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In-Site-Ful

Artist Eric LoPresti, who grew up near a plutonium plant, marries aesthetics to science in *Test Site* exhibit at National Atomic Testing Museum



Photo by Checko Salgado

Eric LoPresti

By **Steve Bornfeld**

July 16th, 2013

See it?

Past the nuclear reactor, around the corner from the radiation monitors, tucked in nice and cozy near the



Photo by Checko Salgado

Artist Eric LoPresti and his wife, Lisa, work on installing his Test Site exhibit at the National Atomic Testing Museum.



Photo by Checko Salgado

B-53 thermonuclear weapon? Art.

Go ahead. Step forward. It's not ... radioactive.

“This was the biggest story of the 20th century, and largely hidden, maybe misunderstood, certainly not fully accounted for,” says artist Eric LoPresti, at age 42 a child of the late-stage Cold War and creator of the simply titled exhibit, Test Site. Depicting the Nevada desert that doubled as the cradle of America’s nuke tryouts as U.S.-Soviet tensions escalated to world-threatening proportions in the 1950s and ’60s, Test Site is on display through September 1 at the **National Atomic Testing Museum**.

“On a personal level, this affects my life, and on a cultural level, it affects the way we think about things,” LoPresti says, chatting outside the museum’s Ground Zero Theater, near one of his India-ink-over-oil canvases. “I want to take the history we inherited and what it means, and project out to what it could mean.”

Science gets an injection of aesthetics from LoPresti, who was raised in Richland, Washington, whose economic engine was the plutonium-producing Hanford Site. Highlight of its history: providing that material for the “Fat Man” atomic bomb dropped over Nagasaki, Japan, killing more than 80,000 people in August 1945.

“I thought that was an interesting background,” says Karen Green, curator of the artifact-loaded museum. “To understand the science and technology and history, you need the humanities in there, too, and Eric has a unique style. What you see here is an unofficial and emotional view. It shows a totally different perspective of the Nevada Test Site.”

Spare, abstract and vast in scope, LoPresti’s paintings are based on satellite photos taken by the government and even aerial images from Google Earth. Distinguished by geometric lines that divide the landscapes by vectors, the paintings balance technological precision with the desert’s stark beauty. Strikingly, they characterize the Nye County test site—officially known as the Nevada National Security Site—as pockmarked by nuclear craters, the scar-tissue reminders of its Cold War legacy. **(To learn more about the era, click here.)**

“As an artist I’m not interested in taking political sides, but our approaches to current problems seem to have this orientation around conflict and apocalypse,” says LoPresti, a 2002 graduate of the Maryland Institute College of Art. “I think the Cold War was a massive cultural life-or-death situation, and that

colors everything we do geopolitically, and when you have that orientation toward Armageddon, you deal with cultural things almost post-traumatically. That is where I'm finding traction these days: the conflict but also the beauty."

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Though now based in Brooklyn, New York, LoPresti comes from Western stock and—forgive the expression—a nuclear family of sorts. Born in Denver, he was 10 when his family moved in 1980 to Richland in Washington state, where his father worked in a research lab at Hanford but was not involved in plutonium production.

Located on the Columbia River, Hanford, which LoPresti describes as a "super-secret affiliate site," was established in 1943 as part of the Manhattan Project that developed and produced the first atomic bombs during World War II. Home to the B Reactor, the world's first full-scale plutonium reactor, it was where the material was synthesized and packaged into spheres and shipped to Los Alamos, which famously assembled the bomb. Hanford holds the distinction of producing plutonium for most of the 60,000 weapons in America's nuclear arsenal during the Cold War.

In 1980, Hanford still operated under a veil of secrecy, he says. "The town itself was boring," LoPresti says. "There wasn't anything to do. What I didn't know, and what I now know in retrospect, is that it was intentionally boring and remote and very buttoned-down and quiet. No one talked about their work." Mostly decommissioned now, Hanford also left a legacy of environmental destruction due to inadequate safety measures and waste disposal practices, and today is the most contaminated nuclear site in the U.S. Since the late 1980s, LoPresti says, Hanford has shifted to mostly cleanup efforts, and his father's duties included tracking damage to the environment. Yet the impact of Hanford in its producing heyday resonates with the artist.

"I was in a town that was there to make weapons," he says. "Morally, it's very precarious. Those people did a service for their country, but at the same time, war is a very complicated thing. As a painter, when I began developing my own subject matter, I started doing paintings of conflict."

Having depicted aerial views of Hanford in a 2010 series of paintings titled *Afterglow*, LoPresti has moved on to the Nevada Test Site, a natural next step in the theme, though the portraits extend beyond the site.

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"'Butterfly' is the name of the black iconographic lines," LoPresti says, looking over his painting in which the lines intersect to form the outline of the beautifully colored flying insect, an ironic framing device over the depiction of the nuke site. "It's very similar to the markup imagery used in satellite. They're very precise and indelible. Here I've overlaid some substantive craters and a setup for underground tests."

Another piece, pointedly titled "Problem Child"—taken from the song by British rock band The Damned—is based on an iconic 1970s photo revealing the expanse of craters receding into the distance. Using juxtaposition, he offsets the photo by adding a color gradient and superimposing sharp geometric lines

over it. “That’s what I work with in all my paintings,” LoPresti says. “There is a source photograph, which I repaint, a color gradient and black iconography of some kind.”

Two works depart from the Nevada site for their inspiration. Again tellingly titled, “Bad Star” revisits the Hanford site. Framed by two facing triangles, it is a representation of a waste pit north of LoPresti’s hometown. By chartering local aircraft, he gained perspective by flying over the Hanford site. “There are containers full of stuff that probably need to be stored for tens of thousands of years,” he says. “But this is my hometown. It’s also a vast and beautiful place that outsiders would think is rather bleak, but it’s the minimalist beauty you get in the West.”

Venturing even farther afield to address the nuclear theme—all the way to the Soviet side—is “Semi,” which is an abbreviation for Semipalatinsk, the Soviets’ primary nuclear test site in northeast Kazakhstan. During the Cold War, the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic was the second-largest republic in the former USSR.

“[Semipalatinsk] is broadly analogous to the Nevada Test Site, a pretty abstract landscape from a satellite image, overlaid by a couple of vectors,” LoPresti says. “What matters for the purposes of this museum is it’s important to touch base with the other side. Who were we fighting? You think we had a problem? Russia and Kazakhstan are on a different level in dealing with their past and their inheritance.”

Dwarfing all these, which are sized at 40-by-30 inches, is the 72-by-54-inch crown jewel “Instrumentation Tower,” based on a government aerial photo and depicting an underground test. “The instrumentation tower is on the left, where they’re going to drop the device, and the scale of it is enormous and kind of loosely painted,” LoPresti says.

Abstract as the works are, the LoPresti collection nonetheless conveys the uneasiness of a Cold War legacy that—especially in an era of North Korean nuclear saber-rattling and terrorists bent on unleashing the ultimate terror—is very much a hot-button topic.

“I want to show some of the pathos, the fear, the terror of this sort of activity,” LoPresti says. “Who knows what it was like to work on these things—but I think people here already know.”

Eric LoPresti: *Test Site*

10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mon-Sat, noon-5 p.m. Sun through September 1, National Atomic Testing Museum, 755 E. Flamingo Road, \$14 for entrance to the museum, \$20 with Area 51 exhibit, 794-5124, NationalAtomicTestingMuseum.org.

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