this idea of sort of that humanness brings so many different layers to the work.

ANDREA SHEA: Brown says Beckett's unique, old-fashioned camera also makes her work stand out.

Sound of camera shutter

CLAIRE BECKETT: It's a 4x5 Wista field camera. This camera, I think was made in the 70s, although it really is civil war-era technology.

ANDREA SHEA: Well-known Civil War photographer Matthew Brady used a similar camera. Beckett's has a modern lens...uses film...is made of wood and leather...and stands on a tripod. She crouches beneath a black cloth to shoot. It takes between 10 and 20 minutes of exposure time to capture her subjects. They must remain perfectly still.

CLAIRE BECKETT: Even the slightest movement of the head will make the picture be out of focus so we don't want that. So I'll close down my aperture... I'll cock my shutter...I'll close my lens...

ANDREA SHEA: Even with the old-school camera Beckett is decidedly contemporary. She scans and perfects her images in her 'digital darkroom.'

Sound of scanner

ANDREA SHEA: But Beckett says her novel camera helped her capture more than images at military camps in Massachusetts, Georgia and South Carolina.

CLAIRE BECKETT: Each time I would go out in the field there would always be a process of winning trust in order to be able to photograph.

ANDREA SHEA: Soldiers usually keep their distance from journalists, says James Hinnant. He was a military Public Affairs officer at Fort Jackson, South Carolina when

the artist was there in 2006.

JAMES HINNANT: In this case, with Claire and that unique camera and the black hood over it and all that, it naturally piqued their interest and they came up to her and wanted to know who she was and what she was doing and why she was there with them.

ANDREA SHEA: The amount of time and thought that goes into making these pictures reveals Beckett's intensions...according to Bernard Toale, owner of the Bernard Toale Gallery...where, on this day, Beckett's photographs are being unwrapped for installation.

Sound of unwrapping

ANDREA SHEA: Toale says Beckett's sincerity appealed to him when he first saw her images last year.

BERNARD TOALE: This was not someone who was making fun of... if there was irony you had to build it. This was someone who was really seriously interested in exploring these young peoples experience in getting ready for war.

ANDREA SHEA: For Becket getting to know that experience...first-hand...and some of the young soldiers has been emotional.

CLAIRE BECKETT: Sometimes when I'm with them it makes me feel really sad because, you know, I'm wondering what will happen very soon.

ANDREA SHEA: Beckett herself won't be going to Iraq. She's says she's more interested in being embedded here than there. Here she can continue to document 'the before' aspect of war...keeping it suspended and frozen in time.

For WBUR I'm Andrea Shea.

BACK ANNOUNCE: Claire Beckett has two solo shows up in New England right now. At the Bernard Toale Gallery in the South End and at the University of Rhode Island in Providence. To view a photo gallery of her work go to wbur.org.