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Robert Fishko, *Director*

"But where does the outside commence? This question is *the* question of the archive. There are undoubtedly no others."[1]

Jacques Derrida

"The entire archive has drawn me in."[2]

Megan Rye

Megan Rye's Iraq paintings emerge from an archive, from a cache of over 2,000 photographs her brother Ryan took while serving as a U.S. Marine in Fallujah. A truly burdensome gift. And while reviewers routinely comment on this, on their way to describing the strange beauty of Rye's paintings, they do not consider what precisely constitutes the archive or what its implications are. But Derrida's question must give us pause when we invoke this most complex of devices. One might wonder, with Derrida in mind, where precisely Rye's archive begins and ends. Although it may have commenced with all these photographs, it is also true that it started earlier with media images, fictional films, news reports, documentaries, public and private stories, many of which predate her receipt of the photographs. And if it does not quite begin there, it certainly does not end there. The broader source material from which Rye draws includes what might be called, following the photo historian Roberto Tejada, the "image environment" of this moment in U.S. history.[3] But the boundaries are yet larger and more porous than that. The word "archive" does not just describe libraries, museums, monuments, and storehouses; it is not limited to collections of documents, material remnants, or stockpiles of images. Among the archive's architectural forms, we must also list the mind, that dark warehouse in which are stored (and from which are lost) memories, sensations, events, narratives, and pictures. It is this structure that Rye most wants to enter; it is her brother's mind, his memories and experiences (so foreign to her, so unknowable, so fragile), she most wishes to touch.

A doubled and disorienting portrait of her brother, *One Way Mirror* (2007) is inspired by a photograph that he took of himself by aiming his camera at the side mirror on his truck. Ryan's face is fractured by reflected light that bounces off the mirror, the truck windows, and his own glasses. Unlike the typical portrait, meant to offer a glimpse at the sitter's unique character through a recognizable countenance, this painting presents a series of reflections and repetitions: two faces, three hands, and four eyes. The camera he holds in his left hand, along with a vertical band of white and grey on the right side of the painting, announces the photographic source of the picture, the film overexposed or the image straddling the end of the roll. As such, the painting thinks critically about the photograph as a tool of memory, a mechanism for capturing details, a

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.
[2] Megan Nosek, quoted in Marya Hornbacher, "Seeing War Through Borrowed Eyes," mnartists.org/article.do?action=print&rid=212437.
[3] Roberto Tejada, *National Camera: Photography and Mexico's Image Environment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

discourse of truth, and a form of knowledge production. Moreover, it seems to offer a thesis for the series as a whole by asserting that the archive upon which it depends bears witness, as Derrida reminds us, to forgetting, to that which it cannot contain.[4]

And this is why, in many ways, despite their seeming realism, these paintings are not about the Iraq war. They do not purport to be representations of it, neither eyewitness accounts nor a coherent political position. Unlike the efforts of the photojournalist, they are not didactic and do not report details about specific agents, events, turning points, or battles. They do not count the dead. They are rather what Derrida calls a "materialized supplement"[5] to memory and a meticulously painted testimony to oblivion. "To praise oblivion," Marc Augé writes, "is not to revile memory; even less is it to neglect remembrance, but rather to recognize the work of oblivion in the first one and to spot it in the second. Memory and oblivion in some way have the same relationship as life and death."[6]

In *Iraqi Store* (2006), for example, the viewer is positioned as though inside an abandoned store, looking out toward the front entrance past shelves and countertops loaded with an overwhelming inventory of things, an abundance of unidentifiable merchandise. A casualty of a bomb or mortar attack, the store is in disarray, its display cases broken, its contents strewn about.

All of these objects are painstakingly painted, their shape and position carefully described, and yet the purpose of all of this detail (the four months that it took to paint) is simply to show and dramatize the intense white light that shines through the door, seeming to dissolve the door frame and transom. It is this light that permeates every painting; that blinds and disorients; that beckons us into an abyss of nothingness. We might think of this store as an archive, as the heaped up contents of the mind, rocked by trauma and bathed in (and slightly blurred by) an intense and somewhat threatening light. This is what forgetting looks like. It is, after all, a form of blindness where detail fades.

Everywhere we look in these paintings there are references to vision and sightlessness, remembering and forgetting. They are populated by mirrors, mirror images, camera lenses, shiny surfaces, reflective sunglasses and goggles, windshields, windows, the ethereal green glow seen through night vision goggles, and a dazzling array of camouflage patterns. A painting called *Mission* (2007) is divided in half vertically. On one side there is a soldier holding a gun and looking off to his left. He is clad in brown "desert" fatigues, a bullet proof vest that bears a different green camouflage pattern, a helmet, and black sunglasses. Our eyes wander over the complex details, the specificity of this particular soldier, the memory of this particular place and time—the small wrinkles in the fabric covering his helmet, the buckle on his chin strap, his watch band, the ten Velcro tabs on his vest. On the other side, there is a vast expanse of whiteness. The soldier's right arm crosses the boundary and the intense white light shining on it makes it look as though it is dissolving, disintegrating, drawn into oblivion.

This painting, like so much of Megan Rye's oeuvre, thus considers the difficult relation between memory and forgetting as well as between the image and what delineates it, the ground upon which it becomes visible. As a consequence, the question

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[4] Derrida, 14.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Marc Augé, *Oblivion*, translated by Marjolijn de Jager (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 14.

her paintings repeatedly ask is “where does the outside commence?” Augé makes the connection between memory, image, and archive when he writes, “Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea.”[7] It is that shifting outline that Rye holds carefully in her gaze; the limits of a fluid archive that she attempts again and again to paint.

Essay written by Jane Blocker
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[7] Ibid., 20.