

## Claire Beckett

### CARROLL AND SONS

Claire Beckett's crisp, large-format photographs of US soldiers preparing to deploy to Iraq and Afghanistan capture the complexity of the nation's post-9/11 military operations in their intertwinement with imaging systems—photography and film/video—that are premised on a false sense of proximity. Granted security clearance to the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California, Beckett spent more than three years documenting army personnel and civilian workers engaging in role-play exercises aimed at readying new soldiers for the populations and perils they would likely encounter once deployed to foreign territories. The scenarios and personas that Beckett photographed in the center's artificially fabricated Middle East-style settlement in the Mojave Desert and environs are based on descriptions given by intelligence services, and by participants playing local citizenry or enemy combatants assuming various approximations of indigenous garb. Though these maneuvers are designed to familiarize American troops with local conditions and customs and with the gamut of attitudes toward US forces (thereby precluding the possibility that any eventuality be unexpected), the ellipses in the exhibition title "You are..." hint at an open-ended quality when it comes to the relationship between "us" and "them."

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Beckett's project is the way she has managed to capture—without disparaging or condescending to those participating in the war effort—the basic means by which the military engineers notions of otherness. All it takes for Private Kathleen Jones or civilian Joshua Osborne—both fair-skinned and blue-eyed—to become Sabirah Ni'mat Kalim of the dubiously titled Medina Wasl Village or an Iraqi civilian improbably named Wadi Al-Sahara is the addition of patterned head scarves. Yet, in these portraits, the address between sitter and photographer is so direct and uninflected that we, as viewers, cannot assume an ironic, cynical, or judgmental stance without feeling a twinge of guilt due to our own uninformed, mostly clichéd assumptions about the identity of the men and women in these photographs—uniformed and civilian alike. Beckett's "action shots," which simulate the habits and hazards of the war zone, operate in this double register as well. In one particularly arresting image, four African-American

civilians displaying a mélange of sartorial codes (i.e. army fatigues, abayas, and Ray-Ban-style sunglasses) impersonate Iraqi village women drinking tea. If they appear as "outsiders" to the cultural realities of the Middle East, the viewer is positioned as a complete interloper, hovering outside the logic of military operations while reflecting on his or her own mediated mechanisms of identification with the individuals on the ground; the elevated, almost aerial perspective from which the photograph was taken only emphasizes the distance. In such subtle ways, Beckett underscores the impossibility of understanding other cultural identities in an unmediated form, while also carving out a space of empathy for the troops and the civilians involved in this war-game theater. As we probe whether a nondescript landscape, decorated with typical American deck and office chairs and a few hastily assembled props, prepares US soldiers to understand the importance of teahouses to Iraqi and Afghani social nexuses, we also confront the fact that so often our own understanding of peoples and cultures beyond our own is hardly any richer, limited as it is to discursive and visual representations.

Presumably the military's counterinsurgency efforts are significantly more elaborate than the few activities we witness, through Beckett, being rehearsed at Fort Irwin. But there is an intriguing resonance between Medina Jabal Town—a contrived desert encampment made entirely of shipping containers—and the back lots of Hollywood, located only a few hours to the south, in Los Angeles. Analogies can only too easily be drawn between the military-industrial complex and the film industry. Not only do both spheres rely on commercialized image systems and the staging of reality, but they share as well an impulse to construct and diffuse specific representations of identity in ways that inevitably escape their own control, ultimately producing unstable signifiers.

—Nuit Banai

Claire Beckett, *American civilians playing the role of Iraqi village women drinking tea: Karen Davis as "Salihah Asad Hatim," Verna Pouesi as "Amira Rough," Randa Matgyo as "Kawthar Amid," and Faye Ugapo as "Rim Duqaq Barakah," Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009, archival ink-jet print, 40 x 30".*

