

ARTS & CULTURE

Your Eyes Deceive You: Claire Beckett at the Wadsworth Atheneum

August 7, 2012 | by [Drew Johnson](#)



Marine Lance Corporal Nicole Camalia Veen Playing the Role of an Iraqi Nurse, Wadi Al-Sahara, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, CA, 2008

In Hartford overnight for reasons that would take too long to explain, my wife and I visited the Wadsworth Atheneum, the city's art museum, where she had interned a number of years before. Hartford is one of those midsize American cities, like Cincinnati or Worcester, dominated by Chris Ware cityscapes.

The Atheneum is a small, good museum and interesting in that way that Hartford is interesting: on a comparatively small stage the choices are more evident, the collections more particular. Things that would be pushed into the storeroom at another museum are given fascinating pride of place. What is less well known is not so consistently edged out by what is too well known.

We walked past the museum's two Balthuses into a room full of photos of men in headdresses, dusty streets, namelessly Middle Eastern scenes. A man fiddling with a bomb. Something was off, however: there was too much unfinished plywood and the people staring into the camera were clearly ... what?

We slowed down, read wall text. This woman is a Marine lance corporal.

Claire Beckett works out of Boston, and her interests have always been international. This show is actually a departure, then, for the Arab streets and desert and unexpectedly American-looking villagers are all from a training camp in California where soldiers come to prepare for their moon landing, among a set with military and civilian role-players meant to approximate and explore the real thing.

They're large archival ink-jet prints, perhaps twenty-five in all, in one room. They are beautiful and as surreal as they are perhaps meant to be. More surreal in their proximity than in all the thousands of pictures we have seen of Baghdad, Mosul, and Fallujah at their remove. So this is the rarer look, the stranger country, farther from us.

All the "opponents" in these photos are played by our soldiers.

A curious theatrical culture has always existed alongside the military along with equally strange sports and games. The overlap is growing in all sorts of high-tech ways: the now-famous redesign of weapons-system controls to resemble the video-game controllers that all our recruits have known from birth. But these photos are from a labor-intensive low-tech exercise (fitting that the base is 150 miles from Los Angeles and movie-industry types were there to work up some of the sets).

My father, briefly in the Vietnam-era army, had a strictly NATO primary military specialty: atomic demolition. In Missouri, when they weren't filling the time with spelunking, they practiced assembling dummy tactical nukes the size of garbage cans, arming them, and then driving away. Years later, my father learned that the point of these tiny bombs was to collapse the historically navigable mountain passes of Europe in the event that Soviets heading West in their tanks might want to use them.

He never so much as saw the bomb he had learned to detonate or a mountain pass he was meant to destroy. The tanks never came that far West.



Marine Lance Corporal Joshua Stevens Playing the Role of a Taliban Fighter, Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center, CA, 2009



Above Medina Jabal Town, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009

These photos of Medina Jabal Town are from a stage set meant for soldiers who would depart for a not at all hypothetical war. And these portraits, like cast photos from opening night, play portraiture against itself. They're in costume, but are they in character? (Beckett says she asks them questions about their role as she takes portraits.) This color-blind casting? Does it train or untrain the eye and the mind? Will it go on or will it be a curiosity of this particular war?

Or they could be from a photo shoot in *National Geographic*, even the famous June 1985 issue from the anti-Soviet Afghan war. The issue whose cover was graced with the image of the then unknown green-eyed girl, a Pashtun refugee. So this could be a photo essay about a little village in a California desert, a village that never was. Insurgents who go home at the end of the night and hang up their headdresses and simply cease to be.

While my wife and I were in Hartford, looking at Claire Beckett's photographs, a father and son came in together. They struck me as a family separated by a divorce, on a weekend visitation outing to the museum. Or perhaps I was wrong.

The flyer for the show says that we immediately notice that something looks surprising, whether we want to admit it or not, as we examine these blond, blue-eyed insurgents, these under-detailed Arabic cityscape-sets. On some level, we all have our conditioned expectations. This man didn't notice.

From the boy's murmured questions and the father's answers, it became apparent that, not reading the labels, the father hadn't noticed that he wasn't looking at Iraq and that these very Anglo "terrorists" weren't actual enemies. They were walking slowly from photo to photo and it was easy to keep fairly close. What seemed odd at first glance, disorienting to me, he assimilated without a bump. This was reality.



Civilian Krista Galyean Playing the Role of An American Marine Injured in a IED Blast, Wadi Al-Sahara, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, CA, 2008

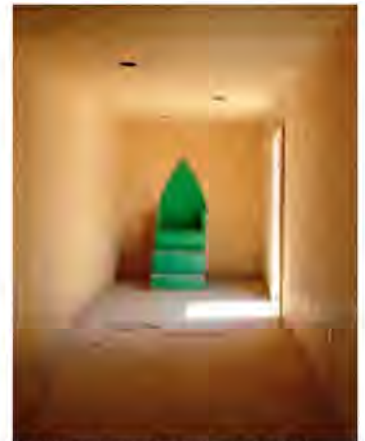
Seeing the fake blood but not seeing that it was fake, he shielded and steered his son past *Civilian Krista Galyean Playing the Role of an American Marine Injured in a IED Blast, Wadi Al-Sahara, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, CA, 2008.*

With her stage-makeup IED amputation and streaks of stage grime on an otherwise clean face and wearing neatly pressed fatigues, she seemed clearly recognizable as something other than what she was pretending to be. But no, he didn't want his son to see this violence. I listened long enough to be sure that I wasn't misunderstanding. They left the gallery without the switchover ever happening.

If there is a point to this last anecdote, it's certainly not anything about the intelligence of these two museum visitors, but instead just our unquestioning relationship to what we're shown, that the eye is not so sharp as essays about art and looking and cognition would sometimes have it. The photos weren't even CGI. Was that why the man took it for granted they were real?

I thought then of the safety of the uncanny valley, in which we still cannot be fooled. We'll leave that behind soon enough. We do not see so well as we could hope.

*Images courtesy of the artist and Carroll and Sons Gallery, Boston.*



Shia Mosque Interior, Medina Wasil Village, 2008

*Drew Johnson is a writer living in Massachusetts. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Harper's, Five Chapters, The Cupboard, VQR, and elsewhere.*

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TAGS Afghanistan, art, Claire Beckett, Hartford, Iraq, Military, photography, Wadsworth Atheneum

## 2 Comments

**Nick Mannweiler** | August 8, 2012 at 2:32 pm

Nice article. It provides a very interesting validation of the tools we use to train Marines here at the Combat Center in 29 Palms. The assimilation you describe is what we hope to do for the Marines that come here to train before they deploy to overseas operations.

Though most of the photos in the story come from 2008, we utilize an even more detailed and in-depth collection of tools to allow Marines to train the way they fight.

Through support from a contractor, we have role players that come in and play the parts of villagers, elders, clerics, and soldiers and police from the Afghan security forces. We had Iraqi role players when we were still involved in that conflict. The civilian role players do not play the part of insurgents or Taliban however. We utilize specially-trained Marines for that part of our training program. The role players, for obvious reasons, aren't a part of our training involving live rounds, just to provide cultural authenticity to the rest of our training. Our training ranges at the Combat Center are among the best in the world and our staff provide Marines with the most current training realities we can. For more photos of training here in 29 Palms or at our Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center, visit <http://www.flickr.com/thecombatcenter>.

Semper Fidelis,

Capt. Nick Mannweiler  
Director of Public Affairs

**Sadie Stein** | August 8, 2012 at 4:12 pm

Nick, thank you for such an informative comment! Really appreciated. SOS