

Big bangers: SARAH PICKERING

Young British photographer Sarah Pickering's images of motionless pyrotechnics captured at police training grounds, are mesmerising unions of violence and tranquility.

Sarah Pickering had barely graduated from her photography MA at the RCA when she won the Jerwood Prize. Her winning series *Public Order* (2005) documented deserted fake towns used as unnerving police training sites. She revisited training grounds to examine violence in her latest project, *Explosion*. Playing with the feelings of anxiety that surround bombs and war, Pickering transforms military test explosions in Kent into dream-like and frozen panoramas. Violence is suspended into something almost tranquil, as she fills the gap between reality and nothingness.

Dazed & Confused: What drew you to explosions?

Sarah Pickering: I'm interested in the visual seduction of explosions, but I'm also intrigued by the more disturbing aspect of potential violence and our relationship to it. The explosion as a metaphor is very powerful one. It represents an extreme state, and conjures some visually rich imagery in our language, fusing fear, power, pleasure and the unknown.

D&C: There's an interesting contrast between the barren landscapes where these tests take place and the violence. What interested you about that juxtaposition?

SP: The photographs aren't constructions, they document tests, so I have very little influence on the setting. The landscapes are really banal, not what you'd usually associate with the British landscape, and I really like that contrast. An explosion going off in this context is not very threatening, but at the same time, there's a sense of strangeness and displacement.

D&C: Does the series comment in some way on the current political climate?

SP: Yes, but it's not entirely about that. Representations of wars have been mediated and cleaned up. In reaction to hard realities, Western culture is withdrawing to virtual approximations of the world. It's important that these photographs are documents of actual tests – so they're grounded in the real, but at the same time I'm photographing a non-event. The scenarios set up by the military or police, can only be imagined.

D&C: Does the media influence you?

SP: I'm very interested in the mockumentaries and docudramas that are so popular at the moment. Also, the idea of making ever more realistic simulations that have familiar presenters reporting from the news desk as if some terrible terrorist attack had happened, is troubling and fascinating. We have a cultural obsession with simulation, with preparation, controlling and predicting the future, and at the same time, we enjoy watching the destruction of cities in Hollywood disaster films. There is a tension between what is perceived as real and what is actually real.

Explosion runs from April 20 – June 23 at The Photographers' Gallery, 5 Great Newport Street, London WC2

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Top: Fireburst, 2004 Above: Ground Burst, 2004