

New York Times Friday 1st February  
SARAH PICKERING Fire Scene  
Daniel Cooney Fine Art  
511 West 25th Street, Chelsea  
Through March 15

As an artist in residence at the Fire Service College in Moreton-in-Marsh, England, from 2006 to 2007, Sarah Pickering took pictures of “burn units,” set-dressed interiors set on fire to educate forensic teams and crime scene investigators. The blazes in these photographs provoke an immediate adrenaline response. More interesting, however, is the carefully orchestrated clutter of the imaginary households.

Like the photographer An-My Lê, who documents Marine Corps exercises in the California desert, Ms. Pickering blurs the line between real and simulated dangers. In an earlier body of work, “Public Order” (2005), she photographed the eerie yellow brick and cinder-block sets at a police training center.

Each of the large-scale color photographs in “Fire Scene” is titled after a particular scenario. Some — “Glue-Sniffing Kids,” “Vandals” — seem to address specific social ills. Others represent the kind of accidents that could happen to anyone, but tend to be associated with lower-income communities. In “Electric Radiator,” a space heater brushes up against a chintz sofa; in “Makeshift Cooking,” a similar device is being used to warm a teakettle.

All the burn units have been staged persuasively, down to the dirty dishes left on tables, toys strewn around the carpet and jackets thrown over the backs of chairs. They amount to a broken-windows theory of disorder as the root of disaster. KAREN ROSENBERG