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Justin Berry, *Palisade*, 2017, ink-jet print, 15 x 12".

Justin Berry

ESSEX FLOWERS

“My first impression was of a dusty distant untouched space,” begins Lucy Lippard’s text in *Cracking* (1978), an artist’s book that she co-authored with Charles Simonds and that served as an exhibition catalogue for a show of Simonds’s sculptures in 1979. The black-and-white images in each spread depict the tiny dwellings—small structures, mounds of mud, heaps of rocks—of an imagined group of what he called Little People, for whom Simonds constructed diorama-sized site-specific villages that were nested in and around art institutions and crumbling buildings in New York and in other cities around the world.

“As I walked with my eyes, inwards, a delicate dusting of green became apparent.” Far from the imagined scale of Simonds’s constructed world, Lippard had to “walk” visually, finding frames that could be interpreted as mesas and plains, some place to be inhabited by humans. Yet the cracks are visible throughout. One sees a backdrop, an impossible architecture, a real city in the distance that disrupts the illusion.

Not far from Lippard’s investigative gaze, Justin Berry’s eyes are similarly focused on another dimension, differing not in scale but in the distinction between a physical and virtual reality. While traversing a simulation of Afghanistan’s Shah-i-Kot Valley in the video game *Medal of Honor*, Berry created screen grabs of ravines and cliffs, comprising a landscape that is not dissimilar to Lippard’s “dusty distant” space, but that here functions as a site of violence and death. This version of the game is set at the beginning of the US war in Afghanistan, and the valley is infamous in military history for its complex, treacherous terrain.

The word *capture* is, of course, also a military term. Berry’s photographs, made from composites of those screenshots, represent a series of attempts, over a period of seven years, to understand this land. And, indeed, his search easily becomes ours. Each picture appears to be a traditional large-format landscape photograph (the revelation that the works are digital or video game-based often appears as a punch line in reviews of his work). In his meticulous selection and collage, most signs of human occupation and conflict are obscured. Yet the viewer may notice the visual discrepancies—the rocks are too jagged, the side of a boulder too stippled—and try to comprehend the image, to understand why, in what previously seemed to be a peaceful scene, a rifle now rests in the shadow of a boulder while a dead man lies sprawled in the open path close by. These traces—barely perceptible to a careful eye—seem to blend into the landscape, rendering the valley once again covert.

“Is it so far away, or so close—that it demands a special focus, a foreign lens?” While Lippard’s rhetorical lens on Simonds’s world created a deeper history for a fictitious place made to look ancient, Berry’s is in some sense trying to unravel a history. Putting aside the prescribed combat missions expected of the *Medal of Honor* character, Berry has also edited out the handheld gun that usually guides a player’s line of sight in a first-person shooter game. He makes the decision not to play. At the same time, his task (which becomes ours as we search the picture plane) is not unlike that of the intelligence officer who must chart the terrain from afar to better inform those who will lead the operation on the ground. Berry’s narrative, his years-long project, ultimately enacts a parallel, minor history that is still at a disturbing remove from the events themselves. Like the drone pilot in Omer Fast’s *5,000 Feet Is the Best*, 2011, or the historian, Berry sculpts his narrative from a comfortable chair. Meanwhile, the war continues. “By dusk layers of dust are settling on forgotten walls. And in the night the cataclysm opens its legs to a new season.”

—Mira Dayal