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**Babes in arms**

**CLAIRE BECKETT: 'IN TRAINING: SOLDIERS BEFORE WAR'**

Through Oct. 28



Private Dan Floyd at Basic Training, Fort Knox, Ky., 2007

BY LISA UTMAN RANDALL

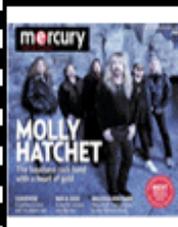
I'm not sure whether to be comforted or deeply saddened by the images in Claire Beckett's "In Training: Soldiers before War," an exhibit currently hanging at the Photography Gallery at the University of Rhode Island. On the one hand the young soldiers-to-be all appear quite capable, they certainly know how to hold a gun and they all have their trigger finger at the ready, but, well, they're kids. And they're preparing to fight in a war that seems increasingly unlikely to be winnable. A war for which we don't even have a working definition of "win." In all likelihood some of these young men and women will come home broken and some of them will not come home at all.

Beckett's portraits and training camp landscapes, all taken during drill weekends at various National Guard facilities mostly in Massachusetts but also in Fort Jackson, S.C., and Fort Knox, Ky., are technically stunning and leave little to the imagination. The shots are crisp close-ups of individuals preparing for war and the training camps where they learn the rules of the game.

The photographs are big C-prints, 30" x 40" - some hung horizontally and some vertically. They're hyper-real - blemishes and stray hairs are visible if you look closely - and for the most part the subjects gaze straight into the camera. These are frozen moments blown up large enough to create a relationship between viewer and subject.

Since 2004, Beckett, who holds an MFA in Photography from Massachusetts College of Art, has been visiting camps around Massachusetts and photographing individuals as they prepare for possible deployment to Iraq.

change  
your  
temperature



"I am deeply moved by the notion of these people who face war. The ongoing nature of the conflict in Iraq ensures that each soldier will likely be called for mobilization, some for a second or third time," Beckett explained in her personal statement.

As I walk around the perimeter of the Photography Gallery, I look at the dates of the photographs, mostly 2006, one in 2007 and I cannot help wonder, "Where are they now?" Has Private Rebecca Hill been "mobilized"? Is she in Iraq? Is she OK? In the photograph, she stands among scrub pines in a basic training camp in Fort Jackson wearing combat fatigues and holding a very large gun. She has a hard hat, a baby face and round glasses perched on her nose - are the glasses army regulation? She appears to be all business, but maybe she dissolved into laughter seconds after Beckett put down her camera. Perhaps Private Hill and photographer Beckett finished the photo shoot and went to share a Coke and a few laughs at the commissary. Perhaps this is wishful thinking on my part.

The exhibit is part of a yearlong exploration of emerging women photographers that Fine Arts Center Galleries Director Judith Tolnick Champa has planned for the gallery. She discovered Beckett's work while looking through portfolios at the Photo Resource Center at Boston University.

"I immediately wanted to do a show with her," Tolnick Champa said. "Her subjects are so young and vulnerable. Claire went to all these different training camps and was encouraged by the higher ups to shoot as much as she wanted to. She had a great deal of access."

Beckett's straight on, documentary style casts a neutral shadow and, as a result, the photographs are offered without any overt political agenda. These are portraits of soldiers, and whether you approve of their mission or not, you cannot dismiss their determination or their bravery.

As I leave the gallery I can't help overhearing two URI students as they amble down the corridor, "Yeah, I had to park my car like a mile away from class and then walk all the way. I feel like I'm gonna die!"

"I know, it's really hard," her sympathetic friend replied.

I thought about Private Dan Floyd photographed prone in the mud, a look of exhaustion closing in around his eyes and the corners of his mouth as he stared off into the distance and I winced.