

ACTIVE DUTY



A NEW EXHIBIT EMBEDS ARTISTS IN MILITARY LANDSCAPES.

BY MIMI ZEIGER

ABOVE LEFT

Linewatch Training at the Border Patrol Academy, El Paso, Texas, 1938.

ABOVE RIGHT

Control Room Main Screen Array, C4i4, Mexico City, Mexico, 2014–2015.

“Landscapes are both places we live in and the pictures of them,” says Hillary Mushkin. The Los Angeles-based artist has been exploring and documenting landscapes, especially as they relate to war, since the early 2000s. Her latest exhibition, *Project Series 51: Incendiary Traces*, is on view at California’s Pomona College Museum of Art until May. “Pictures of landscapes are used for political purposes,” Mushkin continues. “Maps are political. That’s what they are for—to control spaces, to understand a territory, and to do things with what you understand about it. When I talk about landscapes, I am trying to bring the two meanings—place and pictures—together.”



To do this, Mushkin began *Incendiary Traces* in 2011. It’s an ongoing collaborative project that involves field visits and multimedia recordings of the active militarized sites in our midst. She brings groups of artists, scholars, and students to these places and asks them to make visible, to “trace,” what they observe. The results are often simple and neutral—quick portrayals of unspectacular buildings and terrain. But that’s the point. The documents aren’t critique or celebration; the artists and scholars are there to bear witness.

At Pomona, the exhibition brings together images of six sites of military and geopolitical importance, including drawings of the 29 Palms Marine Corps Base and sketches of the U.S.–Mexico border pulled from notebooks. “Sketches are the meat of [the exhibition]—the tattered edges, the erasing, the blotches of water,” Mushkin says. Six large table-like vitrines fill the gallery. She and the se-

nior curator Rebecca McGrew assigned each one a military tactic or technology term.

“Situational Awareness,” for instance, refers to a 2013 visit to the University of Southern California Institute for Creative Technologies, a U.S. Army research laboratory that is developing gaming software to train soldiers in maneuvers to counter improvised explosive devices in remote conflict zones. As part of a simulation of a rural landscape in southern Afghanistan, on display in the gallery are graphite sketches of a market stand and the low buildings of the virtual village. They represent a kind of blurring between what is real and what is the game. A video by Scott Polach, however, looks at the limitations of the artificial landscape. His 2013 work, *Untitled #110113 (ICT)*, captures the edges of the environment where the design trails off into abstraction.

Mushkin’s own 2012 watercolors of the San Clemente Island Naval Weapons Testing Range, made while on a fishing boat off the coast of the Channel Islands, illustrate the term “Coastal Profile.” It’s a prephotographic method of representing remote landforms and topographic signifiers. The waters off San Clemente are where Navy SEALs and other special ops forces train for air–sea scenarios, but Mushkin’s blue and purple paintings reveal only waves and bluffs. Included in the selection of images is a sonar recording by the artist Tom McMillin. Titled *The Earth Is Not Flat: Sonar Recordings from the Bottom of the Sea* (1987), the piece uses sound recording with data output on carbon paper (a now obsolete method) to visualize a seabed wasteland of spent material.

The ways landscapes are represented are less important than the fact that they are represented. “All the pictures we generally see of war are of the front lines,” Mushkin says. “But this is our local landscape, and we are at war.” ●

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