

ON PHOTOGRAPHY

DARKNESS VISIBLE



The atomic bomb set off in the Nevada desert on June 4, 1953, a little over sixty miles from Las Vegas, was code-named Climax. It was dropped from an airplane and detonated 1,334 feet above the desert floor. Rockets fired from the ground just before detonation, to help measure the shock wave, left smoke trails beside the mushroom cloud. The United States conducted a hundred and six nuclear tests in the atmosphere over Nevada in the nineteen-fifties and early sixties, most of them observed by American soldiers or, in the case of the Zucchini test in 1955, by Canadian and British military observers, for whom bench seating was provided thirteen miles from the blast (above). The spectacular nuclear explosions in the desert and in the Pacific Ocean were photographed by a unit working out of the Lookout Mountain Air Force Station, in Hollywood. Most of the unit's pictures have been destroyed, lost, or are still classified, but some of them are available in government archives. For the elegant and emotionally charged "100 Suns" (Knopf; \$45), Michael Light, a photographer and artist who

lives in San Francisco, has assembled Lookout Mountain images and photographs of nuclear tests made by the U.S. Army Signal Corps. In Light's previous book, "Full Moon," digitally transferred images from the Apollo missions were used to create a fictional journey into space. Both books present photographs on black pages with little or no type. Useful information and technical annotations are provided at the back. The apocalyptic visual narrative in "100 Suns" escalates from the eerie ominousness of black-and-white photographs showing embryonic explosions set off from towers in the desert to the over-the-top splendor of Wagnerian nuclear sunsets on the Enewetak and Bikini atolls. In the early photographs, soldiers, often kneeling, with their backs to nearby blasts, provide the point of view. At the end, the camera is in the clouds, in the middle of the terrible beauty. (An installation of the photographs will be shown at the Hosfelt Gallery in San Francisco between October 18th and November 26th.)

—Sharon DeLano