

ATOMIC AFTERIMAGE

COLD WAR IMAGERY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Exhibition and Catalogue
By Keely Orgeman

Boston University Art Gallery
September 4-November 2, 2008

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	7
<i>Marc Mitchell</i>	
Atomic Imagery in Context	9
<i>Patricia Hills</i>	
Timeline	13
Atomic Afterimage	17
<i>Keely Orgeman</i>	
Plates	
Bruce Conner	32
Joy Garnett	34
Michael Light	36
Vincent Johnson	39
Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, with Michael Anastasiades	41
Robert Longo	42
Trevor Paglen	44
Richard Misrach	46
Catalogue Entries	49
Selected Bibliography	59
Exhibition Checklist	61

ATOMIC AFTERIMAGE

By Keely Orgeman

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, pictures played a central role in the US government's campaign to raise public awareness—not to mention alarm—about the global race to develop the most powerful nuclear weapon. Photographs of nuclear tests, in particular, became iconic images through publication in mass-circulation American magazines, though the terrible aftermath of these visually striking explosions was not shown. Instead, the blasts' arresting spectacle at once elicited aesthetic contemplation and seemed an aptly grandiose tribute to the Los Alamos scientists' technological achievement. The pictures tugged the observer in both directions: one moment posing as aesthetically compelling images, and the next as scientific documentation. This binary division "haunts photography" in general, according to artist and cultural critic Allan Sekula, who observes that a photograph "stak[es] its claims to cultural value on both the model of truth upheld by empirical science and the model of pleasure and expressiveness offered by romantic aesthetics."¹ That the bomb pictures could provide truth and pleasure, not only because they shared these qualities in common with all photographs but also because their subject matter lent itself to both interpretations, rendered them doubly powerful.

In this exhibition, pictures from the era of aboveground nuclear testing (1945-1962) serve as both subject matter and the source of imagery for contemporary works of art. According to Sekula, aesthetically pleasing photographs have proven vulnerable to manipulation by authoritative powers, which employ beauty to conceal unfavorable messages in a veil of optimism. In the case of nuclear test photographs, the images' beautiful veneer masks the actual explosions' underlying threats of toxic poisoning and annihilation. The government orchestrates this seduction discreetly, allowing the aesthetic qualities to speak for themselves.² Contrary to what one might expect, given this politically charged material, current artistic responses to the ideology of nuclear defense avoid overt signs of activism. Rather, the participants in *Atomic Afterimage* expose governments' deceptive use of nuclear-themed pictures by consciously engaging with the very strategies of secret politics, also known in military jargon as the "black world."³ The artworks presented here tend to exaggerate or alter their source images' beauty, pointing to a typically "black" strategy that Sekula calls "aesthetics of power."⁴

By examining this Nuclear Age aesthetic, the ten contemporary artists in *Atomic Afterimage* employ an iconography that primarily consists of mushroom clouds. With the exception of the London-based design team of Michael Anastassiades, Anthony Dunne, and Fiona Raby, the artists reside in the United States, where explosions—and their related imagery—were abundantly produced during the Cold War. While some grew up viewing nuclear tests in magazines or on television within hours of the actual events, others have encountered the same pictures well after 1962, when atmospheric testing ceased. Bruce Conner and Joy Garnett represent these two generations, yet both borrow imagery from declassified films to comment on aesthetic manifestations of power. For Conner, who belongs to the earlier generation, his childhood memories of the bomb have powerful and long-lasting psychological effects, which lead him to repeat a small set of mushroom-cloud images in his cinematic and printed work. Garnett's luridly colored paintings explore the power of mediation, focusing on instruments and institutions that limit what the American public sees of nuclear tests.

Garnett's contemporaries often make use of still, rather than moving, images, mined from online databases, governmental archives, or personal memorabilia. After conducting Internet research on a specific subject, such as the history of air-raid siren manufacture in Los Angeles, Vincent Johnson transforms his pictorial findings into composite prints and large-scale signage. Michael Light spends a good deal of time in the National Archives' reading rooms searching for the most striking nuclear-test images to re-photograph as a means of generating new, post-Nuclear Age contexts. Robert Longo radically enlarges the pictures he finds in his collection of books and magazines, drawing monumental, black-and-white nuclear explosions in charcoal to emphasize their destructive powers. Anastassiades, Dunne, and Raby begin with similar images but render them cute by making soft, three-dimensional replicas that resemble stuffed toys.

Some contemporary artists create a new aesthetic to represent our nuclear past and present, partly based on the premise that official, documentary photographs cannot offer a full picture of this narrative. Both Richard Misrach and Trevor Paglen have traveled to areas surrounding nuclear sites

in the American desert, recording the things that inhabit the land more than the land itself. Misrach prefers to take detailed photographs of decaying animals that have fallen victim to human violence, whereas Paglen prefers to shoot his abstract views of hidden military installations from a distance. But rather than presenting us with another form of historical documentation, they treat their photographs as art—art that intentionally possesses terrible beauty.

If the works in this exhibition provide a clear indication, the visual arts show a growing concern with the bomb's majestic allure, to the point that artists in some cases self-consciously surpass the standard of beauty in photographic and pictorial propaganda. This has resulted in an impressive inversion of ideology, in which the US and British governments' "aesthetics of power" is upended and upstaged by the artists' power of aesthetics. Taken together, the works of art display a contrived aestheticism—a telling artificiality—that seems intended to arouse the viewer's suspicion. We are meant to question not only the ethics of testing, documenting, and archiving sensitive material, but also the ethical impact of the artists inserting themselves into a morally questionable discourse. Reflecting on the dilemma posed by beauty in general and dark beauty in particular, art critic and writer Rebecca Solnit eloquently observes:

Beauty undermines the attempts to develop an authoritatively impersonal analysis of culture, [for it] speaks of pleasure, desire, subjectivity...Resisting evil often means resisting beauty; and many evils are tempting because of their aesthetics, from the fascinating fascism of large-scale coordinated athletic and military maneuvers to...the billowing clouds of atomic explosions, which look less like mushrooms than like roses unfurling in a time-lapse film.⁵

On behalf of his colleagues, Misrach provides one possible defense for refusing to resist the beauty and, instead, using it self-reflexively: "I've come to believe that beauty can be a very powerful conveyor of ideas. It engages people when they might otherwise look away...and subversively brings us face to face with news from our besieged world."⁶ Our inability to look away from this nuclear-themed art is precisely what causes uneasiness in the face of its seductive imagery.

EXPLORATIONS IN FILM

Two artists stand apart from their colleagues as pioneers in working with nuclear-test documentaries. Bruce Conner was the earliest to combine declassified footage and other found clips in his own films, beginning in the late 1950s. He chose not to address the nuclear theme in traditional media until recently, whereas Joy Garnett pursued nuclear imagery in painting before turning to film. Although Garnett's film *Dominic Sunset* (2002) contains color footage, in contrast to Conner's black-and-white, it echoes his technique of forming sequences of detonations and accompanying them with sound-tracks. Together their work constitutes a sub-genre of artistic explorations in declassified film, continually made fresh by their reinventing uses for the material.

Conner discovered once-secret footage in government archives well before his contemporaries—even before those filmmakers whom scholars consider the most experimental. In his essay on Cold War films, Bob Mielke credits Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader, and Pierce Rafferty's satirical movie *The Atomic Cafe* (1982) with introducing the American public to nuclear-test documentaries but overlooks Conner's earlier contributions, albeit to a much smaller audience.⁷ Conner's first work in the medium, *A Movie* (1958), includes a shot of an atomic explosion that opens a montage on the detonation's bizarre aftermath. This cataclysmic image sets the stage for the rest of the film, which ends, appropriately, with an aerial view of another nuclear test.⁸ Conner's next cinematic project, *Cosmic Ray* (1961), also makes reference to an atomic bombing in a short sequence of stills. A mushroom-cloud image is followed by an aerial view of Nagasaki, whose imminent fate becomes even clearer (as if it were not already obvious) with the final inclusion of a countdown leader.⁹ In *Crossroads* (1976), he re-uses this declassified material, except much more of it, composing the entire thirty-six-minute picture of footage from the 1946 underwater tests at Bikini Atoll.¹⁰

Conner repeats the same nuclear imagery not only in separate films but also within *Crossroads* and his recent graphic works. Created under the pseudonym BOMBHEAD, *Baker Day: July 25, 1946* and *Puff* both contain stills from the film, although the artist adds an element of the new by scanning and editing these grayscale prints with digital technologies. The subject, however, still alludes to his lifelong visions of nuclear holocaust. As Conner succinctly notes, "I was 11 or 12 years old when they tested the atomic bomb, and it [has] been an obsession with me and everybody else ever since."¹¹

Throughout Conner's diverse body of work, repetition emerges as one dominant theme that corresponds to a formal technique, but there are analogous examples. In his self-portrait, *BOMBHEAD*, which features a declassified mushroom-cloud image in place of Conner's head, the act of substitution refers directly to Conner's past and, at the same time, serves as a technical device. The image harks back to a period in the mid-fifties and early sixties when the artist refused to have his face photographed.¹² Protecting against intrusion on his privacy or exploitation of his identity, Conner devised a strategy of facial concealment whereby he would insert a picture of another man, or an actual human stand-in, whenever his presence was requested in press photographs. *BOMBHEAD* demonstrates that this strategy can be effective in a new context—Conner's own art—using a far less benign substitute.

FILM IN PAINTING

Joy Garnett has also found declassified footage to be a rich source of imagery, but she primarily incorporates these extracts into luminous paintings. Her ongoing engagement with apocalyptic landscapes and narratives, including a current project on mass-media images of the Middle East, derives less from primal fear than from philosophical inquiry. Early in her career, Garnett worried about a cultural tendency to accept photographs of scientific and technological subjects at face value. Collecting images from science textbooks and magazines, she made reference to this material in her paintings as a means of showing that all images were mediated versions of some underlying reality. When attempting to gather nuclear-themed material in the late 1990s, Garnett encountered mediation of a different kind—government bureaucracy. The process of obtaining nuclear-test films involved several steps: calling the Department of Energy's office in Nevada, receiving a catalogue of their inventory, and placing an order for VHS tapes based solely on the catalogue's brief descriptions.¹³ Soon afterward the government archived much of their film and photographic collections online, a move that proved highly important to Garnett's future work.

For me this was a watershed moment, as all of my image research from that point on became an online activity. My concept of "mediation" grew to include more than purely optical modes of filtration and contextualization: government secrecy and declassification was a rich area of inquiry that led me to all kinds of "open" online military archives.¹⁴

Like Conner, Garnett translates ideas into a formal language. Her visual vocabulary expresses the extent to which official controls, although ostensibly more lenient under the Freedom of Information Act, affect one's ability to see clearly.

Where Conner's works in black-and-white yield crisp and detailed imagery, Garnett's multi-chromatic scenes of explosions appear blurry, as though the radioactive plumes of dust or blasts of wind obscure our vision. This impression has partly to do with her method of removing the source material from its context. While playing nuclear-test videos on a television set, Garnett shoots photographs directly from the screen. The photographs then become slides and color prints, which ultimately serve as references for her thinly painted compositions. Calling attention to the paintings' complex construction, she creates smooth surfaces that blend and bind together distinct patches of color. In her polyptych *Forest Shockwave*, evenly applied, horizontal brushstrokes span from one edge of the canvas to the other, flattening forms into a unified image. The sinuous streaks of gray that run through more vivid colors also convey the lightning speed with which the bomb's shock wave ripped through the desert and set ablaze the trees in its path.

PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES

While Conner and Garnett examine the psychological, social, and visual effects of nuclear testing through documentary films, other artists use photographic reproductions to investigate related issues. Given the current availability of digitized nuclear imagery online, Vincent Johnson is able to avoid the bureaucratic obstacles Conner and Garnett once faced. They culled material from the Department of Energy's relatively limited selection, whereas Johnson encounters an overwhelming abundance. In spite of this immensity, pictures of the same nuclear tests appear on several different websites, creating an occurrence of repetitive images—an iconography of pop-nuclear culture—much like the personal iconography Conner cultivates in his work. For Johnson, too, repetition is an important formal device, not because of an obsession with the images' content (as Conner admits to having) but, rather, because of his curiosity about their pervasive cultural presence.

A spirit of inquiry links Johnson to Garnett, as they both question the open-ended nature of history. Johnson became interested in Cold War culture as a result of photographing vernacular architecture in Los Angeles, where he currently lives. Upon researching the sites he had recorded with his camera, Johnson discovered that several were former military installations. Most of the places—including a hospital, an airfield, and a Nike missile base—had long since been demolished or abandoned, save for a single, ninety-foot tower, on top of which was mounted a six-thousand-pound Chrysler air raid siren. It stood as a relic of the two dozen sirens that once dotted Los Angeles's cityscape, prepared to warn the citizens of nuclear attack.¹⁹ Mimicking this 1950s Civil Defense strategy, Johnson recently made a life-sized, sculptural model of the siren and installed it alongside other Cold War icons. A large decal of the government's ubiquitous Civil Defense logo, re-created for the current exhibition, provides an apt complement to the theme of propaganda.

Johnson's artistic interpretations of his own research often reveal little-known information about our nuclear history that many Americans and the government might prefer to forget. Some of his composite prints, like Conner's experimental films, represent imagined scenarios, but are based on real fears of nuclear obliteration and composed of actual Cold War documentation. His digital print *Shelters* presents the American phenomenon of fallout shelters as a case in point. These nuclear defense plans were realized more in pictures than in practice and have since become a source of national embarrassment. Other works by Johnson, however—from the Civil Defense emblem to his *London Blitz* (a photo-assemblage portraying a catastrophic presage to the atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki)—remind us of cases in which governments actually executed their designs on a grand scale. By contrasting real and imagined representations of bomb culture, Johnson delivers a well-rounded pictorial history for viewers to contemplate.



Plate 3

Jay Garnett

Film still from *Dominic Sunset*, DVD

2005

7:13 minutes

Music by Ben Neill, Produced by Bill Jones

Courtesy of the Artist and Winkelman Gallery, New York



Plate 4

Joy Garnett

Shockwave, Jeeps

1998

Oil on canvas

36 x 48 in.

Courtesy of the Artist and Winkelman Gallery, New York

JOY GARNETT

Born in New York, Lives in New York City.

New York-based artist Joy Garnett recalls that her inquiries into the secrets of science and technology began at a young age. Her father, a biochemist, enlisted her help to take photo-microscopy of cellular phenomena, which would later form part of Garnett's collection of scientific images. At first, the collection also consisted of mass-reproduced pictures of anything for which, as Garnett puts it, "lenses or scientific instrumentation [were] needed to deliver visual approximations"—mainly astronomical and sub-atomic subjects. This led to her interest in gathering the imagery of science fiction films, such as *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* and *The Andromeda Strain*, by shooting slides off her television screen. But it was satirical films, not sci-fi, that eventually sparked a desire to produce paintings from source material; *Dr. Strangelove* inspired Garnett to employ declassified clips of nuclear tests, just as Stanley Kubrick had done in the film's ending sequence. Before such footage could be accessed electronically, she obtained several VHS tapes through the Department of Energy's mail-order service and embarked on her creative endeavors into the "apocalyptic sublime."⁶

Garnett's body of work on the nuclear theme also invokes the personal experiences of soldiers. In addition to exploring government websites, Garnett views online resources devoted to "atomic veterans," the popular name given to eyewitnesses of aboveground tests. She finds snapshots of tests taken by soldiers, as well as letters that describe their awestruck reactions to seeing the mushroom clouds. Before comprehending the horrific aftermath, eyewitnesses would often marvel at "the coral tones of the clouds and the extraordinary light," as Garnett explains.⁷ Her vibrant and luminous paintings capture such raw aesthetic experiences.

Selected recent exhibitions:

- "Joy Garnett, New Paintings," Winkelman Gallery, New York, 2008 (solo)
- "Strange Weather," National Academy of Sciences, Washington, DC, 2006 (solo)
- "Image War," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2006 (group)

Selected bibliography:

- Buster-Jungle. New York: Dabs & Co., 1999. Exhibition catalogue.
- Greene, Rachel. *Internet Art*. London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004.
- Sheets, Hilarie M. "Reinventing the Landscape." *ARTnews* 100, no. 3 (March 2001): 128-33.