

Claire Beckett

by [Lost At E Minor](#) in [Culture](#) on 30 October 2008

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Boston-based photographer [Claire Beckett](#) earned a BA in Anthropology from Kenyon College and an MFA in Photography from the Massachusetts College of Art. Her photo series "In Training: Soldiers Before War" was inspired by the two years she spent as a part of the Peace Corps Volunteers in the Republic of Benin, West Africa. We interviewed her about it.

How did this project begin?

I was drawn to this subject initially in late 2004, around the time that there was a lot in the news about the lack of up-armored humvees (the armor necessary to protect soldiers). At that time, we weren't allowed to see

photographs of the coffins of deceased soldiers. I felt a strong compulsion to make work on the subject because I thought it deserved more attention than it was getting. I have stayed with the work because I still find the subject moving, and because it really interests me.

You seem to have shot many more women than men for this series. Is this intentional?

I don't believe that this work deals especially with gender other than the reality that gender is always with us in this world. I probably photographed about the same number of men as women, but in my experience the women were more open and their photographs were more to my liking.

What has been the biggest discovery while working on this series of young soldiers?

Before embarking on this project, I knew very little about contemporary soldiers or the military. Most of what I'd known up to this point came from family stories of World War II and Vietnam. I did not personally know any members of the Armed Services, so the entire thing has been an education.



The most important thing that I've learned is that there is a tremendous variety among soldiers in terms of their personal biographies, their motivations and their politics. In the circles that I frequent there tends to be a set of beliefs about who soldiers are, and this often casts our young soldiers as uninformed victims. This attitude really bothers me because it robs soldiers of their agency. We do not have a draft in the United States today. Everyone who enlists does so by her or his own choice. Yes, we have an unjust socio-economic system in America, but it is a mistake to cast soldiers exclusively as victims of this system.

I have observed that for certain soldiers joining the military is the adventure of a lifetime, for some it is a way to pay for college and for others there is a deep sense of patriotic duty. Among the many soldiers I have met, there have been right-wing Christian conservatives, poor people, Harvard-educated economic elites, left-leaning democrats, Buddhists, Muslims and environmentalists.