

Visions of light and landscape, in painting and print

Michael Light takes to the air in search of telling views that also yield outstanding pictures.

Kenneth Baker

Galleries

Light on landscape at Hosfelt:

Artists continue to seek vantage points — visual, conceptual or both — that might somehow render the world comprehensible as a world. Hence, I assume, San Franciscan Michael Light's title for his show at Hosfelt: "Near Planet." Like a number of other noted photographers, he has taken to the air in recent years in search of telling views that will also yield outstanding pictures.

About a year ago, Hosfelt showed a giant book that Light had made of black-and-white pigment prints: aerial shots of Los Angeles by night or twilight. Light has since made several other books along these lines. Hosfelt's show of them, with a few prints hanging separately, ends today, but the books will remain available to any visitor interested in seeing one.

The most arresting book on view followed directly from Light's "100 Suns" project, in which he made new prints from official government negatives of aboveground nuclear weapons tests.

"Bikini Atoll 06.02.03" (2006) assembles 15 digital pigment images — all but one printed in negative — of the Central Pacific island where the United States tested a series of nuclear weapons between 1946 and 1958.

Like "100 Suns," but less confrontationally, "Bikini Atoll" attempts to make vivid again to our imaginations the enormity of nuclear weapons and the dangers their very existence poses.



Bikini Atoll 06.02.03, #13: Radioactive Bunker Facing Bravo Crater, Nam Island, Bikini Atoll, 2006

An obviously stylized image such as "Bikini Atoll 06.02.03 #13: Radioactive Bunker Facing Bravo Crater, Nam Island, Bikini Atoll" (2006) may serve this end better than more conventional documentary would. Printed in negative, the half-blasted "radioactive bunker" appears to glow in the dark, surrounded by water, like a radiant iceberg dead ahead.

Light's other books examine the geology of Mono Lake, two Nevada valleys and the Bingham

Mine.

You can look at these spectacular images as continuations of the tradition of Western landscape survey photography, from vantage points impossible to its 19th century practitioners. But approach them with a sense of contemporary controversies and they read as one long argument against "intelligent design" and the rest of the backlash against evidence-based cosmology.

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