

When you look at Jim Breukelman's images, taken at North Shore Paintball, it's easy to see a crazy parody of combat and to register the destructive joy written in the infinite splats of colour and worn paths—the palimpsest of thousands of mock battles fought in the woods.

An “extreme sport,” they call it. If they say so, I guess I can buy into that, but paintball is surely a way to get your killer ya-yas out safely. There is nothing that focuses the mind more than a little danger, real or simulated. There's no talk, no negotiation, no hmmm . . . let's take lunch and think about it. There's only your body, your weapon, the stealthy tricks you've learned from the movies, and hopefully some mates to hammer down a little covering fire.

And in the end, it's all up to you, big guy/gal. You've got that gun in your hand, your heart is beating and no matter how much you repeat that it's just pretend, your stomach churns and you have to fight the temptation to raise your head and look around. See that tree covered with a million shots of crusted paint? There's no safety behind that tree. Trying for that tree is a kid's mistake; you're too big. Besides, you can't get to that tree or that stack of tires. But you can't stay where you are without getting laced; you have to move because they are coming for you.

As a highly evolved primate you already know how to do this. You understand camo, you've seen plenty of gunslinging on TV. The craft of combat is basic on a cellular level, and you wouldn't be here

today if somewhere in your junk DNA you hadn't descended from winners.

And that's what Jim Breukelman is showing us. The choice. Life or Death. Seen sharply as only a negative the size of a dinner plate can serve up.

We're all living in an emergency or at least a rehearsal for an emergency. No. It's not a real war. Sure, it's only an enactment, it's only a *photograph of the aftermath* of an enactment, only an *idea* or a *memory*, but look again: see those places where frantic running boots have stumbled and churned the soil into orange mud? You can fall there. In the extreme sport of life you have to attack with caution. After all you can get lost in this forest of images, trip over the tangled roots, and fall down dead. This is where old radials go to die, a retirement home for scrabbly plywood sheets and cargo pallets, for hanging shrouds of canvas. Those are the sucker's refuge, and you can see when someone's there. The fabric sways, moving like the breath of a ghost.

Knowing how to hide is just as important as knowing how to shoot, but don't get fooled into thinking survival is easy. In the fog of war, or the fog of life, there are just too many leaves to decode, too many tactical options, too many branches that fork, and fork, and fork again. There's no time for second guessing and theoretical analysis. Faced with existence or extinction, you dodge and duck the issues of the day, but the battlefield is all there is, and the only solutions you come up with amount

to shoulda-coulda versions of the way you wished you'd lived but haven't.

So as you search for the enemy, or yourself, in these photographs, don't forget about that other you, the one with the gun, trying to read your mind, aiming at the place where your fear is rooted. If you stare into these photographs long enough, there's the vertigo of encountering yourself as a time-traveller. You see the strategies and tactics as they play out in this forest, and you start accumulating a sense of what's really at stake here . . .

And this is what we see—the infinite details of these places within places; a pillbox in a forest, a distant railroad-siding seen through the trees, a tribe of gamers with weapons at the ready. An Afghan vet, or a Gulf War vet, or a Congolese child soldier might point out that real bullets would zip right through those tacked-up forts and you'd be bleeding out and calling for your mama. We've globalized the killing fields. Sure, you can wonder if the paint leaches into the soil, hell it probably does, of course it does. All this is ruining the planet, everything we do is ruining the planet, and if there's a point, maybe that's as good as any.¹

Yes, there is beauty on the battlefield. So is this

mock beauty? Whether our existence is a horror show or a fun show, a game show or a freak show, maybe later we'll realize that there once was something beautiful there, no matter how degraded. There is that gossamer bridge over Lynn Creek, away from the heat of the battle. There is the factory or the silo or whatever the hell it is, full of fleshless industrial intent. A plumbed and veined monster in the woods—are we waiting in the treeline to attack or is it creeping upslope toward us?

When push comes to shove it won't matter who is doing the searching or what is being destroyed. All those questions will be answered on the tombstone of our species. What Jim Breukelman is putting before us is a vision. A space in the woods, a purpose-built kingdom, a place to be all we can be even if we're just parachuting in for the day. It's aimed right at you: those colours on the trees, that stain on the grass, those chain-sawn un-barked poles, the living green of the leaves, the electric blue, the lemon yellow, the craters of red and pink and white, the shadows and the light, the confusion of the branches, the sharp rock, the bruise on your shin, the blood on your lip, an idea devoid of bullshit, hitting you smack in the eye.

¹ Hi Steve, I don't know if this is even relevant to your essay or not. I have been told that paintballs contain harmless stuff such as food dye and vegetable oil. The skin is made of gelatin. Apparently this paint can be washed off with soap and water if you do this soon enough. In my experience, it smells more like regular paint than vegetable oil. I haven't bothered to give it the taste test because the guy at our local wine shop tells me I have an uncomplicated palate, unable to detect subtleties. All I know is that it is very sticky and has a strong smell. Jim



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Chromogenic print on Kodak Endura Paper, 126 x 150 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Republic Gallery, Vancouver





