

On View

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In 2002, while still a student at the Royal College of Art, London-based photographer Sarah Pickering began shooting a series of pictures she calls "Public Order." Their collective title derives from the Metropolitan Police Public Order Training Centre near London, where police officers rehearse responses to imagined scenarios of civic unrest in a simulated urban environment. In one photograph of the facility, a deserted intersection is barricaded with rubber tires and overturned shopping carts. Another provides a view down a narrow alley, where the pavement is littered with bricks and the surrounding buildings are blackened with smoke. These and other anecdotal details suggest the aftermath of a riot, its angry mob recently quelled and disbanded. But Pickering, whose large-scale, color photographs generally privilege ambiguity over deception, also concedes the artifice of this setting. Many of her pictures reveal the buildings as mere facades, and an uncanny emptiness further betrays the fiction of these blighted city streets.

Imaginary threat response has remained the subject of Pickering's more recent photographs. In a body of work known as "Explosions," which were shown last winter at Daniel Cooney Fine Art in New York, she documents the tactical use of pyrotechnics by the British military. Detonated on remote test sites in the English countryside, these controlled explosions are designed to add realistic stress to training exercises and familiarize soldiers with various munitions. Pickering's photographs catalogue the different types of explosions and bear simple titles that refer to each simulated weapon. In *Land Mine* (2005), a concentrated blast leaps from the earth and showers an overcast sky with a fan of yellow sparks. *Fire Burst* (2004), by contrast, is an amorphous miasma of white heat, its incandescent flames hugging the ground and billowing outward.

Although she captures a wide array of pyrotechnic effects, Pickering applies consistent formal controls to all the photographs in this series. Every explosion is centrally framed and crisply focused in the middle ground. Each blast, moreover, is suspended in a moment of spectacular climax that welcomes aesthetic contemplation. While underscoring the premeditation of these fireworks, Pickering's

calculated timing and perspectives also speak to the mediation of violence and war in contemporary society. For most viewers of these photographs, prior knowledge of explosions is probably restricted to news broadcasts about distant conflicts or special effects witnessed in action movies. When equipped with such benign experiential touchstones, viewers may liken the white flash of *Ground Burst No. 1* (2004), for example, to the arrival of an extra-terrestrial in a science-fiction film.

One might argue that the rural settings of these explosions contribute to the reassuring artifice of Pickering's photographs. Indeed, nearly all the pyrotechnics explode against grassy meadows that hardly resemble war-ravaged landscapes. But this incongruity is also a source of the unease that these pictures engender. In a post-9/11 era, when the Western world has learned to brace for unexpected terrorism, these images may aggravate latent fears that deadly violence can occur without warning just about anywhere. So while Pickering's photographs collapse opposing categories of reality and representation, rigorous control and spontaneous combustion, they also remind us that the comfort we gain from disaster preparations tends to be tempered by a heightened state of paranoia.

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