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If She Isn't Working Miracles, What Is She Doing On The Battlefield?

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

by
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Abstract

The images included in my thesis work reflect my experience growing up with military propaganda—pictures of cheerful white women in pearls as part of my rural middle American landscape. I do not name the oppressor because I am not here to pick at the thorns, but to get to the root of the oppression. These are some of the servicewomen I've met. Their stories parallel but cannot encompass the private experiences of all service women. I am grateful for their generosity; without them there would be no pictures.

The battle for equality is much older than Rosie the Riveter but we still ask the same questions we asked Joan of Arc in the 15th century: if she isn't working miracles, what is she doing on the battlefield?

This thesis began for me when I applied to the graduate photography program at Virginia Commonwealth University, although the seed had been planted almost three decades before when my mother chose to give her oldest daughter *a boy's name*. In January of 2013, the ban on women serving in combat was just rescinded as I was looking ahead to Virginia.

Growing up in rural Nebraska the only visual representation of servicewomen came in neatly packaged propaganda and ultimately one-dimensional versions of their stories. With this thesis work I intend to look deeper into the private experiences of modern servicewomen as it is tied to the experience of being female in service throughout time.

Who are the women? Before we answer this question I'd like to turn to an idea found during research. Dr. Cynthia Enloe writes about feminism, international politics and at her lectures asks folks to please, wear their gender hats.¹ By acknowledging our privilege within the discourse of gender we are better able to experience and access the stories as told here. As I move forward into this work I ask that you also put on your gender hat. About one percent of the US population serves in the military, of that servicewomen make up only about fourteen percent.²

The linguistic shift from Service Women to Servicewomen happened for the *New York Times* during the 1960s and remains in favor.³ The first appearance in the *Times*

¹ Cynthia Enloe. "The Risks of Not Learning from Iraqi Women's War Experiences."

² Eileen Patten and Kim Parker. "Women in the U.S. Military: Growing Share, Distinctive Profile".

³ Chronicle: Tracking NYT Language Use. 2014. <http://chronicle.nytlabs.com/>

mentioning Service Women shows up in earnest around the early 1940s when the Women's Army Corps and similar groups within the other branches of the military were created in favor of beginning to integrate women into the regular fighting force. This text, will use servicewomen because my research points to a difficulty in distinguishing and dividing the defining attributes of being female from the act of service.⁴

Servicewomen are doing, and have been doing, the same jobs as their male-identifying counterparts for much longer than the military has officially permitted, the only difference, being that until the beginning of 2016,⁵ servicewomen were not able to attach directly to combat units and when looking at their service on paper, they lived far away from the danger of the frontline. But the reality is that they lived on the same bases, and dealt with the same dangers with only a few degrees of separation. Under the previous status quo, the military did not have to hand out Imminent Danger Pay (the military's euphemism for combat pay), or recognize PTSD. As one Iraq veteran I interviewed told me, "on paper" she didn't see combat—meaning she wasn't directly attached to a combat unit, although she did live on the same base and drive on the same roads. In short, they told her "it wasn't possible" for her to have PTSD because on paper, combat existed in a vacuum.

Speaking directly to servicewomen was one of my research avenues. I felt strongly that primary sources were the best practice for an outsider like myself. I define primary sources here as texts written by servicewomen, research facilitated by

⁴ Beth-ann Vealey. "United States Women Marines' Experiences and Perspectives about Coping with Service Life: A Phenomenological Study." Thesis. VCU, 2014.

⁵ US. ARMY. December 4, 2015.
https://www.army.mil/e2/rv5_downloads/women/full_integration_of_women_in_the_army.pdf.

servicewomen of servicewomen, and personal interviews with servicewomen. The only problem with this definition of primary sources was, I quickly discovered, that people do not love talking about the military, especially to those whose work resembles journalism or art critical of social structures.

Former CIA agent Barry Eisler, interviewed on *Democracy Now*, tells host Amy Goodman point blank: to the US government, journalists and artists are terrorists.⁶ Once arriving in Virginia for graduate study one of my first trips out to photograph military sites started out fairly pedestrian, a friend and I went to make pictures of a nearby supply depot where a handful of tanks and vintage jets are parked on the lawn. There is a pull-up for cars to park, even though you had to photograph the vehicles through a fence. Sometime later that week two men in suits showed up at the door having followed our license plates back, they wanted to see our pictures. We declined. Why had the cameras scared them?

Although women have been near combat since the beginning of warfare, we have not always seen or heard record of them. The Marine Corps museum outside of Quantico, Virginia has the statue of a female marine out front. Unlike the statue that stands outside the women's museum at Fort Lee, Virginia the statute at Quantico is a replica and presents the Marine servicewoman of the early 1940's. The statue at Ft. Lee was dedicated on Veteran's Day in 2013 and was attended by servicewomen in historic uniforms (Fig. 10). Affectionately called Lieutenant FAWMA (Friends of the Army Women's Museum Association) the Lieutenant is dressed in modern combat gear. This

⁶ Barry Eisler, interview with Amy Goodman, 25 February 2016.

is notable because, at the time, although the ban had been lifted, servicewomen were not yet being implemented into the regular combat tours.⁷

This excerpted poem by Patricia Lockwood makes short work of catching us up to how long it has taken women to prove their place in the ranks.

*“First there was Helen of Sparta, who did it only
with oil, no one knows how; then there was
Maggie of England, who even on the battlefield
put men back together; and then there was Rose
of the deepest South, who stood up in her father’s
clothes and walked out of the house and herself.*

*Disguised women were always among them.
They badly wanted to wear blue, they badly
wanted to wear red, they wanted to blend
with the woods or ground. Together
with men they were blown from their pronouns.”⁸*

To begin, a lot of Lockwood’s poem is wrapped up in myth. It is not probable that Helen (of Troy) would have dressed as a man, but there was a woman who dressed as a man during the Trojan War. According to Greek myth, Epipole of Carystus wore men’s clothing to be able to fight the Greeks, but she was ultimately stoned to death when discovered.⁹ Lockwood’s next reference, Maggie of England, fared a great deal better in her career as Dr. James Barry. Barry was born Margaret Ann Bulkley (Maggie), encouraged by family support to take on a new identity leading her to become a

⁷ US. ARMY. December 4, 2015.

⁸ Patricia Lockwood. “List of Cross-Dressing Soldiers”

⁹ William Smith. 1880. *A dictionary of Greek and Roman biography and mythology.*

decorated army surgeon and find success in research medicine. Barry's identity was not discovered until her death when she was being prepared for burial.¹⁰

Recent political rhetoric would have you believe that the theater of war, and more specifically combat, are unique and require a soldier who is specially trained for this very particular role. If we want to visit the frontline as a physical place it has come to encompass whole bases and large swaths of geography, not the point-of-the-spear it once resembled. If the poem's conversation of desire teaches us nothing about how long it has existed, turning to the perspectives of servicewomen to help us to understand the complex world where they have lived.

Interviews tend to look and feel a lot like journalism. The images included in this thesis also lean heavily on the genre but are meant for the gallery. The language of journalism is one that today's viewer already speaks. The news image gives us permission and a safe place to stop and stare.

The image of Erin (fig. 6) invites this kind of dialogue, she is looking out at the viewer meeting their gaze. Her weapon and pose, enters into a conversation with VALIE EXPORT's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1968),¹¹ without the confrontation of the original performance piece. She holds her rifle the way she was trained, pointing only her gaze to the viewer. I met Erin through one of the members of my thesis committee. Erin was an interior design graduate student in the same building as the photography department, and had moved to Virginia to pursue her degree having transferred to the Virginia National Guard from working full-time as a recruiter in Connecticut. Maybe it

¹⁰ "James Barry (1792 or 1795-1865)."

<http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/people/jamesbarry>.

¹¹ VALIE EXPORT. *Action Pants: Genital Panic*. Munich, 1969.

was our age and social media fluency or the fact that both of us were pursuing MFAs, but Erin and I instantly had an understanding of what this thesis conversation was about, and within our first conversation she had shared the library of graphic images male colleagues had sent her unsolicited (fig. 4).

I was horrified to be looking at physical evidence of something I had only ever heard reported. Once I saw the exchanges that accompanied these images I knew there needed to be a picture, and it needed to exist in a world that would not censor it. Erin and I discussed how she got to this point in her career and relationships, the tightrope she felt she had to walk, I chose the exchange in *Where is your wife mr* (fig.2) to represent it. Her ambivalence in the text is what struck me most. She is forced to walk a line between taking a stand—breaking with protocol and going above her higher ranking officer, the man who sent the text—or being complicit to the abuse and say nothing.

Kelli (fig. 3) is a Lieutenant Colonel and lawyer for the army. She went through basic training the same year as her superior officer. Yet his rank is higher than hers because until this year¹² their service has looked different on paper. So much of promotion within the military is connected to combat service. If you are barred from even applying to jobs designated as “combat” your pool of promotion opportunity gets quite a bit smaller. As a result of this exclusionary policy, four servicewomen, along with Service Women Action Network, a non-profit organization sued Leon Panetta as Secretary of Defense in 2013, the same year Panetta lifted the combat ban. During the

¹² MacKenzie, Megan H. 2015. *Beyond the band of brothers: the US military and the myth that women can't fight*.

trial, Staff Sergeant Jennifer Hunt testified “The Shrapnel that tore through the vehicle that day didn’t stop because I’m a female.”¹³

Kelli served as a lawyer in Afghanistan, and had to travel (via helicopter) to get from place to place, client to client. As the quote says, the fire on her helicopter didn’t stop coming because on paper she wasn’t in combat. Kelli is approaching twenty years of service and is considering retirement. But servicewomen like Kelli, with experience that would now qualify as combat, are not *grandfathered* into the changes to service. In effect their combat experience just doesn’t count. Kelli’s story and her perspective was something that had never occurred to me before this thesis project. I had spent months thinking about what repealing the ban would mean for women *about* to enlist or having *just* enlisted. Kelli has already lived her “non-combat” combat. How do we acknowledge her contributions if they cannot be officially recognized?

Paige is a woman I met through Laura Browder, an educator and author of *When Janey Comes Marching Home*, (2010). Laura interviewed hundreds of servicewomen for her book and during my initial consultations with her, she suggested I speak with Paige about her service.

Paige served in Iraq for one tour of duty in 2003 and 2004. She was a member of the Virginia National Guard at the time and worked mostly as a supply truck driver and provided support to the supply driver as they rotated tasks within their guard unit. For her service Paige earned a Bronze Star, one of the highest honors awarded for military service, for a position that on paper was not a combat position.

¹³ *Hegar et al. v. Panetta*

But this is not the whole story. Paige told me that she was reluctant to speak with me, only saying yes because I had used Laura Browder's name. This is a pattern I found throughout my interviews and attempted interviews. The pattern of government distrusting media and artists has filtered down the ranks. I am grateful for the generosity of not only Paige, but all of the women named and un-named here.

Because Paige served before the "Don't Ask, don't Tell" policy was repealed, she was forced to fight to be credited for her service at all. When she tried to marry her wife she was presented with a threat of dishonorable discharge due to their partnership. Paige served in a very difficult time, she had a combat award although on paper her service didn't qualify her for combat, and when she tried to fight for the correct (honorable) discharge, her commendation was almost not considered against her record, because on paper, she could never have seen combat.

Women officially entered the US military in the 1940s, although they have always fulfilled support roles of all kinds and at times tried to pass as men in order to fight themselves.¹⁴ Lockwood's poem only alludes to the history of these women. Vietnam was a turning point for women—representing only two percent of American veterans, eighty percent were nurses; all were volunteers.¹⁵ It was not until the early 1980s that women were integrated into the regular fighting force in the United States, but one of the best examples of the plight of servicewomen throughout history is none other than Joan of Arc. Although today's servicewomen enjoy significantly better rights and condition than in the early 15th century, the conversation getting us there over the past

¹⁴ Karen Abbott. *Liar, Temptress, Soldier, Spy: Four Women Undercover in the Civil War*. 2014.

¹⁵ Cynthia Enloe. *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*.

three years have been more akin to the questions we asked of Joan than anything relevant to servicewomen today.

WORK

In *Tuesday 0713* (fig. 3), much like the discussion of how problematic the perspective of sentimentality is in Melissa Smyth's 2015 essay, "On Sentimentality: A Critique of Humans of New York." I want to make plain my observer status. I acknowledge that a situation changes when I ask to photograph and, as is the nature of the camera, mine is the perspective that is forced. With the exception of *Gender Panic after Action Pants* (fig. 6), these photographs have all been made in a similar way; without intervening on the actions of the subject. This way of working also looks like journalism. The difference being, as illustrated in this image, I am clarifying the direction of my research.

In *Where is your wife mr* (fig. 4), I document a text exchange with a higher-ranking officer (SGT is the acronym for sergeant). Erin shared this, among a number of other exchanges containing graphic language and images she received unsolicited. I chose to photograph this particular exchange because of her ambivalence. Erin's reaction is complicated, much the same way I find Erin's place in this complicated. This issue of sexual harassment within military culture is not new to the technology. She is forced to walk a line between being complicit and breaking protocol.

Confirmed kill (fig. 5) was created at a Law Enforcement Training Facility after a range course for air men and women. The outline of the body stands in sharp contrast

to the bullet catch back-stopping the target. The bright white on the cardboard are the remnants of paper targets previously layered, and once removed revealing the eventual hole in the chest. The body is what is problematic for so many servicewomen.¹⁶ Being female goes back to the biological issue of the physical body not being male. This body is a stand-in for all of the stories I was not able to capture completely. *Confirmed kill* is a reference to an idea popular in military culture, but one that is a misnomer. There is no official military framework to “confirm” a kill.

Gender Panic after Action Pants (fig. 6) is included to talk about a few things, one of them being gear. If women can immediately start applying for jobs previously banned to them, some of the gear servicewomen use needs to be updated immediately. Beginning this year all jobs will be coded for women,¹⁷ opening the last bastions of the military culture, minus of course, the dress code. Items like flak jackets can be unsuitable to a woman’s anatomy, while other items pose a less dangerous problem.

This picture came out of collaboration with the subject, Erin, who provided her standard issue (read also: “unisex”) long underwear that is clearly designed to be most functional for male anatomy. This image does not say “look, these underwear don’t fit”. This image says “look, I am forced to wear a man’s uniform”. As the title alludes, VALIE EXPORT’s *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1968)¹⁸ became a central part of the conversation for us. Erin’s pose is intended to mimic the iconic feminist performance piece.

The plaque under the Molly the Marine (fig. 7) statue at the Marine Museum at Quantico reads:

¹⁶ Beth-ann Vealey

¹⁷ US. ARMY. December 4, 2015.

¹⁸ VALIE EXPORT. *Action Pants: Genital Panic*.

DEDICATED TO ALL WOMEN
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE
WHO EARN THE TITLE "MARINE."

THIS STATUE IS A REPLICA OF THE FIRST
STATUE OF A FEMALE SERVICE MEMBER
IN UNIFORM ERECTED IN NEW ORLEANS
ON 10 NOVEMBER 1943 AS PART OF AN
EFFORT TO RECRUIT WOMEN INTO THE
MARINE CORPS DURING WORLD WAR II.

Molly is my contribution to Lockwood's poem. She is the first of her kind, making progress against the headwind she is eternally set against, making room for the next girl. As noted in the plaque, she has a sister, the original statue standing in the middle of an intersection in New Orleans, which is also bracing against this headwind. The statues are mostly identical; both figures looking east, facing into the sunrise every morning. The photograph of Quantico Molly was made just before sunrise, and is symbolic of all the new beginnings these sister statues have seen and will see.

CANDIDACY

The Candidacy exhibit required a great deal of build-in to take the space, a disused tobacco drying warehouse, and transform it into a formal gallery. Built into the vastness of the warehouse, the "gallery" (fig. 9) measured nineteen feet long and eight feet tall and was sheetrocked, finished and painted by hand. The remainder of the

gallery was left unfinished, because it resembled an unfinished room like the walls in a basement or attic might look. We the viewers, as outsiders, cannot fully comprehend the perspective of these servicewomen. The best we can hope for is accurate representation in the media. Because as outsiders there will be corners of these women's lives that we will never see in news reports.

Reading the gallery wall left to right (fig. 8), we begin with a photograph titled *And still make it home for dinner*. In the images we see what appears to be the interior of a warehouse-style store, looking closer into the picture we find what appears to be disused military garb and equipment for resale. A row of flight helmets sit on the top row atop mannequin heads all of whose gender appear to skew female. Above them a young woman rappels down the air-vent that holds her National Guard recruitment poster. Its faded sky embossed with large white letters reading YOU CAN. *And still make it home for dinner* following just below as if to catch her.

First women to earn jungle tab is a large reproduction of a literal newspaper image. The texture of the offset printing starts to abstract at the large size, further obscuring the identity of this young woman. Although we do not see her face, she represents all of the faceless women who have quietly completed the military jobs not coded for women before the combat exclusion was repealed. Until this year, regardless of performance, women were not allowed, on paper, in any job designated "combat." Promotions that required combat experience were in effect closed to women based on a technicality.

The image in the middle is titled *Lt. FAWMA (Friends of the Army Women's Museum Association)*. FAWMA is pronounced like a Boston accent, both of the 'r'

sounds are replaced with flat 'a'. The statue stands on a small podium and is slightly smaller than life-size. She was designed before the combat exclusion was repealed but depicts a woman in full combat gear. She is of the future. Her finger is oriented downward to symbolize the growth we've made since the ban on combat has been lifted making her a reality.

The fourth photograph is titled *Women's Cell* and represents not only the possible repercussions of attempting to "pass" as a man in previous military realities, but also a metaphor for the secluded lives many service people lived (and in some cases, like transgender soldiers, might still be living) before they were allowed to serve openly. The picture was made at the historic Albemarle prison in Charlottesville, Virginia. It was designated the women's cell.

The final photograph on the wall sits next to image titles and the poem excerpt that opens this paper. Last is the *Vet's Club* window in what appears to be the last bastion of pre-Vietnam pro-military sentiment. The light of the sunset reflects across the sun-bleached decorations and creates a portal for us to enter into. It is the hope of a brighter idea of the future. We can only avoid repeating our mistakes by reflecting on the past.

IMAGES



Fig. 1: Alex Matzke, MFA Thesis installation, Anderson Gallery. 2016.



Fig. 2: Alex Matzke, Feat. Emily McBride, MFA Thesis installation, Anderson Gallery. 2016.



Fig. 3: Alex Matzke, *Tuesday 0713*, 2016. Archival inkjet print. 26.5x38 in.

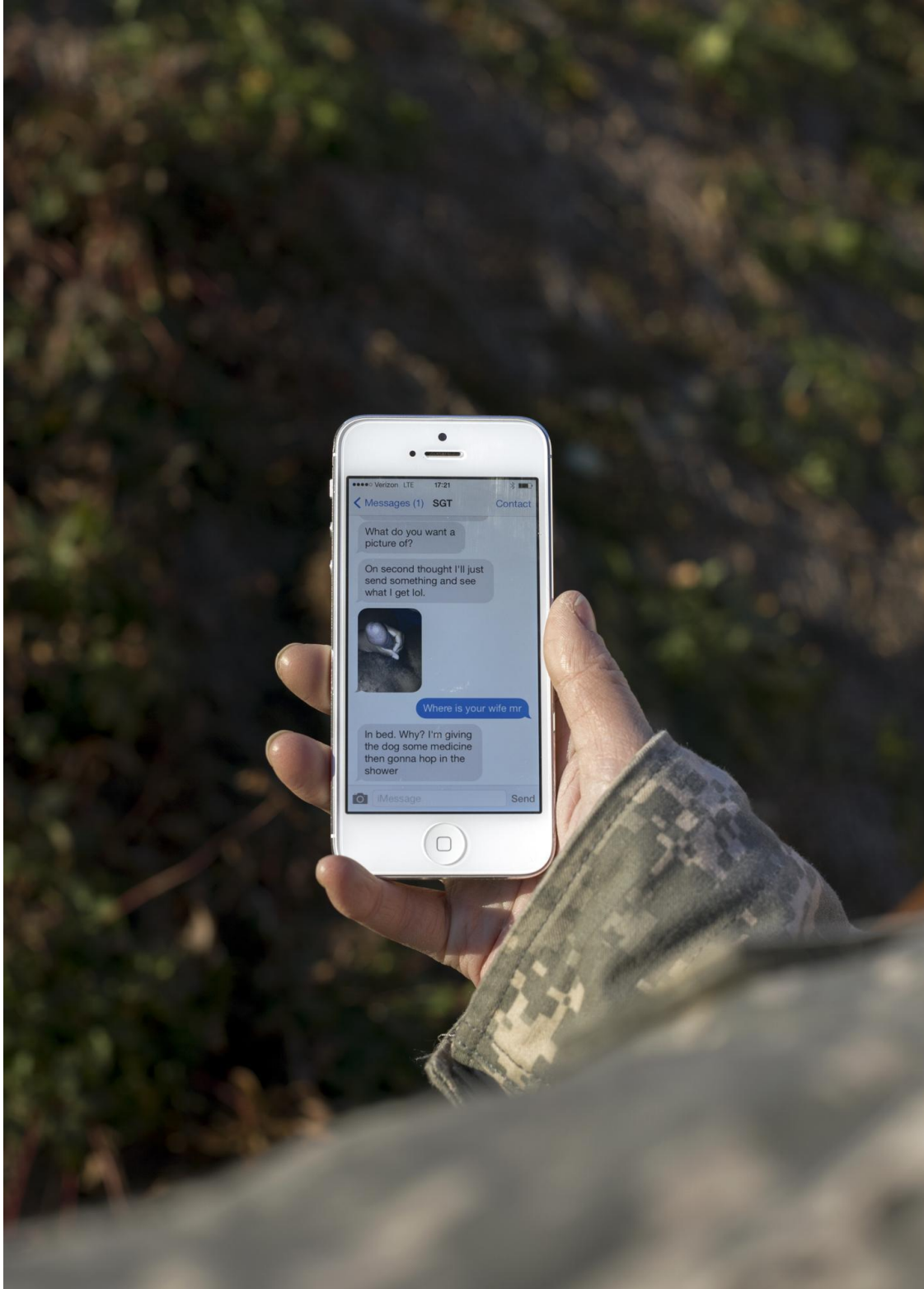


Fig. 4: Alex Matzke, *Where is your wife mr*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 26.5x38 in.



Fig. 5: Alex Matzke, *Confirmed kill*, 2015. Archival inkjet print. 26.5x38 in.



Fig. 6: Alex Matzke, *Gender Panic after Action Pants*, 2016. Archival inkjet print. 26.5x38 in.



Fig. 7: Alex Matzke, *Molly the Marine*, 2015. Archival inkjet print. 26.5x38 in.



Fig. 8: Alex Matzke, Candidacy installation. 2015. Archival inkjet prints, 24x30 in.



Fig. 9: Alex Matzke, Candidacy installation. 2015. Drywall, wood, and finishing materials, 8x19 ft.



Fig. 10: Alex Matzke, *Lt. FAWMA Dedication*. 11 November 2013.

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