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Critic's Choice: "True Diplomacy" and Steve McQueen

By Bert Stabler



Succession (Bremer, Negroponte, Khalilzad, Crocker),
2007 (detail)
Oil and resin on panel, charred wood frame.
14 x 12 inches

Artist Jimmy Baker and his wife, architect Jil Baker, reflect on Iraq in "True Diplomacy," now at Western Exhibitions, relying for many of their images and objects on the proposed immense U.S. Embassy complex in Baghdad. Jimmy Baker strikes an ominous note in his statement, writing that the fortress symbolizes the developed world: "a sterile modernist utopia." A series of dark prints of fortified vistas, "Vision of Progress" combines digital renderings and screen printing and is finished with a seemingly bulletproof coat of sparkling resin. The same clear armor encases Invisible Fortress, a golden three-dimensional model of the proposed embassy. The show's most chilling image, though, is *Succession*, a framed oil portrait of an anxious-looking man based on a digital photographic composite of four U.S. ambassadors who've served in Iraq since the invasion. Another, similarly political show offers a counterpoint to this hermetic technopolis: at the Renaissance Society, Steve McQueen's 17-minute film *Gravesend* examines the global economy's ravaged hinterland. The film features footage from the Congo of the brutal struggle to mine coltan, the source of a valuable mineral used in many consumer electronics products. Both shows aestheticize tragic situations, but they also give rise to uncomfortable insights.