

ENTERTAINMENT

VISUAL ARTS

War photography without the battles

Looks can be deceiving, and that's the point

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VISUAL ART CRITIC

If you asked the question, Elle Flanders would describe herself as a war photographer, with a couple of important caveats.

"I think there's a translation, often, in photography, that war photography is about the gore and the guts," she says. "And I don't know what the effect of that imagery is, other than a turning away from it. For me, the work is very much an attempt to engage with the everyday of war — the effect, rather than affect, of war over a period of time, and what happens to those places."

Take, for example, the huge image now plastered on a two-storey wall in the courtyard of the Museum for Contemporary Canadian Art for the Contact Photography Festival: Rolling hills of green flecked with yellow dandelions, an expanse of blue sky, the sheen of a perfectly tranquil spring day.

Looks can be deceiving, and that's very much part of the point. For the

lingering desolation of war, Flanders could hardly have picked a more enduring conflict.

The image is called "Isdud," the name of a Palestinian village that simply ceased to be in the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that established Israel's national territory. What's left of Isdud — some rubbly stone buildings, some of them dating back to 16th century Ottoman Empire — is, like dozens of such villages, officially non-existent.

It's just one of the sites Flanders and partner Tamira Sawatzky have been capturing together for the past five years. For Flanders, who is also a filmmaker, the project represents nearly two decades of inquiry.

Fittingly, the project in its full span is called "What Isn't There." When Flanders began photographing in 1994, villages such as Isdud couldn't be found on any contemporary maps (in recent years, Google's satellite mapping has helped the project tremendously, she says).

"I talk about taking photographs of nothing for almost 20 years," she says.

Flanders, who is Jewish, is from Toronto, but spent several years



TARA WALTON/TORONTO STAR

Elle Flanders, left, and Tamira Sawatzky in front of their Contact photo installation "Isdud."

growing up in Israel. As a child, she experienced the Israeli countryside as a sort of idyll that embodied the country's creation myth.

"We were taught that Israel was a land without a people, for a people without a land," she says. Later on, as an adult, details of the country's true genesis, as a nation created by the expulsion of a people that had been there for centuries, clouded that former idyll by a dark reality.

(At the opening for Contact earlier this month, she likened that ide-

alized version of how Israel came to be to "learning about Canada through the eyes of European explorers . . . oh, wait, that is what we learned here.")

That conflation with colonialism is both intentional and highly contentious in pro-Israel circles.

"As soon as you occupy a land from which you are not native, what else can you call it?" she asks. "When I get attacked — which, as you can imagine, is fairly often — for exposing the less attractive sides of how

Israel came to be, I say, 'There were choices; it didn't have to be this way.'

In her work, the polemic of Israeli/Palestinian unrest fades from black and white to shades of grey.

"That's what we hope our work does: Make the viewer ask questions, and want to know about the bigger picture."

"Isdud," from the series What Isn't There, is on view in the exterior courtyard of MOCCA, 952 Queen St. W., until Aug. 31.