



It's pronounced nu-cle-ar

By BEN RUTTER

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Atomica

Lombard-Freid Fine Arts and Esso Gallery

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An age, we tend to think, is animated by a spirit: a common aspiration, a pattern of belief. And yet the most familiar of them? Stone, Bronze, Iron? are named for elements, not ideals. The move to class human cultures according to their weaponry and implements was first made by archaeologists, and the convention appears to have stuck. The postwar age became "atomic" in honor of its founding tool. Lately we have left it for the age of information, which certainly sounds more benign, as if disputes will now be settled with an almanac.

But then data has been weaponized as well. We guard our firewalls as closely as our bricks and mortar. And perhaps our energetic response to fresh dangers—memorizing passwords, shredding files—has forced the older, Cold War threats from view. Or else we're simply, amazingly, jaded. Though it can crack the earth in two, there is something almost dowdy, like an obsolete appliance, about a warhead in a silo. "Atomica," a show mounted this summer at the Esso and Lombard/Freid galleries to mark the 60th anniversary of Hiroshima, stood poised to break this crust of habit from our thinking on the bomb. That it did not succeed at this—that perhaps it didn't really try—is a lesson in itself.

While some artists here were comfortable exhorting us—Peter Kennard's montages of earth and bullet, skeleton and fallout retain their blunted edge—others merely gesture, with this smudge or that glow, toward something like the nuclear sublime. The difference here reflects one of curatorial temperament. Ombretta Andruff, who conceived the show, strides up to the atom like an activist; the gallerists pursue a more poetic tack. Still, the deeper contour of the show is not the line dividing frankness from obliquity—didacts and poets alike can convey a sense of urgency. It is rather the line dividing soberness from something more like whimsy. This rift is generational.

You can feel the gravitation of the dark star under which the works of the atomic age were born. Carol Rama and Nancy Spero, in paintings from the 1960s, depict a kind of unlocated pall. The latter's partner, Leon Golub, is on hand as well, another of his ghoulish squads perpetrating badness. Even the slighter, more sarcastic pieces—Chris Burden's Atomic Alphabet (1980), or Komar and Melamid's riffs on Yalta (1985)—take outrage as their premise. The same cannot be said of the odious Campbell's soup display—big tins labeled "Cream of Mushroom Cloud"—stacked by some young talent in the room furthest from the door.

Only a culture that had truly feared the bomb could have laughed at Dr. Strangelove. Perhaps a generation raised on Tom Clancy and Red Dawn is one that is uncertain how to be afraid. The show's younger artists exhibit something more like skittishness. Lisi Raskin, a recent MFA, paints a lurid German bunker. It's kind of creepy, kind of cool. I waited for something to happen. Molly Larkey, slightly older, sets a bright, lumpy bloom of fallout atop a two-tone plinth, announcing, in the title, I made a bomb. Here is a youthful theory of deterrence. Mutually assured destruction? Yuck! The lone foray into earnestness, Mark Handelman's noisy Flag Dispersion, is overly deliberate. Though its lofty title betrays ambition, this is plainly a picture of Old Glory getting blown to hell. The best of the lot is Shiva Ahmadi, whose calligraphic paintings tease the accouterments of military Iran—jackboots, barrels, warheads—into the tidy courts of the medieval Persian miniature.

At points, the indecisive mannerism of the younger artists and the dark portents of the older ones are successfully reconciled, and these are the highlights of the show. The dying brightness and concussive sweep of Joy Garnett's series of paintings, Forest Shockwave, join

nature and artifice, storm and bomb, in a palette of malignant, Fauvist prettiness. Less well realized, but closer to the point, are two small depictions of nuclear tests executed by the Italian painter and pyrographer Davide Cantoni. Cantoni works with a magnifying glass, carving paper with a beam of heat that leaves it looking neatly ravaged. It is perhaps best not to know that he spends this marvelous technique on a broad range of subject matter, for it is particularly fitting here: the subtractive process and the charred borders it leaves bear an obscure but powerful relationship to the bombing of Hiroshima, which printed the white negatives of its citizens on the city's walls.

As I walked home along 33rd street, I passed a rusting fallout shelter sign, and wondered what the landlord was doing with the space.
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