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The Photography of the Atomic Age: A Review Essay

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New Mexico, long recognized as the “birthplace of the Atomic Age,” is also the birthplace of another phenomenon: atomic photography. In the summer of 1945, Manhattan Project photographer Berlyn Brixner spent weeks positioning and loading fifty automatic cameras in the high desert of central New Mexico on the Alamogordo Bombing Range. Then, at 5:30 on the morning of 16 July 1945, Brixner trained a hand-held camera on the Trinity Site nuclear explosion to produce the first-ever photographs of an atomic mushroom cloud.

Three weeks later, Sgt. George Caron, tailgunner for the *Enola Gay*, became the second atomic photographer. As pilot Paul Tibbets banked the plane, Caron shot several photographs of the strange cloud that rose over the now-devastated city of Hiroshima. Hours later, the third atomic photographer, Japanese cameraman Yoshito Matsushige, snapped several photos of Hiroshima; of these, only five have survived.

After that, the list becomes too long to measure. The United States army of occupation brought photographers to both Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the fall of 1945. The following spring, Harry Truman’s government invited scores of professional cameramen to the South Seas

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island of Bikini to witness two atomic detonations (Able and Baker) in Operation Crossroads. The images taken at Trinity, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Crossroads all combined to make the mushroom cloud a familiar visual artifact for the post-World War II generation. Art historian Peter B. Hales has argued that the "central icon" of the postwar atomic culture was the "mushroom cloud rising above lush tropical atolls of the South Pacific or the wastelands of the Great American Desert."¹

In the hands of talented professionals, these mushroom cloud images were often "beautiful." Yet they almost always filled the viewer with a vague sense of uneasiness and discomfort that the "beauty" could never quite dispel. Most viewers realized that along with the cloud came a baffling array of radionuclides that forever eluded the human eye. Thus, no one could ever photograph the invisible aspects of the atomic age. Or could they?

In 1987, Canadian photographer Robert Del Tredici organized the Atomic Photographers Guild. The goal of these professional photographers was to document this theme, to photograph both the visible and the invisible aspects of the world's nuclear culture. As these books show, the new atomic photographers are very skilled.

At Work in the Fields of the Bomb contains over one hundred black and white images by Del Tredici. His approach is straightforward. Except for a number of aerial shots, the artist focuses his camera directly at the subject. Thus, he gives us plain images of: Navajo uranium miners; plutonium plant workers; the Texas Catholic bishop, who urged his parishioners to leave their jobs at the Pantex assembly plant near Amarillo; Edward Teller, "father" of the H-bomb; and Dr. Alice Stewart, noted critic of any low-level, nuclear radiation. All the faces stare back at us as if we had suddenly opened a friend's family album.

When Del Tredici moves overseas, his images take on a new poignancy. In Japan, he presents an image of aged *Hibakusha* and a handful of paper cranes folded by radiation victim, twelve-year-old Sadako Sasaki. He closes with shots of the Russian disaster at Chernobyl, including a large commercial freezer in Swedish Lapland that is full of inedible radioactive reindeer meat.

In addition to his black and white images, Del Tredici has included over sixty pages of interviews and field notes. He is equally as stark here as he is with his photographs. When Edward Teller says his question makes "no sense," he reports it as stated. From discussions with Sam Cohen, "father" of the neutron bomb, to an interview with Yoshito Matsushige, Del Tredici holds the same distanced point of view in both image and text.

Still, only a Neanderthal could miss the central meaning of his message. The photographer has constructed his photos so that the viewer confronts the irony of the nuclear world at every turn. The two Pantex public relations men stand in front of a replica of the Nagasaki weapon (Fat Man) as nonchalantly as if they were placed in front of the Eiffel Tower. The frozen smile of the young, attractive Goodyear sales representative placed beside a Pershing II missile system component is an image not soon forgotten. Del Tredici's photos, which seem to be straightforward, are ever laced with irony.

Peter Goin, who teaches photography at the University of Nevada, Reno, uses a similar approach. Goin, however, shoots exclusively in color, rather than black and white, and he carefully excludes all people from his photos. *Nuclear Landscapes* begins with a shot of the monument at Trinity Site and closes with several images of various nuclear ruins at Bikini and Eniwetok atolls. The heart of the volume, however, lies with Goin's photographic renditions of the Nevada Test Site (NTS) and the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington state.

The NTS is bleak under the best of circumstances but Goin's artful images catch the washed-out majesty of Nevada's seemingly endless space. His shot of Yucca Flat, a spot where numerous above-ground tests were conducted until 1963, is virtually serene. That of Jackass Flats, which is equally tranquil, was taken from the top of Yucca Mountain; and Yucca Mountain is the most probable disposal site for the nation's high-level nuclear waste. Sedan Crater, a gigantic subsistence crater from a Plowshares underground explosion, is truly awesome. The numerous shots of abandoned structures such as railroad trestles, a collapsed hangar, and the "Doom Town" house might, under a different set of circumstances, be part of any Southwestern ghost town.

Goin treats the high desert surrounding Hanford in a similar fashion. From tree stumps of an abandoned orchard, lost when the Manhattan Project confiscated the region for a plutonium production facility, to the various decommissioned reactors, the viewer wanders through strange juxtapositions of empty space and rusted machinery. The burial ground area—home of several underground storage tanks filled with gallons of liquid nuclear wastes—looks placid. Only a glance at the caption alerts the viewer to the real meaning of this nuclear landscape.

Goin is less successful with his superficial historical introduction to the atomic era, interspersed with government photos from the Trinity test and from various NTS blasts. But the interwoven saga of the danger he placed himself in to take his photographs helps excuse the occasional error of historical fact. Like Del Tredici, Goin has loaded his camera with both film and irony. The contrasts between the captions and the landscapes seldom fail to touch the viewer.

As the long introductory essay by Eugenia Parry Janis shows, University of New Mexico photographer Patrick Nagatani is cut from a different piece of cloth. The Chicago-born, Japanese-American artist has carefully constructed each of his forty photographic images in a unique manner. Thus, Nagatani's photographs are metaphors rather than straight documentary images. He has accomplished this by coloring (especially the sky) through collage techniques, and by the frequent appearance of his vast collection of model military airplanes. No viewer would ever take Nagatani's images for realistic photographs; but no viewer could miss the meaning of them either.

Still, Nagatani's varied imagery is complex. One needs Eugenia Parry Janis's explanation that the figures of carp in his photo of the Jackpile Mine uranium tailings at Laguna Pueblo reflect a traditional Japanese celebration of life. Similarly, the viewer needs to know that the striped figures dominating the foreground of the Missile Park at White Sands Missile Range in Alamogordo are Koshare, or Tewa ritual clowns. But even without explanation, most New Mexicans would recognize the green fragments in the air of Nagatani's Trinity Site photo as bits of Trinitite, the radioactive fused sand created by the 1945 ball of fire. Most state citizens would also recognize the meaning of the three dead Vaughn roadrunners lying next to a truck hauling nuclear waste to the WIPP Site in Carlsbad. And no citizen of the modern era could miss the implications of Nagatani's final shot, a father and child (actually, Nagatani and his son) standing under an umbrella in a black rain.

Nagatani's manipulation of color is masterful. The sky above the Navajo tract homes and uranium tailings in Shiprock is an eerie red, while the air in an elementary school classroom discussing radon gas has turned sickly green. The "Lysistratas" image of the National Atomic Museum in Albuquerque might be described as millennial red, while the background of the uranium mine near Mount Taylor is an uncomfortable yellow. The most telling color manipulation, however, lies with Nagatani's photo of snow falling in the contaminated Mortandad Canyon in Los Alamos. Because the ground is "hot," it melts the snow and remains strangely green throughout this otherwise peaceful winter scene. While Nagatani's images have been constructed in a way that Del Tredici's and Goin's have not, all the photographers have developed their images in the same bath of irony.

Carole Gallagher's *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War* is slightly different. A native New Yorker, Gallagher has devoted the last decade to photographing and interviewing "downwinders," the men and women who lived to the east of the NTS, in an area once described by government reports as virtually uninhabited. From the early 1950s to the test ban treaty of 1963, the Atomic Energy Commission set off 100 above-ground atomic explosions—almost one a month for ten

years—and the radioactive fallout drifted inexorably over these largely Mormon hamlets and villages. By the late 1950s, a number of these 100,000 “virtual uninhabitants” began to notice increased local sheep and cattle deaths and, even more terrifying, a much-above-normal rate of mental retardation, solid cancers, and childhood leukemias. The Atomic Energy Commission, however, assured everyone that their needs were being carefully considered. Now, over thirty years later, there is no question that this above ground testing, plus the accidental venting of several underground NTS explosions, brought untold misery to the people who lived in this region of the Southwest.

Gallagher’s photographic style resembles Del Tredici’s. She presents a series of full-face, black and white portraits of NTS workers, atomic veterans, “downwinders,” and the Nevada/Utah landscape. Scattered photos taken by Dorothea Lange in the early 1950s offer a tranquil “before” to Gallagher’s “after.” The photographer’s images are intimately linked to the texts—usually interviews—that are found on facing pages. The tragedies that have struck their lives have spurred the “downwinders” to bitter eloquence:

Josephane Simkins, “I feel like we were really used, and I’ll never trust our government again”(137); Elmer Pickett, “They done to us what the Russians couldn’t do”(151); Glenna Orton, “I’m just a person. I’m just as important as anyone in Las Vegas or New York” (179); Frances Spendlove, “I don’t believe anything the government says” (191); Delayne Evans, “I love the country and I love my government but I think they sure done us wrong”(277).

The combination of Gallagher’s stark black and white portraits, plus the power of these texts, leaves the reader with a deep weariness of heart.

While Gallagher occasionally draws on irony, the main thrust of her book is rage. In a recent newspaper interview, she used terms like “holocaust” and “original sin” to describe this situation.² She is unsparing in her criticism of the hierarchy of the Mormon Church, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the United States Government in general. The artist’s skillful juxtapositions of family style photographs (although many of the “family” are obviously ill) with the straightforward texts brings the point home to the viewer. Although Gallagher closes this volume with several ironic shots of St. George, Utah, and the surrounding landscape, her positive images are far too few to change the overall tenor of this study. *American Ground Zero* is one of the most powerful books of the post-World War II generation. There is no question that it will become a classic of the genre.

Through these four volumes, the members of the Atomic Photographers Guild have created a visual aspect to the largely invisible nuclear subculture. Although historians have told the stories before, the power of words seems to pale beside the visual images.³ Nuclear questions are extremely complicated, and one can easily become lost in changing units of radiation measurement, endless graphs, and scientific arguments over low-level exposure statistics. Photographs like these, however, remain much more accessible to the average person. *Everyone* can respond to them. Thus, the images in these books will be to future generations what the photographs taken by Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and the Farm Security Administration were to their times: the key visual documents for a generation.

NOTES

1. Peter B. Hales, "The Atomic Sublime," *American Studies* 32 (1991), 5; see also, Vincent Leo, "The Mushroom Cloud Photo: From Fact to Symbol," *Afterimage* (1965), 6-12.

2. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 29 June 1993.

3. See the four studies reviewed in Ferenc M. Szasz, "Downwind from the Bomb: A Review Essay," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 30 (1987), 183-87; see also, Philip Franklin, *Fallout: An American Nuclear Tragedy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989).