

PHOTOS COURTESY DANIEL COONEY FINE ART

Up in Smoke: An Explosive Approach to Art

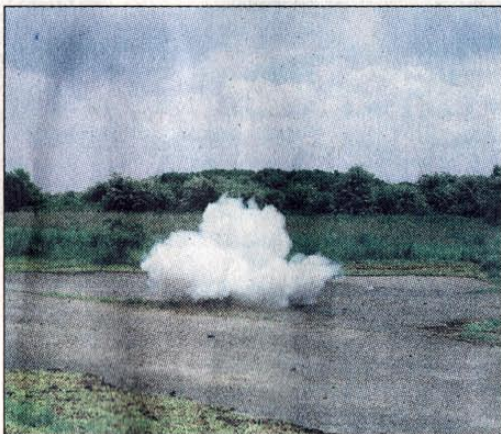
By **BLAKE GOPNIK**
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They could almost be classic British landscape pictures: rolling downs, patches of green grass, soft gray skies, cotton-ball clouds.

But in one image, that single puff of cumulus is hovering right above the ground — far too low to be a cloud. And in another, it's more like a nimbostratus, but darker than any storm front that's ever hit the British Isles. A third image gives the game away: It shows the moment just before those clouds have formed, when England's rural peace gets shattered by a thunderclap of noise, an explosive flash and a shower of sparks.

In a recent series of photographs, 33-year-old Londoner Sarah Pickering — she's so newly out of grad school, she barely even counts as an "emerging artist" — has captured controlled explosions set off on the proving grounds of the British police and military.

They're pyrotechnics, used to train and prepare British fighters for the real munitions they might encounter if things got really out



Sarah Pickering's "Artillery," top left, "Land Mine," top right, and "Electric Thunder Flash," above.

of hand. (Some are designed by the same people who blow things up for James Bond films.) Pickering's photos bear the titles of the imitation armaments they document: "Land Mine," "Artillery," "Napalm," "Fuel Air Explosion."

There's an art and artifice to pyrotechnics, even when they're used for practical ends. In this case, that explosive artifice echoes some of what goes on classic art: It's about making faithful copies of things seen in the world. Then it gets picked up by Pickering's realistic imagemaking to show us how warlike things can be even when it feels like we're at peace.

And yet despite the grim realism present in this project's every stage, there's some lighthearted magic in it, too — or at least a trickster's prestidigitation. A bang, a flash of light, a puff of smoke and then — hey, presto! — nothing. The magician's assistant has been blown to kingdom come.

The photographs of Sarah Pickering are getting their American premiere through Feb. 25 at Daniel Cooney Fine Art in New York. Information and more images can be found at www.danielcooneyfineart.com/PickeringArt.