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2007 Fall Arts Preview



ARTS

READY FOR WAR?

Claire Beckett looks for the 'human level'

By GREG COOK
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CRISP, MUCKY DETAIL: "Private Dan Floyd at Basic Training, Fort Knox, K.Y., 2007."

Private Dan Floyd lays face and belly in mud during basic training at Fort Knox in Kentucky. Boston photographer Claire Beckett shows the wet soil caked on his arms, legs, and helmet in crisp, mucky detail. He seems close to us, but cold, wet, miserable, and alone. His eyes are wide, his lips parted, as if he's been stunned. It is one of Beckett's most striking photos in her exhibit "In Training," at the URI Fine Arts Center Galleries, both for its verisimilitude and its nagging artificiality.

Claire Beckett, "In Training"
 University Of Rhode Island Fine Arts Center
 Photography Gallery, 105 Upper College Rd,
 Kingston | Through October 28

Beckett's 10 photos here show Army and National Guard troops training in Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Kentucky over the past two years. "My photographs do not have an overtly political or partisan message," Beckett writes. "My desire for those viewing these works is that they might consider who the individual soldiers are on a human level. I am deeply struck by how young the soldiers are, by their physical vulnerability, and by the gravity of what is asked of them."

Private Rebecca Hill looks as if she's playing dress-up as she stands awkwardly under her too-big helmet clutching her rifle. Beckett moves close for head-and-shoulders portraits of a few soldiers. The helmets of troops pop up from foxholes dug into the dry ground of an evergreen forest. Private Megan Cassidy stands facing us head-on, sweaty and exhausted in an Army T-shirt and shorts. A pair of women in green camouflage uniforms look terribly bored squatting amidst the thicket of a snow-dusted wood. Female soldiers line up as if for a school photo, dressed in the white gowns and checkered headscarves of our Arab enemies, their fatigues and combat boots peeking out here and there, as they carefully grip their empty rifles. A pair of troop trucks rumble past a faux Middle Eastern village of empty façades and junked trucks.

Beckett's photos feel like meticulously arranged school yearbook shots. She is interested in the postures, costumes, make-believe settings and role-playing of combat training. The young soldiers appear strikingly white, pimply, and awkward.

But it's a mistake to read too much from these pictures. The give-away is that everyone has nearly the same dull expression — the frozen bored look of subway riders killing time as they do nothing but try to mind their own business. Military training is serious stuff, but you don't bring dozens of young adults together without any goofing and shenanigans.

What we see here is another variation of the deadpan style that dominates much art photography today. (Another favorite style is Nan Goldin-ism). It seems a continuing reaction against the "decisive moment" documentary art photography that was popular in midcentury modernism. That style was built upon the idea that great photography is a sort of athletic-intellectual gymnastics in which photographers stalk subjects, finagle to be at the right place at the right time and, in a split-second, focus and compose their picture to epitomize the moment, the subject, the height of the action.

Conceptualists and postmodernists began dissecting both the authenticity and artistry of "decisive moment" photography in the '70s. Jeff Wall elaborately staged photographs that imitated slice-of-life observations. Cindy Sherman photographed herself in numerous invented "film stills." The postmodern deadpan style that has grown out of this echoes school photos, the vacant look of fashion models, 19th-century portraits. It is distinguished by sober posed portraits of people with blank expressions, often shot head-on. Deadpan photographers are frequently both physically and emotionally distant, producing affectless scenes like An-My Lê's panoramas of soldiers training in California that were shown at the RISD Museum a year ago. There's something sad and upright about a style that declines to risk getting in the middle of things, to dare getting emotional.

Beckett is a talented photographer who has set her sights on powerful themes: war and youth and

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vulnerability. She deploys the deadpan style to convey the sense of weirdness and absurdity of, say, training in snowy evergreen forest to fight in the desert. But her uniform tone feels like she's projecting too much onto the soldiers. Perhaps she means to reflect years of distorted views of our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, of the "war on terror." But it's about time to see clearly.

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