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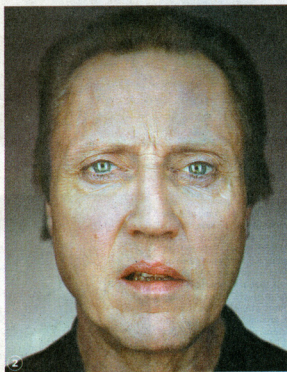
**Movie Nation:** What's on the big screen

**Exhibitionist:** Visual arts and beyond

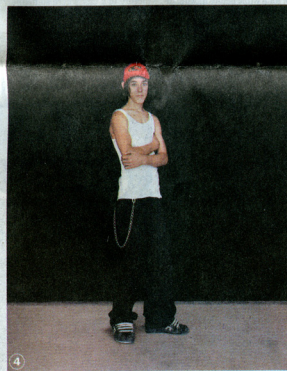
# Arts & Entertainment

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE NOVEMBER 4, 2007

# HERE'S



# LOOKING



# AT YOU

BY GREG COOK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The photographs depict strikingly young American troops: A woman in a pale blue gown and headscarf masquerades as an Iraqi insurgent, a guy in a black robe carries a rocket launcher, and a mud-covered private in uniform stands holding a rifle.

Jamaica Plain artist Claire Beckett has photographed military training in Massachusetts, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Kentucky for a few years now. In "Simulating Iraq" at the Bernard Toale Gallery, her photos are rich in detail and color. But what really stands out is how Beckett has photographed nearly all the subjects head-on, with a similar affectless expression on their faces. Her style, she says, is partly intuitive and partly a result of the old-fashioned medium format camera she uses.

"Setting it up can take like 10 minutes," she says. "At least. In that time the person settles in and they become more comfortable generally and they have a much more contemplative neutral expression. . . . It is an expression that you don't get tired of."

Neutral expressions and cool, head-on compositions have become one of the signature styles of today's art photography. Some have called it deadpan photography: The tone is impassive, matter-of-fact, detached. Often the people are posed.

You can detect the style in Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra's portraits of a young woman before and after her induction into the Israeli Army, part of the Institute of Contemporary Art's permanent collection. You see it in the student portraits by Chicago photographer Dawoud Bey in "Class Pictures," now on view at the Addison Gallery of Ameri-

Engaging yet ambiguous, deadpan photography provides a refuge from emotion in a time of worry

1. Claire Beckett's "Private Sean Williams at Basic Training, Fort Knox, Ky."
2. Martin Schoeller's "Christopher Walken"
3. Dawoud Bey's "Sarah"
4. A "Pine Flat" portrait by Sharon Lockhart



## Visual Arts

## Dispassionate subjects draw intense interest

## ► DEADPAN PHOTOGRAPHY

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can Art in Andover. It is there in Brookline photographer Laura McPhee's coming-of-age portraits of an Idaho girl, shown in her "River of No Return" exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts last year, and in California-based Sharon Lockhart's "Pine Flat" portraits, which appeared last fall at Harvard's Arthur M. Sackler Museum.

The list goes on and on. There's New York photographer Martin Schoeller's giant celebrity head shots, which were shown at the Bernard Toale Gallery last January and often appear in *The New Yorker*. You see the deadpan style in Minnesota photographer Alec Soth's shots of people and hotels in "Niagara," displayed at New York's prestigious Gagosian Gallery last year. And the style bubbled through "reGeneration," a roundup of photography by recent art-school grads from around the world at the Art Institute of Boston last fall.

Deadpan style is not limited to portraits. Beckett's photos of a fake mosque, a computer war-game room, and a table set up to practice negotiations share the same direct compositions and cool tone as her images of people.

Deadpan photography often feels as if it's presenting evidence or specimens, rigorously and dispassionately recorded, to study types, structures, forms. The inspiration for this can be seen in "Contemporary Outlook: German Photography," a small survey at the MFA through Feb. 10. Here are August Sander's portraits from the 1910s and '20s of a farm couple, a machine operator, a match-seller, a doctor and her young son. Sander photographed plainly and directly, aiming to document "People of the 20th Century," as he titled his book, by occupation and class.

Bernad and Hilla Becher followed in this tradition. They made their mark beginning in 1959 with what MFA curator William Stover calls "relentlessly clinical" monumental photos of water towers, blast furnaces, cooling towers, the often unsightly industrial architecture that seems to vary little from place to place. They often presented the structures in groups, like "Framework Houses, Weissenstrasse 35, Siegen" (1970), which documents 12 houses, all shot straight-on and centered in the frame. The houses share a similar decorative wood framing, but placed side by side you notice their individual variations. Stover also presents giant drivers-license-style portraits from the '80s by the Bechers' student Thomas Ruff and a large head-on 2006 shot of an ornate library by their student Candida Hofer. The library is empty of people, a hallmark of deadpan architectural photos.

Arlette Kayafas, who runs the photography-focused Gallery Kayafas, finds recent deadpan photography intriguing but sees a difference between it and Sander's art. "Even though [Sander's subjects] weren't smiling, there wasn't this blank stare on the faces. There was this dignified pose," she says. "There's much more of an emotional presence to them." Stover argues that what some see as more emotion in the earlier work, like Sander's, is actually nostalgia — that when they were made, they appeared as blunt as deadpan photos feel now.

## Even playing field

In many ways, deadpan photography is a reaction to the slice-of-life documentary photography popular at midcentury. That style was built upon the idea that great photography is almost a kind of athletic-intellectual gymnastics in which photographers stalk subjects or arrange to be in the middle of things and, in a split-second, focus and compose their pictures to capture the "decisive moment" — the telling gesture, the subject at the height of the action.

Conceptualists and postmodernists dissected the authenticity and artistry of such "decisive moment" photography in the '70s. Jeff Wall elaborately staged photographs that imitated slice-of-life observations. Cindy Sherman photographed herself in numerous invented "film stills." Feminist and multiculturalism discredited the notion of an unbiased observer and charged that an artist's power over the subject was frequently invasive and exploitative. Meanwhile newspapers were moving away from immersive photo essays (prominent since Life magazine began publication in 1936) and toward posed portraits.

Some art photographers continuing to do a documentary mode looked for new models. They turned to Sander, passport photos, mug shots, yearbook portraits, and team photos. They adopted a purposefully arless style of recording that they hoped would be more neutral, more objective.

"It's about presenting everything on an even playing field," Stover says. The subjects, "they're just standing, just being. Don't smile, don't cry, don't do anything,



just be you.' That allows them to be much more than they are. That allows them to be an everyman, so to speak. That allows them to be universal.'

For her "River of No Return" series, McPhee, who exhibits at the Bernard Toale Gallery, found inspiration in 19th-century portrait photography, both its severe look and its gear. Like many deadpan photographers she shoots with old-fashioned large-format cameras that are cumbersome to carry around and set up. Usually the photographer composes the picture by getting under a black-out cloth behind the contraption and looking through a glass that shows the world upside-down and backward.

With such a setup, slice-of-life action is out and stillness and distance are in. People often appear awkward. The format's large negatives capture every detail: pimples, pores, sweat.

And they often capture that dour, flat expression. Toale says the ambiguity of this expression can engage viewers more deeply because the mood and

meaning is not spelled out. But some find it vacant, hollow, alien, forced. This neutral expression is the look of people minding their own business and waiting — outdoors, in doctor's offices. It's also the bleak fashion-model look that fills magazines, billboards, television, the Internet.

"The problem for someone like me — I personally collect mostly portrait work — is there are just a lot of artists today who are all starting to look alike," Toale says. "One of the problems I'm having is distinguishing one artist's eye from another. I don't know what it means." Then he adds, "It means they are just to a good college and they bought good equipment."



Clockwise from top: One of Sharon Lockhart's "Pine Flat" portraits; Claire Beckett's "Deidra Manasee Playing the Role of Bisma Alwaley"; Rineke Djikstra's "Evgenia, Induction Center Tel Hashomer, Israel, March 6, 2002"

## The picture of ambiguity

Where to see today's deadpan photography — and works that inspired it — in the Boston area:

"Claire Beckett: Simulating Iraq"  
At: Bernard Toale Gallery, through Nov. 10. 617-482-2477, [bernardtoalegallery.com](mailto:bernardtoalegallery.com)

"Class Pictures: Photographs by Dawood Bey"  
At: Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, through Dec. 30. 978-749-4015, [www.andover.edu/addison](http://www.andover.edu/addison)

"Contemporary Outlook: German Photography"  
At: Museum of Fine Arts, through Feb. 10. 617-267-9300, [mfa.org](http://mfa.org)

"Accumulations"  
At: Institute of Contemporary Art, through July 6. 617-478-3100, [icaboston.org](http://icaboston.org)