

SUBLIME ENIGMAS: The Great Basin, the Moon, and the Atomic Bomb

PUBLIC ARCHIVES AND THE AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS
OF MICHAEL LIGHT

BY STEPHEN VINCENT

Michael Light's landscape photography, creative archival work, and publication of both trade and artist books are each distinguished in the way they adopt different yet related strategies for examining the mythology and consequences of America's westward expansion. A serious student of this history, Light's adept use of archival visual materials drawn from public sources has an uncanny way of cutting through obscured histories and transforming them into fresh documents. In *Full Moon* (1999), working with the NASA archive, Light sequenced and combined photographs from the first and subsequent Apollo moon landings to reflect a history that eerily mirrors Western exploration and settlement. In *100 Suns* (2003), again using public archives, he worked with pictures from the 1945-1962 atmospheric atomic bomb tests in both Nevada and the Marshall Islands in the South Pacific. Both books foreshadow and visually echo the diverse focus of his work as an aerial landscape photographer. With the exception of relatively recent underwater photographs at Bikini Atoll—a kind of postscript to *100 Suns*—he has been making an extended aerial survey of the inter-mountain states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah and Washington) in a quite ambitious project titled *Some Dry Space: An Inhabited West*.

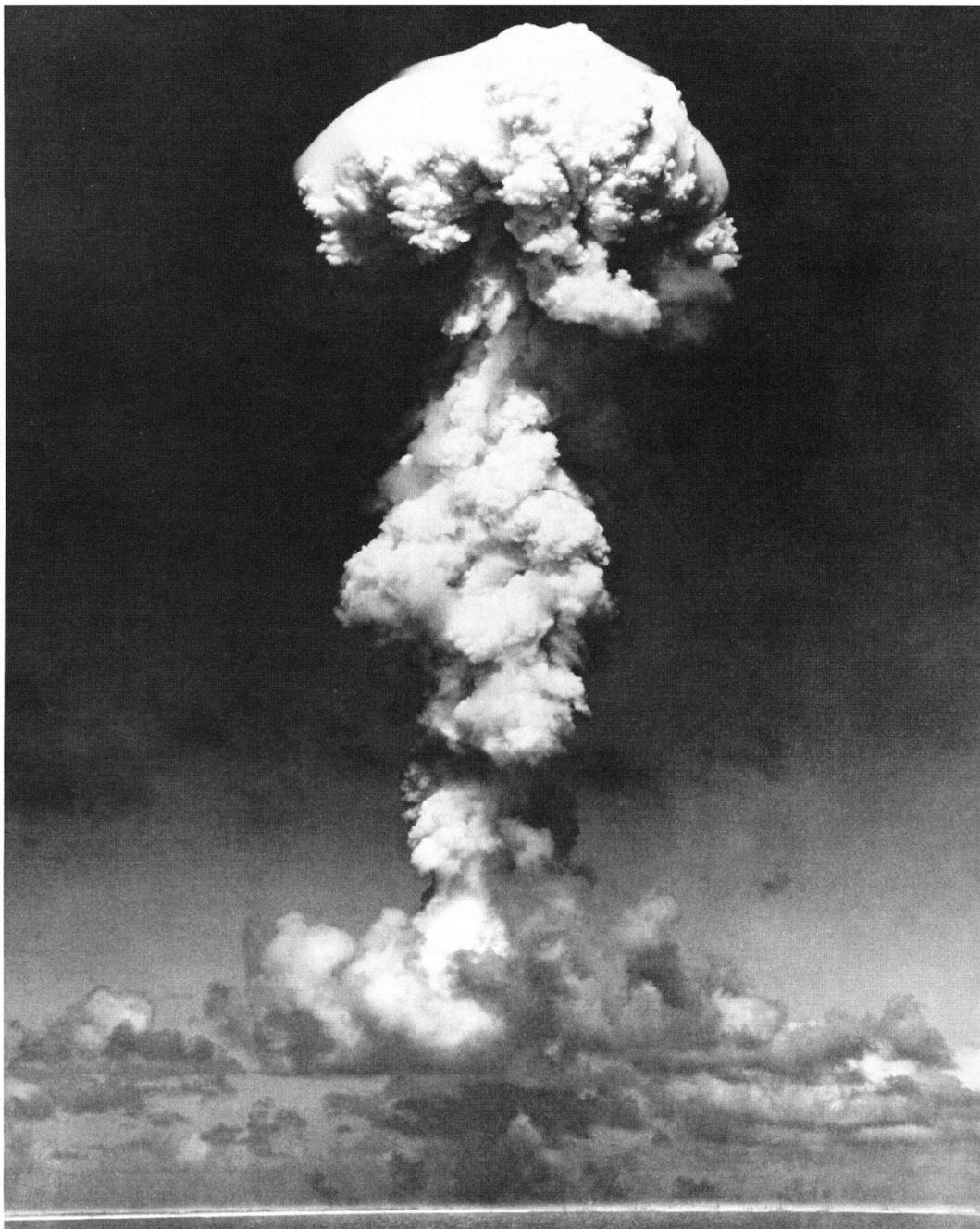
Since the 19th-century invocation of Manifest Destiny and the subsequent and ongoing migrations across the continent, it is estimated that 97% of the landscapes within these States have been altered by human presence and fabrication. Working between the 100th Meridian and the Pacific Coast as an organizing principle, Light has separated his project into several parts, which he calls "slivers," the elements of which include cities, waterworks, mines, and open spaces, as well as subset subject areas. Most of these segments are being or will be turned into both trade and limited edition handmade artist books.

When we look at the diversity of sites and ambition of this ongoing work, it becomes clear that Light's intention is to re-explore and give fresh account to the expansion of the American West in

its multiple natural and manmade manifestations. The initial scope of the project is clearly informed, in part, by a desire to revisit and rework the distinguished legacies of 19th- and 20th-century landscape photographers, particularly those who documented the opening of the West for Euro-American settlement. It is a pictorial legacy that includes such seminal figures such as William Henry Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan, Eadweard Muybridge, and Carleton Watkins, among others. In its approach to the West, Light's project shares the 19th-century interest in the physical grandeur of the land and its mineral, water, lumber and other natural resources, as well as an interest in the old and new cities that continue to emerge and expand across the land.

Aesthetically, however, Light's historical consciousness of the diverse ways the West has since been embraced by its artists has led him to explore multiple approaches to his subject. In photographs of the open, mountainous spaces of Nevada, for example, he can share Edward Weston and Ansel Adams' engagement with nature as a source of the luminous and the mystical sublime. Perhaps uniquely among Western photographers, Light's pictures also bear the influence of 19th century landscape painting, such as "the sublime" mountain works of Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, particularly in their use of western expeditions to explore geological forms as a manifestation of Biblical scripture through which their paintings could reflect both horrific and transcendent states of being. In part as a latter day Romantic, Light similarly engages us; he is a photographer intoxicated with the means, risk and adventure of taking pictures that incur a different kind of dialogue with nature itself.

At the same time, Light does not limit his work to a contemporary re-working of the "western sublime." Indeed, a closer look at Light's various projects over the last 20 years show us a photographer deeply immersed in working through the multiple issues and consequences that have been given to us in the wake of America's call of Manifest Destiny—whether those results be religious, economic, environmental, aesthetic or otherwise. In this sense Light is conscious of and influenced by the rich presence and examples of



ABLE, 21 KILOTONS, BIKINI ATOLL—1946

IMAGE BY U.S. ARMY PHOTOGRAPHIC SIGNAL CORPS



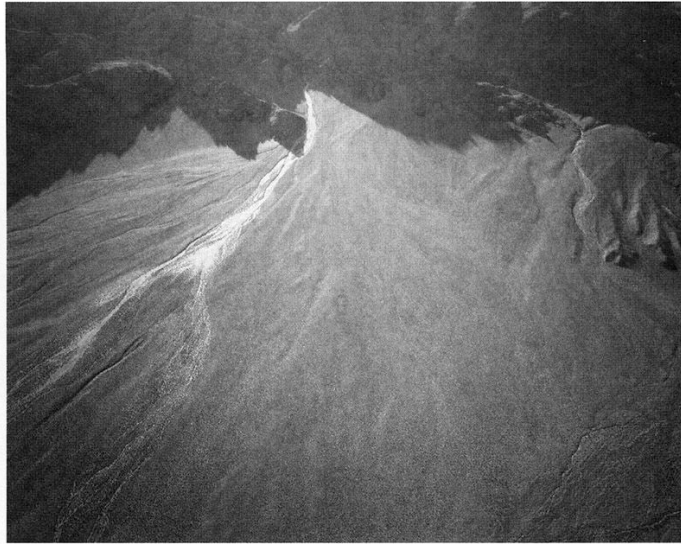
INTERCHANGE OF HIGHWAYS 60 AND 202 LOOKING WEST, MESA, ARIZONA—2007

his peers and elders who have used the camera to make critical interpretations of the social and physical imprint of fellow western citizens. Count among them Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Mark Klett and other participants of the Rephotographic Survey Project (1977-79).

His work reveals Light to be a citizen artist, one who has used historical archives, his camera and his plane (and sometimes a wet suit) to explore, experience and document the large, subtle, dramatic, beautiful and often terrible ways in which Americans have reproduced their foot-prints on urban, rural, lunar and ocean landscapes. From an aesthetic point of view, what is perhaps most unique and interesting about his approach is the way the work moves back and forth from the 19th-century romantic and ecstatic

adventurer to the no-nonsense presenter of clear-cut, well-informed, factual documents. It is Light's enigmatic relationship with both the sublime and the straight factual that accounts for part of the work's strong intrigue. Now in view of almost two decades of published work, we have the opportunity to explore the way the photographs in the different projects—*Full Moon*, *100 Suns*, and *Some Dry Space*—reflect on, resonate and help us make interpretive connections between an archival past and an imaging present.

Unlike his pioneer photographer counterparts, who typically carried their equipment (including glass plates) in wagons drawn by mules, Light takes his aerial photographs from the open door of a small plane or a rented helicopter. Instead of a sta-



SLOT CANYON AT 400', DEEP SPRINGS VALLEY, CALIFORNIA—2001



VILLAS OF THE TITANS, CAMELBACK MOUNTAIN LOOKING WEST, SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA—2007

"The book form seems to be my mother tongue, and so with my Western aerials I have been hand-making giant limited-edition books in my studio that directly refer to Timothy O'Sullivan's Congressional railroad survey albums of the 1870s. I show them on a modified cinematic camera tripod, and at 36 x 44 inches when open they have a presence that calls to mind a strange mix of Biblical exhortation, the harshness of the surveyor's grid, Hollywood representation and robotic interplanetary exploration." —Michael Light



BINGHAM MINE/GARFIELD STACK 04.21.06 ON CUSTOM DISPLAY TRIPOD—2006



EXPLOSION PIT AND PUMICE EROSION LOOKING EAST, SOUTH COULEE AT RIGHT, MONO CRATERS, CALIFORNIA—2006

tionary tripod, he shoots with a handheld camera while he directs his studio assistant co-pilot “to drift” across, or hover over, a particular terrain. Much as an early pioneer, there is a sense of entitlement and freedom that informs the making of this work. However, unlike the United States government’s policy and enticement to pioneers to open and inhabit the West in the 19th century, it is now practically impossible to penetrate most corporate or privately held western lands...by foot or by car. Ironically, the flight prohibitions remaining from 9/11 notwithstanding, Light’s images strongly suggest that his plane has a porous, democratic, almost mischievous capacity to rise up, cross property lines and, with some exceptions, photograph at will. In the process he is able to make pictures that give the eye an opportunity to hover and drop down into private

enclaves, industrial spreads, mining operations, or fly within or over seemingly inaccessible geological formations.

Light does not look down and map; he descends into and looks across. This slanted, oblique approach is intended as a means to explore the relations between light itself and different kinds of physical components within a site, whether, for example, they may be houses, mountains, or light industrial parks. In this way the combination of moving aircraft, photographer and camera permits a different kind of fluid participation in the landscape, one where we are more able to intimately examine, compare and contrast the photograph’s different, sometimes odd juxtapositions and family of physical parts and light. There are many examples of these juxtapositions throughout Light’s work.



EARTH'S LARGEST EXCAVATION, 2.5 MILES WIDE AND .5 MILES DEEP, LOOKING WEST, BINGHAM CANYON, UTAH—2006

The Bingham Canyon copper mine and its Garfield smelter operation represent one of the most significant manmade imprints on the Western landscape. The mine is located at an altitude of 8000 feet, 20 miles southwest of Salt Lake City and is the largest man-excavation on the planet. The rim is almost three miles in width, and nearly a half mile deep. The Garfield smelter stack on the Great Salt Lake is ten miles away. It is the largest free-standing structure west of the Mississippi, just 35 feet shorter than the Empire State building. The juxtaposition of these two photographs, part of a larger series, reflects the dynamic of light's enigmatic relationship to the sublime.

The apparent tilt of the plane parallels the contours of the flanks of

the mountain, enabling the photograph to render the texture of the mine's depth, particularly in the way different surfaces absorb or reflect light. The illumination becomes a kind of shale, where glimmers of it stack up into portions, slices, often dissolving into either a soft or harsh glare. It is in this direct, visceral, almost vertiginous confrontation with illumination itself that the photographer comes close to the 19th-century painter's ecstatic intrigue with the natural sublime.

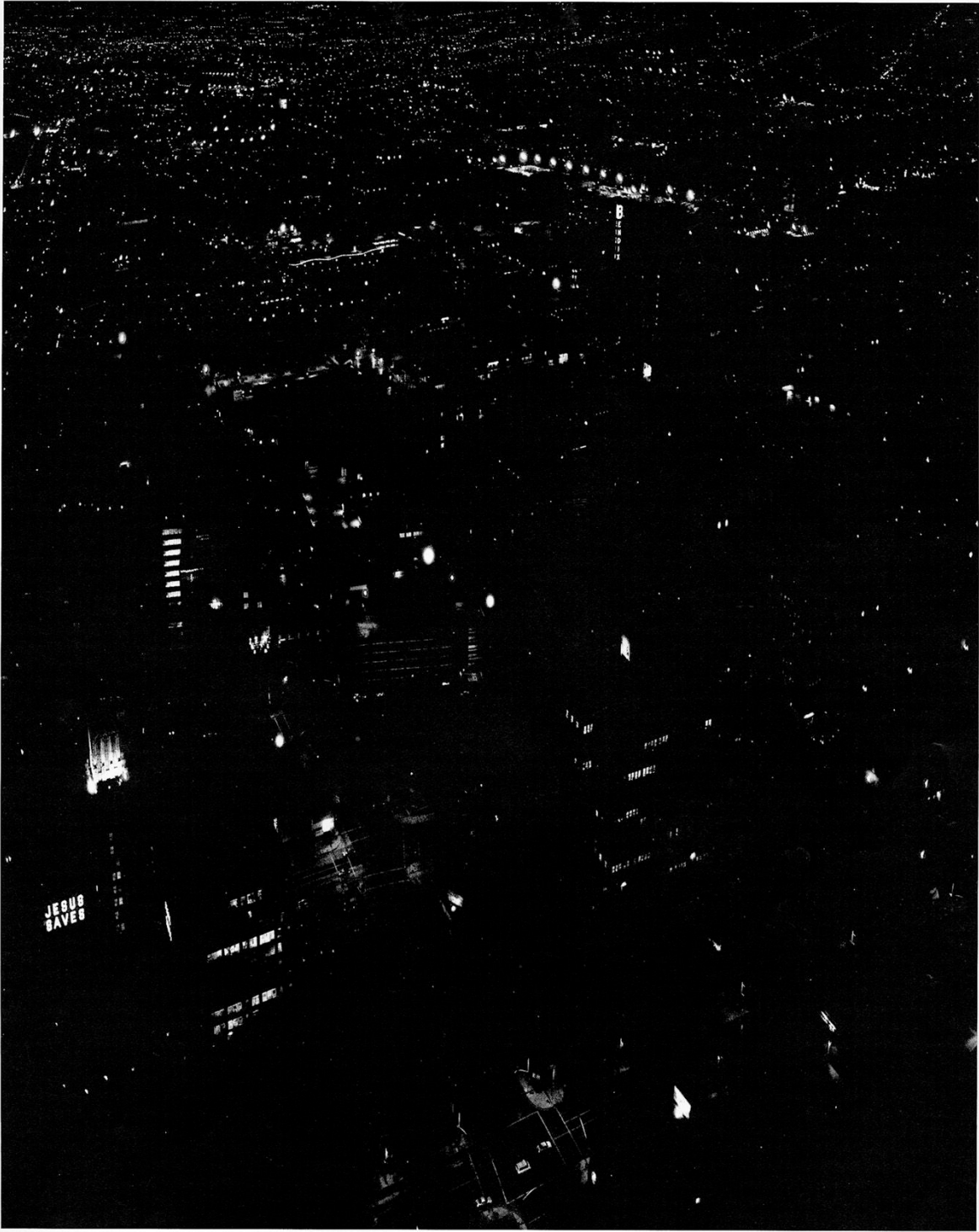
The facing photograph of the smelter operations is an ambiguous celebration of structure and site. While the plant sucks out and transforms the copper ore, the almost deathly salt white light of the Lake in the distance ominously seems set to drain the power out of the smelter's own machinery.



1215-FOOT-TALL GARFIELD STACK, GREAT SALT LAKE BEYOND—2006



GARFIELD SMELTER STACK, OQUIRRH MOUNTAINS AND ANCIENT BEACH OF GREAT SALT LAKE, UTAH—2006



UNTITLED/JESUS SAVES, LOS ANGELES—2005



DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES LOOKING WEST, 1ST STREET BRIDGE AND L.A. RIVER IN FOREGROUND—2004

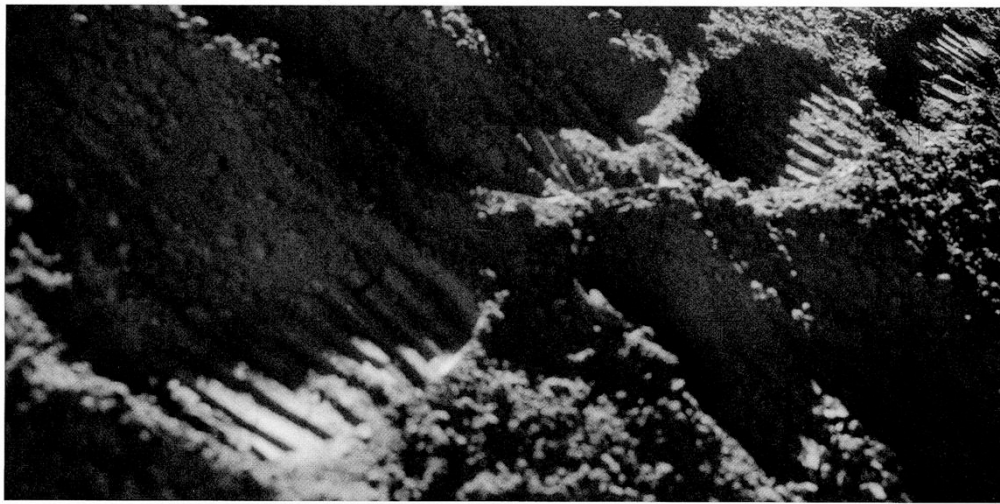
In the nocturnal and daytime photographs of Los Angeles, we find another dramatic example of the juxtaposition of the ecstatic with what I will call the vacuous sublime. In the nocturnal views, the continent enters a kind of lyric darkness in which the lights of cars, trucks, buses, houses and buildings dot, glimmer and give the landscape a sense of mystery and, perhaps, the reflection of a divine music. Transcendent over the glimmer of the city's lights, the photograph becomes a conversation, a dialog with the muses of the night, particularly in a city so well known for its mythology of angels and stars. In the context of Manifest Destiny, if California was intended to be a re-discovery of Eden, the photograph implies, at least, a momentary paradise on the continent's western edge.

Unintentionally ironic or not, towards the lower edge of the photograph, the eye catches the words JESUS SAVES in white neon.

The nocturnal views—this is one of a series—however, are turned upside down in pictures of the metropolis by day. Instead of distinct, glimmering music, the camera confronts a footprint whose massiveness—its skyscrapers, freeways, river, and industrial parks—block out any direct human presence. Instead of persons, we get grim evidence of physical containment and transience. Aiming his camera direct into the light, the City—as any kind of Mecca—appears to dissolve into what may be considered a hazy, spiritual diaspora whose various architectural components (or pilgrims) bear but faint connection to one another.



SIDE OF THE BINGHAM PIT LOOKING EAST, UTAH—2006



FOOTPRINTS ON THE INTERIOR SLOPE OF SURVEYOR CRATER, MOON—NOVEMBER 14-24, 1969

To get a larger view of Light's interpretation of Western expansion, a closer look at the visual threads and shapes between the archival and new photography projects reveals a number of provocative correspondences. The initial boot treads from the first moon landing closely parallel the machine-made terraces that flank the sides of the Bingham mine. The presence of the rover's tire tracks on the moon mirror the dirt roads into the Arizona construction sites, as well as our earliest memory of wagon wheel-tracks. The rock formations behind the Phoenix residences correspond to the moon's arid hill shapes. In making these various connections, the *Full Moon* archival pictures work as a foil and parallel for evoking a relatively innocent West before the arrival and the literal incision of the European presence in the New World. Consciously or

not, these pictures of the first temporary settlement on the moon foreshadow another territorial loss of virginity. In effect, in relation to his work in *Some Dry Space*, Light's editorial organization of the NASA photographs becomes a revisit to the first earthly violation of the American continent's founding European explorers, the one that the Puritans foresaw as the new Eden. Indeed, it is intriguing and not a little ironic to read the quotes from the astronauts as they speak of the sublime, even religious, sensations that they experienced while on the moon. In terms of American history, looking at the photographic evidence of our human presence in *Some Dry Space*, it is impossible not to question whether or not an ultimate human partnership with the moon, or any other planet, will again repeat the history of our inhabitation of the American West.



SALT RIVER, GRANITE RIVER DAM AND CENTRAL ARIZONA PROJECT INTERSECTION, MESA, ARIZONA—2007



PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPOSITE OF EUGENE CERNAN AND THE ROVER NEAR SPLIT ROCK, MOON—DECEMBER 7-19, 1972

MOON PHOTOGRAPH: HASSELBLAD 70MM BLACK-AND-WHITE NEGATIVES BY HARRISON SCHMITT, APOLLO 17



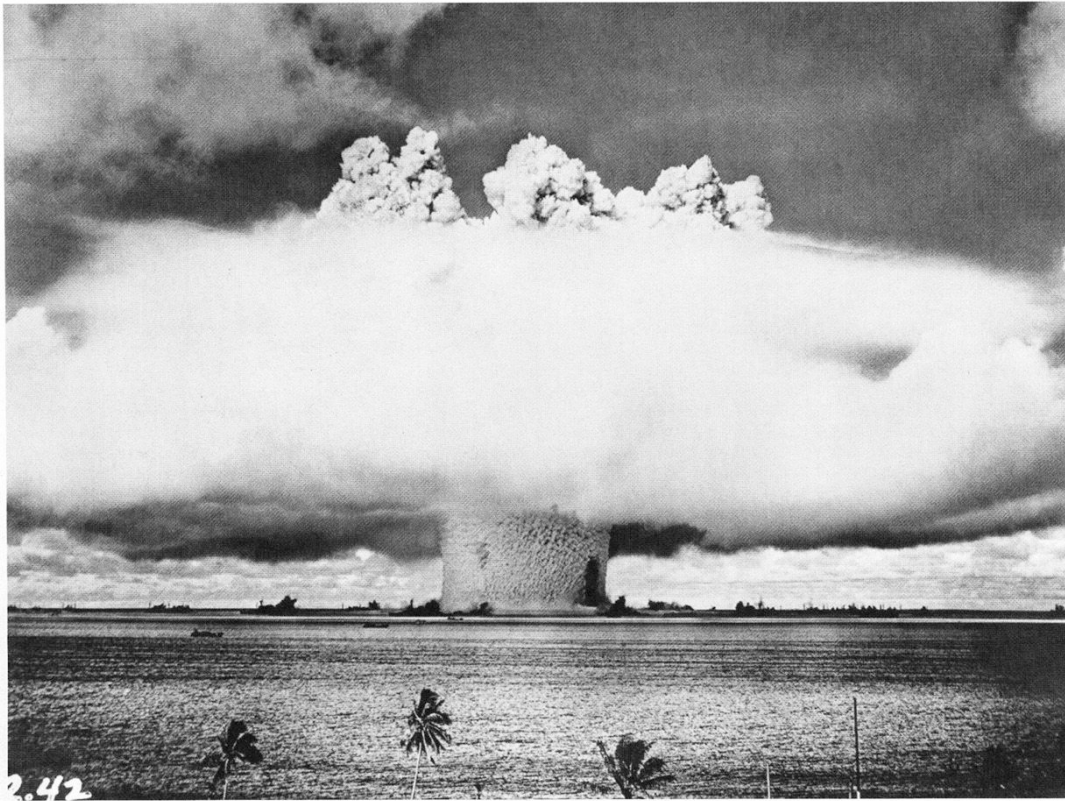
ZUCCHINI, 28 KILOTONS, NEVADA—1955

If *Full Moon* uses the NASA archive in a way that mimics and excites comparisons with the 19th-century explorers and photographers, the archival photographs of the atomic bomb tests in *100 Suns* offer an antithetical, darker vision. Instead of Manifest Destiny's promise to bring the country to the delight and inhabitation of a new Eden, these pictures culminate in a portrait of geological and social devastation. Instead of luminous, ecstatic pictures of mountainous landscapes, the stunning pictures of mushroom clouds leave a visual trail that is more akin to the horrors of Hieronymus Bosch. In retrospect, now fifty years later, the grim-faced yet bedazzled soldiers at the Nevada test site almost suggest they had been forced into the worship of a satanic force.

As we have since learned from history, the results of the atomic tests served to prove that the destruction and radioactive fallout from the use of a nuclear weapon would destroy the world. It is testimony to Light's courage (or foolhardiness) that, in an interesting twist to his process, he moved from archival research back into investigating the physical world of those historical photographs. In 2003 and 2007 he journeyed to Bikini Atoll lagoon in the Marshall Islands to photograph the 1946 Operation Crossroads test site where two atomic bombs were detonated on 90 unmanned but fully fueled warships—including the *Nagato*, from which the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had been ordered.

Diving at depths of 180 feet, Light worked in a manner similar to the shifting three-dimensional perspective of his aerial photographs, though in much more dangerous territory! Bikini Atoll remains uninhabitable to this day due to radioactive fallout from the 1954 Bravo hydrogen bomb test, America's largest, which was a thousand times more deadly than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

It is in the development of these photographs that we get Light at his most direct and morally insistent. Instead of black and white prints, these are negative prints in which the broken shards and crumbling vessel shapes appear to glow from their radioactive charge. In this imaginative reverse transformation of the negative—a kind of alchemy—Light permits us to enter the remains of a lethal history. As in Greek and Roman mythology, these photographs take us across the river Styx into the realms of the dead. Indeed, the ships are still armed and dangerous. Horrifically, the *Nagato* still carries, sealed inside one of its compartments, the remains of dead Japanese sailors. And 40,000 American sailors witnessed the Crossroads tests in 1946. We will never know how many of them died or became seriously ill from radioactive exposure. Light's photographic witness to the devastation above and below the ocean waters is a clearly intended rebuke to the Edward Tellers and other nuclear promoters of the world, and those nations, including this one, whose use of such bombs would eliminate the planet of human habitation.



BAKER, 21 KILOTONS, BIKINI ATOLL—1946

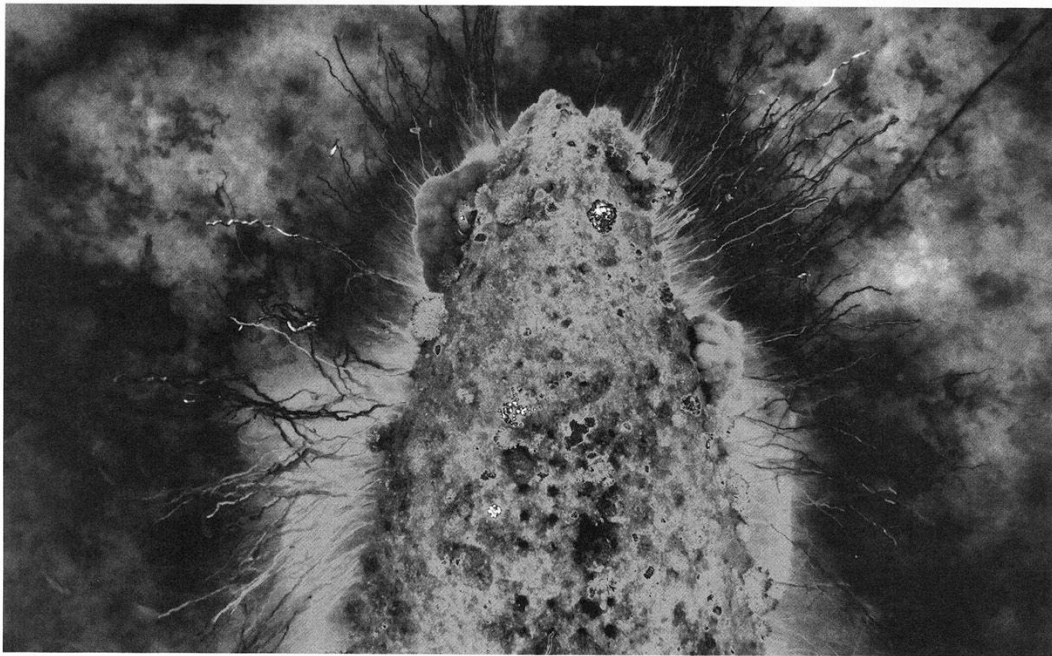


OVER BIKINI ATOLL—2003

TOP IMAGE BY U.S. ARMY PHOTOGRAPHIC SIGNAL CORPS



BIKINI ISLAND, RADIOACTIVELY UNINHABITABLE SINCE 1954–2003



BOW OF U.S. SUBMARINE AOGON AT 180 FEET, SUNK BY ATOMIC TEST "BAKER" IN 1946–2007



INSIDE RADIOACTIVE PHOTOGRAPHIC BUNKER BUILT IN 1956, AOMON ISLAND, BIKINI ATOLL—2003

And yet, the archival photographs of these so-called “test” bombs present us with a haunting enigma: They are sublimely beautiful, no matter how lethal! The split atoms produce the most primal reflection of a creative act, something equivalent to the birth of a star. In Light’s flight to Bikini Atoll, the tropical storm clouds seen through the plane window appeared to mimic the archival mushroom cloud shapes that rise from the test. What are we to think? Is Light making these matches to draw attention to the threadbare proximity, for good or for ill, between what we call natural phenomena and human manipulation? Do the similarities between the natural and nuclear clouds point to a line where our actions may exceed what is permissible? A line, if we cross it, into an extreme place where we kill the seas with bombs, where we denude nature with endless housing developments, where we throw all eco-systems entirely out of balance? It is the power of Michael Light’s careful investigation and use of archival photographs, the ongoing witness of his aerial photography, and the splendid execution of his books, that his work possesses the power to provoke such sweeping thoughts.

Artist’s Books and Catalog:
Ranch (1993), Twin Palms Publishers, Santa Fe
Full Moon (1999), Alfred A Knopf, New York
100 Suns (2003), Alfred A Knopf, New York
Michael Light: Bingham Mine/Garfield Stack (2009), Radius Books, Albuquerque
Some Dry Space—An Inhabited West (2009), Nevada Museum of Art, Reno

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