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## From Baghdad, Pictures of Peace

Nothing has exploded and no one is wounded in Phil Nesmith's photographs of Iraq. And that might be the most extraordinary thing about his show, opening Saturday at Irvine Contemporary.

"My Baghdad" chronicles Nesmith's two trips to the war zone in ambrotypes — hazy, antique-looking images created on glass plates.

The surprisingly placid images were shot in 2003-04 and during a brief stint in 2006, and they include barren Iraqi landscapes, birds on a wire and sunsets marred only by a passing helicopter. They have the patina of old Civil War photographs, but were shot digitally — because things move too quickly in Iraq to pull out a large camera and wait for a long exposure. "It's too dangerous for that," Nesmith says.

So how *does* one go to Iraq and come back without images of bloodshed and atrocity?

"That's what CNN is for, that's what Fox News is for," says Nesmith (pronounced nee-smith), an Arlington-based former Army intelligence sergeant who left the service in 2000 and arrived in Iraq as a civilian defense contractor in the early days of the war.

Part of it, of course, is that most of the photos were snapped during a markedly calmer period.

But it is also that Nesmith's objective was to capture "common daily scenes if you're an American soldier living and working there for a year." The images were plucked from personal snapshots from his time embedded with a single Army unit. Though he had taken war-zone photos while serving in Bosnia in the 1990s and has since become serious about photography (he had a space in last year's Artomatic), he hadn't considered a show until his first trip to Iraq was nearly complete. Last summer, some of the shots got a test run in smaller form at H&F Fine Arts gallery in Mount Rainier.



"Soldier," one of Phil Nesmith's photographs of Iraq at Irvine Contemporary.

The Irvine show, with 10 of the glass plates and large-format images, opens with "Reunion," which compiles new works by the gallery's artists, on Saturday. The reception is from 6 to 8 p.m. 1412 14th St. NW. 202-332-8767.

— Lavanya Ramanathan