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HOLDING FIRE: a new exhibition of work by Sarah Pickering

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Ffotogallery, Turner House, Plymouth Road, Penarth CF64 3DM

Holding Fire brings together for the first time two bodies of work *Incident* and *Explosions*, capturing the fascinating and bizarre spectacles to be found in the training centres of the emergency services. On gallery level one, large black and white images of fire-damaged interiors present us with an institutional simulation of potentially tragic events - scenarios that are recreated, restaged and repeated endlessly by the fire fighting services. By way of contrast, the ground floor exhibition features full colour images of pyrotechnic explosions used by British police and military instructors to intensify the sense of drama and tension in training exercises.

Incident (2008)

The *Incident* series was produced whilst Sarah Pickering was Artist in Residence at the UK Fire Service College from 2006-7. This is photography that draws attention to the photograph – the dark areas often appear where lightness should be, creating a slippage between negative and positive; the matt surface of the fibre based prints echoes the carbon-covered surface in the spaces. The choice of the scale (50"x 60"), the composition, and the materiality of the images, references image making outside that of the purely photographic.

The blackened spaces reveal traces of human presence – marks where fingers have been dragged across surfaces and bodies rubbed up against objects. These traces and marks resonate with the surface of the photograph itself. Strangely pristine, these locations are devoid of the charred piles of debris normally seen in a burned out building. Designed to withstand repeated fires, the furniture and fixtures have a schematic and approximate structure. Ranging from the domestic to the industrial, there is an intense emotional power conveyed by the pictures in stark contrast to the very functional subject matter.

Transcending expected themes of documentary photography, *Incident* denies simple categorisation; in this work the fictional nature of the subject and the quality of the surface and image become metaphors for photography itself.

Explosion (2004 – ongoing)

The pyrotechnic simulation industry has expanded rapidly over the last five years. Atrocious acts have occurred in conflict throughout history, but training in recent times has become more and more realistic to psychologically prepare our forces for the worst. Police and soldiers who have grown up

playing computer games and seeing ever more spectacular special effects in films are disconnected from yet feel closer to the “real.”

With names like “Artillery,” “Electric Thunderflash,” and “Landmine,” the pyrotechnics evoke not only violent and destructive events from wars and conflicts, but also the dramatic re-enactments of such events in feature films or war documentaries. Witnesses to extreme situations often describe what they saw as being “like a film,” and modern filmmakers use CGI and special effects to realistically conjure up possible disasters to entertain viewers. Pickering explains:

“Whether real or artificial, we enjoy looking at explosions and, as an artist, I’m of course fascinated by their visual seductiveness. But I’m also interested in the forms of violence they represent, in our relationship to them, and in identifying the imaginative references they instantiate”

By using photography to record a simulated or imagined scene Pickering creates a document that is already a departure from reality. The narrative behind these dramatic scenes is not explicit, and what the viewer infers from them depends on how they rationalise the unexpected to allay their fears. Audience reactions are also conditioned to some extent by over-exposure to ‘reality’ and so-called ‘mockumentary’ television genres. Moreover, most of the photographs in this series were in fact taken during manufacturers’ demonstrations for military and police shopping trips rather than during training itself—in this sense, the images represent artificial instances of artificial explosions, packaged here as “product.”

These test sites are in the English countryside where the bursts of light, flames, sparks, and smoke sit incongruously in the rural setting. By cataloguing and decontextualising the explosions they depict, these photographs permanently suspend them in a tranquil and contemplative moment. The image of a past event hovers between “then,” “now,” and “what might be”; and what should be a decisive moment is confounded.

About the artist

Sarah Pickering is a London based, British photographer who graduated from the Royal College of Art with a MA in Photography in 2005. She has been the recipient of several awards including the Photographers Gallery Graduate Award and a Jerwood Photography Award in 2005. Work from the *Incident* series is about to be shown at the Victoria and Albert Museum as part of an exhibition of their recent acquisitions. Aperture and the Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago will co-publish a substantial monograph of her work later this year.