



SIGNALS IN THE DARK: ART IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

MONTREAL + TORONTO

against an adult world on one wall while eccentrics and oddballs found kindred spirits through the ages on another. The gambit was both historical and ahistorical. For Shimon and Lindemann, it seems to have paid off, highlighting the timeless qualities of their own choice of subjects and the photographic methods they utilize.

For this newcomer to the region, Shimon and Lindemann's photographs seemed to embody a certain ineffable Wisconsin-ness. Although the artists briefly recamped for New York at the beginning of their careers, they soon returned to their home state and made it their lives' work to photograph the land and the people that they know so well. Manitowoc has been the center of this world. For over twenty years, Shimon and Lindemann have created an intimate record of the place and its denizens. What is unique about their endeavor though—and about Wisconsin in general, I suspect—is that a significant number of their works celebrate the presence of musicians, freethinkers, poets, punks, and liberals who live and thrive in rural America. Though urbanites seem to think that it is only in coastal cities that such folks survive, Shimon and Lindemann suggest otherwise. Here in Wisconsin, folks seem to be unapologetically idiosyncratic to a degree that I have not encountered in the—many—other places where I have lived. I may be wrong about this. After all, I am new here and my Wisconsin romance is young. Still, Shimon and Lindemann's photographs demonstrate that sometimes romance does last and that charm does not always fade.

—Sam Watson

"I'll dig the grave for him / Who doesn't look at you with my eyes. / I'll destroy the nest of the bird / Which flies away without greeting you." These are not the words of an overwrought lover but of a patriot beholding his national flag. In Köken Ergun's video *The Flag*, 2006, a six-year-old girl dressed in a cadet uniform passionately recites this poem by Arif Nihat Asya to a full stadium. One after another, children standing in line pledge their allegiances to the flag before receiving a pat of approval from the city and military officials sitting on the side.

Ergun's video is featured in *Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War*, Seamus Kealy's ambitious curatorial endeavor that seeks to demonstrate art's contention with perpetual war and its representation in spectacular mass media as well as warfare's infiltration of every aspect of so-called private life (Justina M. Barnicke Gallery + Blackwood Gallery; January 17—March 2, 2008 / Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery; August 29—October 11, 2008). In avant-garde spirit, the works of the sixteen selected artists deploy a range of artistic tactics to render or re-imagine the destruction, violence, and depravity that surround them. However, their signals do not cast enough light to pierce the ever-growing shadow.

In the video installation *A Tank Translated*, 2002, for example, Omer Fast interviews the crew of an Israeli Army tank—the commander, driver, gunner, and loader—after their release from military service. Conducted in Hebrew, the interviews are displayed on four separate monitors on pedestals of different heights, arranged in the gallery according to the men's relative position within the tank. Subtitles stream below. One of the men recounts: "Sometimes you're doing things... and you have no idea what you're doing. [...] The guys above tell you what you're seeing. The news abroad tell you what you're seeing. Sometimes you see more than them. Sometimes you say the same thing, it's simply a chosen field of vision."

His own experience in the tank is combined with other sources—television, military lingo—in order to create a communicable story. And the artist introduces yet another remove: Fast has tampered with the translations, dropping words or bending them into new sentences. And so, he casts doubt on the testimonial genre's truth-value and on language's ability to convey faithfully.

One of Kealy's underlying premises is that, while the news and entertainment media have produced the desire to consume images of catastrophe, artists have the ability to unleash the real horror they mask. As such, the exhibition presents us with many of the same images with which we are inundated daily. In Johan Grimmonprez' single-channel video *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, 1997, for example, airplanes crash into grey stretches of concrete and desert. In Sean Snyder's *Casco, Salco, Shevaton, Toyota, Mars...*, 2004-2005, commercial labels dot crumbled buildings or brighten up military garb. This is not to say that these works are inherently complicit with Shoah-business. Still, the disparate images on view in the gallery coalesce into spectacle: the many wars, first and foremost real, are subsequently dispersed by the media, then reworked by artists, and finally presented as a metaphor of an underlying ideological reality more palatable, if bitter, than the lived trauma.

Kristan Horton's obsessive *Drawing of A History of the First World War* (Disc 01-03), 2008, captures this vertiginous spin into hyperreality. While listening to an audiobook describing the First World War, Horton depicted the unfolding nightmare in a spiraling graphite illustration. While the drawings can be unraveled mentally to create the semblance of a coherent narrative, the effect is more akin to a toy top spinning in an unpredictable direction.

Kendell Geers' video *Title Without (Rock)*, 1992, however, resists this centrifugal pull; it is simply unimag-

ABOVE: Köken Ergun, stills from *The Flag*, 2006, video, 9:01 minutes [courtesy of the artist; distributed by the Netherlands Media Art Institute, Amsterdam]