

INSIDE:

Each day with so much ceremony

Roh Stone

"The explorer tried to smile back, without knowing exactly to what abyss his smile responded". It's a line taken from a short story by Clarice Lispector. In their original anthropological context, I am not sure what the words might add to the themes and inventions about the occupation of time that join-up this current suite of images by Allen Ball. Yet, to imagine an uncertainly smiling countenance for these composed and somehow reticent photographs is somewhere to start.

It is a start that imagines for them a particular disposition toward the world. A smile, indeterminate, sociable, standing-in as an acknowledgement of something mutual, something recognizable though unnameable, such a smile seems to describe perfectly a poised incomprehension. And that, here represents the special form of understanding of the lived experience of modern warfare that Ball's essays carefully advance.

Such incomprehension, accepting and benign, even hope-filled, seems the only appropriate way of knowing and naming some things. As a device, its creative poetics have let earlier war artists – Nash, Douglas, Blunden, Holden, Rosenberg, Dunbar, all those – outline of a sense of connection in the otherwise fruitless environment of attempts to impress chaos with order. With it, the suggestion of a sensibility, nothing more, towards the tumults over which such connections are made is a treasure in itself.

It is the same here for Ball as for his predecessors. Only, one ought note, with the added and necessary quality of his freeing of photographs both from their mute documentary condition and from the sense of a commanding moral witness to which they are often required to defer.

My dad finished his required two years of national service in early 1961. A couple of years later I was born. Since then I have seen photos of his drinking mates in Aachen, heard stories of surreptitious ships departing Malta, of Kenyan markets where ebony antelopes were purchased and the guzzling, as only a youth can, of mugsful of unpasteurized cream from the top of milk churns whilst guarding gates to a Wiltshire airbase. Apart from these pictures, however, the book on the subject is more or less closed to me, and I think perhaps now to him too. My own brush with the services – a similar period, though one spent in bewildered administrative review of battered post-Gulf computers – produced collaterally a dilettante's fondness for the lonelier parts of Schubert and Heaney, rituals of cycling to fill the hours spent isolated among the Buckinghamshire hills and hamlets and once, on a blazing May Sunday morning, the sight of an absolutely square, absolutely crimson field of poppies on a local hillside. None of these things produced epiphany, not in the end for either of us; only images against a ground of undifferentiated dailiness to which have clung fractions of vague, intensely open and approximate significance. Across them, talking, we have been able to occasionally glimpse each other in our very different lives.

The precisely enigmatic condition of such significance as this is important for the way Ball's collected images structure a mode of personalism as a medium through which one might orient oneself toward the quotidian theatre of a life embedded in warfare. This set of photographs was made in 2007, at a particularly heated moment of conflict in northern Sinai. Yet, Ball's focus on the things that appear as the reflective spatial products of the military's psychological investment in repetition is able to set aside for a moment the familiar pistes of strewn and maddened beaches or cities dislimned by bombardment.

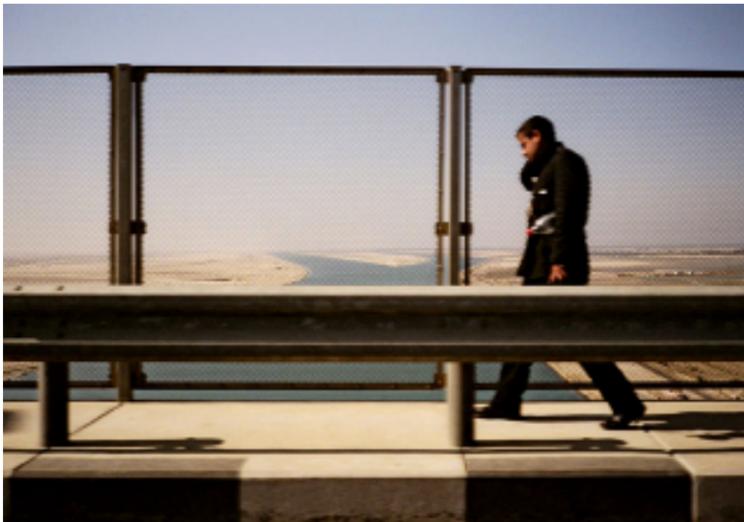
His handling of, for example, a lookout post and the comportment of a blanket and pair of boots in the shade made by an armoured vehicle is capable of calmly eloquent revelation. But, is there wryness in the eloquence? Is the image touching? Is it remorse or worry that it speaks of, or despair or euphoria, or anger, balefulness, resignation, forgiveness, anticipation, boredom or any of the other, less easily named and anyway fleeting affects provoked by sustained periods of adrenalization? The point is that diagnoses of the monumental value of such unlikely, homely comforts can only jostle and discourse towards some kind of rapprochement here. And, in avoiding the prevalence of any one of their many meanings, one also finds oneself gently guided from remarking in glib, reductive figures on the shame, futility or thriftlessness of war.

It is in broaching a long-standing though formally little-studied facet of improvised, masculine, domestic administration – to be found in cleaning clothes, sleeping comfortably, keeping cool and properly fed, generally treating the ordering of oneself and one's responsibilities as a preoccupation in itself, as the occupation of time – where Ball's photographs find their own beginning. They continue via this material. There is a successful attempt in these images to see the structured forms of military coordination (logistics, accounting, technical maintenance) through the visual conventions of art practice. And vice versa. Here, military organizational prudence is able to cast in other light, say, the formally-noted irritability in the personality of a rock summarily conscripted as a door stop, nuanced conversations between patches of differently sun-washed red on a fire hydrant, or the sumptuary composition of grid-lines framing a vehicle repair bay. Through these artistic observations, as well, it is possible to see something of the subjective intensity of what is caught up in soldierly routine.

But watch, in all of this, how Ball names things. There is a crucial eponymy at work, a 'for the purpose of-ness' that haunts the titles of these pictures. It haunts their subject matter and supplies a source of the exhibition's humour. Though not perhaps its smile, the character of which one seems never unaware.

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OUTSIDE:



Allen Ball

ASC PROJECTS PRESENT:

Bridge walker Allen Ball

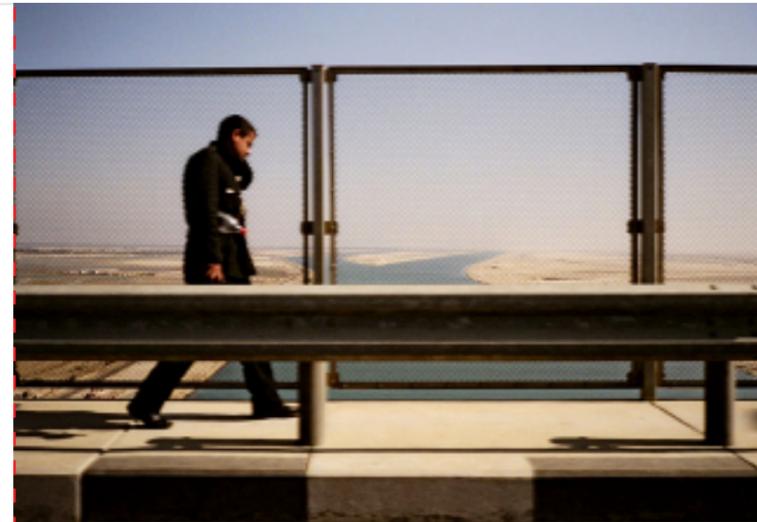
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Bridge walker