

## Sarah Pickering

### *Holding Fire*

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Sarah Pickering gained critical acclaim for her project *Public Order* (2002–5), that documented the Metropolitan Police's public order and firearms training centre at Gravesend in Kent, and for which she was one of the 2005 Jerwood Photography Prize winners. Pickering's images revealed the manicured but flimsy-looking façades of shops, nightclubs and other generic urban structures of the £55 million facility. In light of the Metropolitan Police's widely criticised handling of the G20 Summit protests this year, these images – of where the riot squad received training for these kind of events – have acquired a new significance.

Pickering moved on from the *Public Order* project and began a residency at the UK Fire Service College at Gloucestershire in 2006, producing several bodies of work including *Incident* (2008), which is installed on the second floor at Turner House. The seven images presented here were made in the various interior spaces at the college used to instruct trainee fire fighters, which range from a ship's galley to an urban housing estate stairway. At first glance, the presentation of Pickering's images appears to be somewhat dated: very large and monochrome within black-stained wood frames surrounded by a white mount. The formal priorities of the photographs seem to be in tonality, contrast and texture, nostalgic of a classical era of photography. However, further inspection of these apparently prosaic spaces reveals incongruous details such as nuts and bolts, corridor walls made out of sheet metal and pillows out of steel; all designed to be subjected to repeated infernos without being damaged. The size of the images facilitates the process of searching for clues to confirm the spaces' function; although less subtle are the rather macabre, sack-like 'victims' piled-up indifferently like dirty laundry. These clumsy, unsophisticated dummies juxtaposed with the hard steel of the interiors are a sobering reminder of the vulnerability of the human body, and the importance of the training facility. In the same way that the *Public Order* series seems more current after the G20 protests (perhaps more relevant than when it

was first exhibited), I saw the exhibition against the backdrop of the fatal fire at a tower block in Camberwell on 3 July, believed to have started in a stairwell, that gave the series increased poignancy.

The choice to make the works in monochrome and to produce them as fibre-based prints in glassless frames adds an unusual tactility to the series: the matt texture of the prints aptly reflects the soot-layered interior spaces in the images and there is a genuine sense that even the lightest touch would smudge the delicate surface of the photographs, just as the boot and finger marks of the trainee fire-fighters, like in an etching process, have rubbed away soot as they have navigated around the rooms, revealing shiny metal beneath.

On the ground floor, in stark but strangely appropriate contrast to the *Incident* photographs are several images from Pickering's *Explosion* series. This ongoing body of work catalogues various types of explosive detonations made by the pyrotechnical manufacturers of such devices, who supply them to the various services for the purposes of demonstration and training. Unlike the quiet, sombre and diverse images of the *Incident* series, these vibrant colour photographs record a split-second, 'decisive' moment, and their compositional consistency and reverse mounting present an image as slick and as seductive as any other consumable product.

The instantaneous nature of the subject, of course, seems relevant to photography, although it is uncharacteristic of contemporary fine art documentary photography which has slowed-down considerably (in terms of its subject matter and in the technical approaches of its practitioners); this is especially true of work made using larger-format equipment. Pickering's images achieve what photography does at its best: enable us to see something that our eyes cannot see properly for themselves.

The theme of physical simulation and fabrication is central to Pickering's other works and has been explored by documenting environments that have been manufactured to rigorously rehearse tactical procedures and prepare its users for particular psychological responses. This is also the case with the *Explosion* series, although it is not so much the simulated physicality of the various explosions that Pickering has documented here (an explosive reaction cannot be simulated – only its cause and its ignition), but perhaps the appearance of a decisive moment. The

tightly cropped images betray the fact that Pickering knew the precise locations of the explosions, which leads us to reason that we are witnessing a controlled detonation, and, as we know, they are always preceded by a countdown or warning, which defies the notion of spontaneity. Also, as well as various other connotations, the title of this exhibition –  *Holding Fire*  – alludes towards a pause at a critical point within a chain of events.

Although Pickering began the  *Explosion*  work in 2004, it appears to be a subtle departure from her other projects. Despite the fact that her subject matter resembles that of other artists like An-My Lê, Paul Shambroom and Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin these works touch upon questions about the nature of photography that her other projects do not. The aesthetic discontinuity between  *Incident*  and  *Explosion*  also suggests that a modest documentation of simulated objects and places is not Pickering's primary concern.