

Sarah Pickering

Explosions, Fires, and Public Order

Special book review by Liz Kuball

“It turns out that an eerie type of chaos can lurk just behind a façade of order – and yet, deep inside the chaos lurks an even eerier type of order.”

Douglas Hostadter

“The terror of security resides in the mental space between acceptance and denial, preparedness and ignorance, control and disorder.”

Karen Irvine

I live in a land of fires and façades, of scenic storytelling and manufactured reality. So, something seems familiar to me in Sarah Pickering’s photographs. Pickering’s monograph, *Explosions, Fires, and Public Order*, published by Aperture, includes four separate series with a common thread: preparation and training for disaster and the attempt to control the uncontrollable.

In *Public Order*, Pickering explores a “town” built for the purposes of training public safety officers. If you didn’t know what you were looking at, you might, at first, think this was a real town, a real place, except something seems a bit off: the uniformity, the blandness, the blanket of gray. It looks like an empty Hollywood backlot. Without the movement of people to focus on, your attention turns to how unreal those shopfronts and houses are. When Pickering shows that there is nothing but a grassy field beyond the threshold of the front door, where the living room or showroom should be, that’s where the images become clear. There is a real sense of the absurd in these photographs. In their large-format clarity, they force us to examine our own towns, our own buildings, our own conception of reality.

In the second section, *Explosions*, Pickering documents the detonation of fake bombs for use in Hollywood films and military training exercises – a dichotomy that gets to the heart of our perception of war. The detonations take place in grassy fields and vacant lots, with hardly a sign of human life. (If a bomb goes off in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?) With such a blank backdrop, with life already removed from the scene, these explosions are nothing more than pyrotechnics shows conducted in broad daylight. The *Explosions* series may be the core of Pickering’s book: the images deconstruct devastation, leaving a sense that it’s manageable and contained, that everything is going to be all right. And yet, you know it won’t be. You know that real bombs don’t go off in empty fields, and that there is no way to train for them.

In *Fire Scene*, Pickering photographs the first moments after a fire’s ignition in rooms more similar to a soundstage than to reality. I found myself scouring each scene for which items were the ones people would take before leaving. Which figurine on the TV set would be the one spared? Which book or photograph would be left behind? These are questions I’ve weighed myself when I’ve been evacuated from my home as wildfires tore through neighboring hillsides. Priorities become very clear in those moments, and though there is something to be said here about the social commentary of these scenes – these are not the fires of the upper class (read the book’s introductory essay, by Karen Irvine, for some questions worth considering on this

topic) – these photos were the most emotional and intimate for me because of the human lives they imply.

The fourth and final section, *Incident*, is the only black-and-white series. Here, Pickering shows us the aftermath of fire, again in a setting used for training. These sets are less decorated than the ones in *Fire Scene*, and the images reveal the soot, the ash, the dirty realities of what fire leaves behind. The last photograph in the book is of several dummies, stacked one on top of another. It's a fitting end for a work so focused on our extremely human need to prepare for disaster, and the inhuman ways in which we do so.

In the end, Sarah Pickering's work shows us that in trying to reproduce catastrophe, we're doing little to prepare for it. There is nothing in these pictures of real crime, true terror. There is nothing of the feeling I had, pulling away from my home, Jeep loaded with my belongings and my dog, the hills on fire behind me. This is the sanitized version of life gone wrong, with none of the heartache and heartbreak. This is what we wish catastrophe would be.

Sarah Pickering (born in Durham, UK, 1972) is a London based 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 Award in 2005. Sarah has exhibited internationally and in the UK where her work was part of How We Are: Photographing Britain, at Tate Britain, and is currently on show in the photography gallery of the V&A museum. Her work is featured in many publications including the Phaidon anthology on contemporary photography, *Vitamin Ph*, and the catalogue and exhibition, *Manipulating Reality*, (Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozziina Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Florence). Her monograph *Explosions, Fires and Public Order* was recently published by Aperture to coincide with a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago during Spring 2010. Gallery representation is with Meessen de Clercq, Brussels.

[Sarah Pickering](#)

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