

ULTIMATE ALCHEMY/THE POLITICS OF FIRE

All things, o priests, are on fire....
The mind is on fire, ideas are on
fire... mind consciousness is on fire.

From Buddha's "Fire Sermon"

James Hillman, the noted psychotherapist and former director of the Jung Institute in Zürich, has stated in his book of selected writings, *A BLUE FIRE*, the differences that he feels exist between our archetypal connection to the mythologies of war, and our 20th Century fascination with the idea of a nuclear apocalypse. There is no question, Hillman believes, that enacting rituals which circulate from the archetype of Mars, the god of war, and sitting in a numb psychic stupor while gazing at abstracted images of nuclear annihilation are two different experiences and should not be entered under the same psychological heading of WAR. Hillman states:

"The rhetoric of Mars in war journals, poems and recollections speaks of attachment to specific earthly places, comrades, things. The transcendent is in the concrete particular. Hemingway writes that after World War I: "abstract words such as glory, honor, courage... were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the regiments and dates." How rare for anyone to know the date of Alamogordo (or even where it is), the date of Hiroshima, or the names of people or places or units engaged. Gone in abstraction...

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Quite different is the transcendent experience of the nuclear fireball. The emotion is stupefaction at destruction itself rather than a heightened regard for the destroyed. Nuclear devastation is not merely a deafening cannonade or firebombing carried to a further degree. It is different in kind: archetypally different. It evokes the apocalyptic transformation of the world into fire, earth ascending in a pillar of cloud, an epiphonic fire revealing the inmost spirit of all things..." 1.

In this exhibition, **PLAYING WITH FIRE**, presented by The Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, six New Mexico artists: Michael Cook, Lydia Madrid, Patrick Nagatani, Roger Sweet, Woody Vasulka, and Erika Wanermacher present work, in a variety of media, which is an attempt to address some aspects of the impact upon us from our preoccupation with nuclear energy. Included in the various inquiries of these artists is the over riding vision of a potential planetary holocaust. Whether the globe goes up in one final big bang or dies whimpering, slowly cooking itself into a half-life heat-death of radiation poisoning seems like a totally unacceptable trade off in any terms. There is no 'getting well' from radiation poisoning. There is no restructuring of the Earth's infinitely complex inter-dependencies if we blast our one and only ground zero network apart.

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These artists have, in a metaphoric sense, taken on the weight of the world, and they attempt, through the devices of their own personal 'alchemical' procedures, to affect heightened levels of awareness regarding the uses of atomic energy while broadening our perspectives of the nuclear landscape. The artists in **PLAYING WITH FIRE** could be thought of as contemporary Alchemists, heating and mixing and re-combining the leaden variables of nuclear realities into an amalgamation of visual awareness leading to the gold of insight and intuition. Each artist seems to be working out of some kind of laboratory of layered information which yields in every end product a heart breaking vision of re-combinatory history, even when this vision is bracketed by a deeply intoned helping of black humor such as one might find in Nagatani's luridly gorgeous color photographs.

In Patrick Nagatani's newest body of work entitled, **NUCLEAR ENCHANTMENT**, he has created 40 images (of which CCA shows 10 for this exhibition) of a searing, cultural indictment against our 'atomic age'. Nagatani uses actual images from various sites in New Mexico, historically linked from the days of the Manhattan Project, which he then juxtaposes with various tableaux that he sets up in his studio (assisted in part by Diane Keane). The results are multilayered epiphanies which strike directly at a raw, ironic nerve scraping against images of a bizarrely altered present. Actual history overlaps virtual realities with a nightmarish beauty. Lurid colors enhance an almost ritualistic ground of black humor all the more deadly in its aim because of the toll of human lives taken by dropped bombs, or in the process of being taken this very moment as mine tailings fly through the air and poison water and build up in the blood and in the bone...

There is a tremendous amount of information in Nagatani's images in the **NUCLEAR ENCHANTMENT** series, and they are sometimes cryptic, but always to-the-point invocation to our duplicity and willful ignorance and collusion with the powers that be. One image that he repeatedly uses as a form of moral indictment against a complacent public is that of the Japanese 'tourist'. Nagatani, himself a Japanese-American, in the process of altering straight forward documentary shots, uses the figures of Japanese individuals (including himself) who explore as 'tourists' the historic sites of atomic experimentation in New Mexico. One image, however, floats above the rest like a sacred visitation coming back over and over again to haunt the mind and point a cautionary finger at our collective destiny. The print is called: "Bradbury Science Museum, Los Alamos National Lab". In the background is an overview of part of the museum interior and the image focuses on a large sign with text that reads:

If peace is viewed as the absence of general war among the major states, the world has enjoyed more years of peace since 1945 than has been known in this century; and nuclear weapons have been a major force working for peace in the post war world. They make the cost of war seem frighteningly high and this discourages nations from starting wars that might lead to their use.

Donald M. Kerr, Director
Los Alamos National Lab
1979-1985

In the foreground of this image, backgrounded by the concept of the ultimate deterrent to war, are the heads of small Japanese children staring straight out

at us, and near these heads are clear glass beakers with names on them: Yohima, Michiko, Hariako, Suburo, Hirako, Haruko--- and inside the beakers are the ashes of un-lived lives...

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The nuclear imagination leaves the human behind for the worst sin of all: fascination by the spirit...The soul goes up in fire. If the epiphany in battle unveils love of this place and that man and values more than my life yet [is] bound with this world and its life, the nuclear epiphany unveils the apocalyptic god, a god of extinction, the god-is-dead god, an epiphany of nihilism. 2.

In **PLAYING WITH FIRE**, Erika Wanenmacher shows in addition to her **DARK TWIN**, **LIGHT TWIN** sculptures, a suite of 5 etchings called **THE SOUL DENSITY SUITE**. These etchings were inspired by the book, **THE CHANGING LIGHT AT SANDOVER** by James Merrill. As part of the thesis of the book, Merrill weaves in and out of his text the idea that the soul is destroyed by radiation. Wanenmacher takes this theme of the destruction of the soul and depicts a tortured, human consciousness in varying stages of witnessing its own agony of annihilation. There is no morbid, gallows humor here as a death's head floats out from its dark background as if in a seizure of disbelief. In the murky darkness from which each image arises and falls back into at the same time, archetypal symbols appear: a red spiral in one radiates out from a skeleton's rib cage; there is a barely perceivable bat in another as if the embodiment of a shriek; and a green leaf, disassociated from any axis mundi.

In spite of Wanenmacher's reliance on darkness and the visible death throes of a soul passing across unbearable thresholds, there is an exquisite, albeit ghastly beauty to this suite of images. Once the impact of their meaning rises to the surface of the viewer's consciousness, they take one back and down for a subterranean view of hell where eternity rests on a fulcrum of irradiated dreams.

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Apocalypse is not necessary to war. Let me make this very clear: apocalypse is not part of the myths of Mars. Mars asks for battle, not wipeout, not even victory. 3.

One of the paintings that artist, Michael Cook, presents in **PLAYING WITH FIRE** is called **SEA OF RED** and its complexities and overlaid information bear sorting out. Cook uses a certain painting style that elevates the schematic to the level of myth. In fact a good deal of imagery that he uses comes from his research into texts from all over the world that purport to demonstrate the feasibility and safety of 'ground control' plans for civilian defense against nuclear bombs. In **SEA OF RED** the very air is on fire and as our eyes adjust to the intensity of color in this monumental painting (as if we are seeing with infra-red faculties) we begin to make out a series of trenches cut into the Earth and that seem to recede into some metaphorical vanishing point. Inside these trenches are human beings lying face down with their hands folded over the backs of their heads. As if this helplessly futile gesture could ever protect them against the half-life of uranium detonation... This particular 'civilian defense' image Cook found in an engineering library in Berkeley, California and is from a Russian text on atomic fallout shelters.

In the foreground of SEA OF RED are two large bald heads on either side of the painting. These generically androgenous heads also have their throats included and here Cook schematically represents the lymphatic system because it is from this system that the cancer resulting from radiation poisoning is spread. Also in the foreground of the painting and seemingly to hover like a strange curtain of meaning just behind the heads are lines and markings in black which signify the patterns of particles in a bubble chamber. And deep in the midst of all of this information on the surface of the canvas is a death's head, presented nearly subliminally for our threshold awareness to meet face to face.

The impact of this painting is steeped in an acid red irony to be sure, but an irony rendered all the more poignant in our identification with these helpless people in the trenches; and one cannot help but put one's hand to one's throat when looking at the two large heads which gaze off into a future overloaded with the prognosis of a pre-mature death. Yes--- these are beings from our contemporary nuclear mythos.

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If nuclearism produces "psychic numbing", stupefaction, [and] stupidity, [the archetype of] Mars works precisely to the contrary. He intensifies the senses and heightens fellow feeling in action... Mars gives answer to the hopelessness and drifting powerlessness we feel in the face of nuclear weapons by awakening fear. Phobos, his Greek companion or son, and rage, ira, [or] wrath... Apocalypse may lift veils, but it closes down into the truly final solution, after which there is no reopening, no recorso. Broken the wheel. 4.

If we can rise up from our trenches of futility into which we stumble day after day in our post World War II, weary post-modern era, and be motivated by fear if nothing else, perhaps then we can place ourselves in the path of mutational forces. History shapes us and changes us and if studied closely, offers strange surprises and points of life-enhancing bifurcation. Evolution is furthered by the acts of mutation and perhaps the moment of mutation is our only saving grace if we as a species are to continue. In Roger Sweet's work, mutations occur at every level. Information taken from the surface of the Earth, from historical records, from mined materials, from found objects, books, and trees (to name but some ingredients in his alchemical mix) are all then recombined into objects of totemic significance coupled with the resonance of intense compassion. There is no bit of matter too humble or too rare that cannot find a way to unite into a congruous whole that declares the re-combinant value of the vectors and valence of dreams. One image in particular haunts the imagination and that is the 'angel' figure in the piece SOME SAY THE WORLD WILL END IN FIRE. I like to think of her as the 'Angel of Aggregation' and indeed she is. Sweet has taken sandstone nodules; a found plaster of paris torso with a hand holding a phallus-like form; wings of flow stone; and for her head, he used a piece of pumice. The 'Aggregate Angel' is bonded together with plaster of paris and white glue into a seamless whole--- The angel as ancient goddess figure to propitiate regarding our contemporary psychological dilemmas.

To the left of this composite angel is an old photograph showing Albert Einstein in a Native American headdress, with his wife at the Hopi Reservation. Of course Einstein would have been visiting the southwest in conjunction with activities at Los Alamos and other atomic weaponry sites.

A recurring image that Sweet uses in his work and that is emblematic of one aspect of his nuclear agenda, are three black and white images in a vertical column. They vaguely suggest human heads and torsos and in fact they are. They are re-photographed images from a museum installation that used to be at Kirtland Air Force Base and they depict examples of burn victims at Hiroshima. Even though the unsuspecting viewer may not know precisely what they are, there is a strange and subtle energy that is triggered off in our minds by these tiny icons of agony. In one of the sculptures Sweet shows in **PLAYING WITH FIRE** called WATER FONT, there is amidst the assemblage of found objects a small pool of water at the base. Above it, the image of the three burn victims. The pool of water is a gesture of offering to them, and perhaps somewhere in who knows what spatial and temporal interface, the burn victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will understand and accept Sweet's offering to soothe and comfort them...

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To hold the bomb as image in the mind requires an extraordinary extension, and extraordinary daring, in our imagining powers, a revolution of imagination itself, enthroning it as the main, the greatest reality, because the bomb, which imagination shall contain, is the most powerful image of our age. Brighter than a thousand suns, it is our omnipotent god term... our mystery that requires constant imaginative propitiation. 5.

Lydia Madrid's drawing entitled:  will fill an entire room at CCA during the **PLAYING WITH FIRE** exhibition. What appears at first glance to be a delicate and light filled floor to ceiling visual discourse, holds on closer inspection a series of events so to speak concerning the uses and abuses of our mental, spiritual, and physical landscapes in contemporary life. The drawing can be likened to an elaborate metaphorical map where every signpost, every feature of the landscape shifts into double meanings in the tug of war between nature and culture. Madrid uses an intricate and highly complex series of pictographic-like symbols which can be read metaphorically in a number of ways. For instance, a spiral of rectangles might suggest an anthropomorphic reading but from another perspective this spiral is an aerial view of a village. Or a skeleton may represent death or merely symbolize the foundation of our bodily existence. Everywhere in this mythic landscape, the forces of culture make themselves known and felt, upending traditional cosmogonies that hold a divine force at its center. In mapping her used and abused terrain, Madrid might just as well put an image of death at the heart of a village that lies in wait for bombs to be dropped. She also uses color symbolically to suggest a dialogue of crossed purposes. Her strategy of color is to use it not only to represent traditional directions, ie. red to symbolize the warmth of the south, or yellow to mean the north and the color of our ability to understand, but to use color as an indictment against culture. Madrid "flips" traditional usage upside down and, for instance, will use the color yellow at the top of a cross to mean pollution and acid rain. Red at the top of a symbol may mean the flames of destruction. Images themselves appear upended because as Madrid says: "We flip our priorities and at times we forget why we began to study or research something and the whole process becomes very destructive in the end."

Madrid relies on written text as well as visual clues for tracking through her 'suspect terrain'. She perceives the use of language as quote: "... a song, a lesson, a dance. Maybe it's time we thought of another way to use language to make another song--ie-- to rethink the whole thing...". As we enter into

Madrid's light filled 'cave drawing', do not be deceived by the brightness that surrounds us. Because the closer we look and the more we enter into Madrid's intricate dialogue of cultural reversals, the more we are asked to look through our dearly held assumptions about our place in the landscape and the world. We must navigate gingerly and try not to lose our way in an apparent fall from grace.

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The translation of the bomb into the imagination is a transubstantiation of God into imago dei, deliteralizing the ultimate god term from positivism to a negative theology, a god that is all images. And no more than any other god term can it be controlled by reason or taken fully literally without hideous consequences. The task of nuclear psychology is a ritually devotion to the bomb as image, never letting it slip from its pillar of cloud in the heaven of imagination to rain ruin on the cities of the plain. 6.

Woody Vasulka's video tape, THE ART OF MEMORY, has a rather paradoxical place in the exhibition PLAYING WITH FIRE. The five preceding artists mentioned in this essay are consciously and willfully pursuing a line of inquiry that has nuclear politics at the fulcrum of this inquiry. Vasulka however, insists his video is not specifically anti-nuclear or even, for that matter, political. His artist statement says in effect that instead of futuristic concerns that deal primarily with video technology, he "decided to look back, and this is what I saw...".

in Vasulka was born in Czechoslovakia and like many other Czech artists and intellectuals, he left his country in the sixties to settle ~~in Europe and eventually~~ in the United States. The Europe that Vasulka witnessed during his formative years had seen political upheaval of cosmic proportions. THE ART OF MEMORY explores a brief collective history of Europe and Russia in this century, but at the same time Vasulka kicks the information up to an ambiguous present haunted by a mythological creature with wings who hovers over the archetypal beauty of the southwest landscape featured in this video. The creature however is spurned by a contemporary "Everyman"--- a "No-Where Man" lost in his own aimless, supercilious consciousness.

In Vasulka's 20th Century chronicle of the political turbulence that factored into his own life and times, there of course appear references, both visual and verbal, to the Atom Bomb and to Oppenheimer's now famous quotations from the Bhagavad Gita as he witnessed the first blast:

If the radiance of a thousand suns were burst
at once into the sky, that would be like the
splendor of the Mighty One.

Even if Vasulka is right when he says that THE ART OF MEMORY is not a political piece per se, and that he is more interested in the technological suggestion of a three dimensional space; or the transition between a two dimensional iconic image into the illusion of a three dimensional space, one is haunted nevertheless by the various matrices of historical developments within this century as he presents them. This information culminates in an image that hangs over our heads in a fervent if totally and obscenely ironic simulation of divine inspiration.

Vasulka says that THE ART OF MEMORY is an historical meditation without a political assignment, because in effect he sees the events of this century so horrendous and horrible that only metaphysical forces beyond the grasp of human kind could be responsible for such spiritual, psychological, physical, and moral destruction. He says: "They [those metaphysical powers] would have to be guilty forever because mankind can never be responsible for the deeds of this century."

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As the 21st Century rapidly appears on an ambiguous horizon, there is the pressing need for each individual to find her or his own place within the nuclear landscape and become acquainted with the variables of survival that hinge, as never before, on the variables of conscious awareness. These six artists in **PLAYING WITH FIRE** have presented a variety of responses to the uses and abuses of atomic energy, and one fervently hopes that the messages they offer will aid us in our own responsible decisions regarding the politics of fire.

Diane Armitage
Visual Arts Coordinator

1. A BLUE FIRE; James Hillman; Harper and Row; 1989; page 182, 183
2. *ibid*; page 183, 184
3. *ibid*; page 184
4. *ibid*; page 184
5. *ibid*; page 184
6. *ibid*; page 184, 185