

## REVIEWS: *Massachusetts*

### CLAIRE BECKETT: SIMULATING IRAQ

Carroll and Sons Gallery • Boston, MA • [www.carrollandsons.net](http://www.carrollandsons.net) • February 16–March 20, 2011

Claire Beckett's photographs make us uneasy. That's because her subject matter, recorded with deadpan accuracy, isn't exactly truthful. But it's not Beckett who is simulating Iraq. Rather, these stark images come from military training facilities where enlisted soldiers go through the paces of action they have yet to actually experience.

Beckett is an "embedded artist" who takes images of events that occur in front of her.

The settings are California desert and mountain areas, where quasi-villages have been fashioned with help from Hollywood set builders. Like the costumes and even the bloody bandages of the "injured," these fabrications dissolve on close inspection. Loosely interpreted shapes like minarets and onion domes have been fashioned out of surplus wood and storage containers, augmented by dying palm trees and splashes of incongruent paint. The exotic locales are half-glimpsed dreams, just functional enough for the war games to unfold.

Beckett is interested in when the illusion

falters and simple humanity shows through these earnest façades of terrorists, Iraqi nurses, enemy snipers, injured Marines, and Taliban fighters. She asks her subjects, who have been given scripts and paid to act parts, about how they should be portrayed. With *Marine Lance Corporal Nicole Camala Veen as Nurse*, the soldier

augments her costume with beautiful embroidered fabrics. They match her makeup and lacquered nails, giving this dedicated soldier the aspect of an actress ready for her close-up.

Also ambiguous is an image of MLC Joshua Stevens playing a Taliban fighter. In one image he and two marines patrol a riverbank holding rifles. It's like a still from a war film.

In close-up, the provisional nature of the fabrics that make up his headscarf and robes explains to some extent his incongruous blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. In this war "game," the soldiers are armed only for laser tag; however, experienced snipers aim to kill.

In *Evening, Medina Wasl Village*, Beckett captures a bonfire blowing in the desert wind, a rare night shot. Soldiers are visible behind the blaze, and also as after-images due to the low exposure. The fabricated buildings glow green and yellow behind them, surreal backdrops to an unlikely endeavor with life or death.

—Shawn Hill



Claire Beckett, *Evening, Medina Wasl Village*, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2008.