DOG/81 KILOTONS/ENEWETAK ATOLL/1951 by Michael Light, Digital Images © 2003 Michael Light; courtesy Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco

100 Suns and the Nuclear Sublime:

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL LIGHT

ROBERT HIRSCH

Michael Light is a San Francisco-based photographer and bookmaker whose work deals with the politics of the environment and America's cultural relationship to it. Light has exhibited internationally, and his work is in the collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Getty Research Library, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The New York Public Library and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, among others.

Light reworks familiar historical photographic and cultural icons into landscape-driven perspectives by sifting through public photographic archives. His first such book and exhibition, *FULL MOON* (1999), utilized lunar geological survey imagery made by Apollo astronauts in the 1960s and '70s to represent the moon both as a classically sublime desert and an embattled point of first human contact.

His latest archival project, *100 SUNS* (2003), focuses on the politics and the impact on the landscape resulting from atmospheric nuclear detonations in Nevada and the Pacific Ocean that were carried out from 1945 to 1962. Light aerially photographs areas of the western United States, pursuing themes of mapping, vertigo, human impact on the land and the sublime. He is beginning a planned decade-long aerial photographic survey of the West tentatively titled *Dry Garden: America Beyond the 100th Meridian*. Light is represented by Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco and Frehrking + Wiesehofer Gallery, Cologne. This interview is the result of conversations and emails from early 2004 and through the spring of 2005.

Robert Hirsch: How did your previous project, *FULL MOON*, generate the impetus for *100 SUNS*?
Mike Light: On the most fundamental level I am a landscape photographer interested in issues of scale and perspective. I spent five years with *FULL MOON* and its intense, planetary landscape. Where does one go after? The elemental qualities of nuclear fusion and fission appealed to me as a distillation of the planetary sublime. The nuclear landscape is one of power and violence that needed to be described, particularly in how since 1945 it has irrevocably altered the cultural mechanics of landscape and the environment, after humans became architects of the sublime. Previously the sublime was the province of either God or Nature.
RH: How and when did you realize this was your next direction?
ML: Ideas have a way of forming organically. *100 SUNS* happened midway through the five years I worked on *FULL MOON* and is about the American West. The landscape is divided in a bifurcated way—desert and ocean. This evolved from my concerns for the environment and how we treat that environment, as well as my interests with the fundamental building blocks of landscape perception and representation. I work with big subjects and grand issues, and I am fascinated about that point where humans begin to become inconsequential and realize their smallness in relation to the vastness that is out there. In my archival work I also enjoy inserting a certain kind of revisionist politics into big iconic subjects that are owned by the world, where I can tell a story through my particular prism, in a way that hopefully offers a fresh perspective. *100 SUNS* allowed me to roll all these things into one project.
RH: *100 SUNS* was the result of your process of working?
ML: Sure, all my work is the result of all that preceded it. It's intriguing to try and pick apart where certain things come from and the order in which they evolve. I don't think that I would have been able to do *100 SUNS* before *FULL MOON* because it's a much more difficult and provocative book. It takes confidence and experience to publish a portrait book of the Apocalypse in six editions worldwide. One's voice must be very clear before taking on a subject like this. Every image in *100 SUNS* refers to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
RH: Why didn't you include actual images from the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?
ML: Everything in the book is deliberate. If I included a single image of Hiroshima or Nagasaki—even if it were only an aerial detonation image and not one of immediate human destruction—the book would have had to go down a wholly different path, or really be two books. It was not a door that one opens lightly; one must be prepared to cross the threshold. My book is about American power, not the direct consequences of the power being observed. It is intentionally one step removed. Other books go where *100 SUNS* does not; I believe that when working with intimidating subjects it's best to stay very focused.
RH: Is the book format viable in the digital age?
ML: Yes, absolutely. I use the Internet just as much as anyone else, but one cannot come away with an organized, coherent, hard-hitting object after doing your research. They are two different animals. The organization and filtration of good books—good art—are needed more than ever in an age where every laptop has more information available than a hundred thousand libraries of Alexandria. If anything, the Internet can be seen as one big democratic archive—quite the playpen, but a replacement for the oracular power of the book? Never. This is not to say that what we call a "book" won't radically expand, however. I imagine hovering holographic spaces under the complete control of the eye…
RH: How has your undergraduate degree in American Studies from Amherst College in 1986 influenced your photography?
ML: Greatly, in that I very much remain an Americanist. Not in the sense of being an apologist for the nation, certainly, but in the sense of doggedly trying to figure out how it works and finding meaning in the search (however trying it may be at the moment!). The synthetic pulling together of disparate strains of thought that characterizes American Studies has also proved invaluable. My time at Amherst has provided my work a more critical and idea-driven flavor. It's also given me a lot of healthy anger and confidence, perversely, because when I was there it was so thoroughly hostile to photography as an art form or as a tool of cultural production.
RH: You were born in 1963, the same year as the Limited Test Ban Treaty.
ML: Actually I was born the day it was signed [August 5, 1963].
RH: Do you consider that prophetic in terms of a historic turning point in the nuclear arms race of the 1960s?
ML: I don't, particularly, but my mother might!
RH: What are your childhood memories about the bomb?
ML: I was fortunate that my childhood and youth were untouched by fear of, or for that matter, any knowledge of the bomb. I don't recall any "duck and cover" exercises in grade school. My first engagement with nuclear issues was reading Jonathan Schell's *Fate of The Earth* (1982) in college, which left me stunned and profoundly depressed about the human situation.
RH: As an imagemaker do you think there is any inherent difference in the images that you create in real time with your camera and those that you discover in an archive?

ML: Sure. I'm the person behind the camera in one, and in the other I'm not. With the images I make out in the landscape I get to select the particular place and time and then choose an exact moment from all other moments available to make the photograph. With archival work I of course don't have these choices. It is a strange thing to go into a project like *FULL MOON* or *100 SUNS* for years at a time, because as a photographer I do get "inside" preexisting images, and come to know them as my own, but there remain big gaps. It's eerie, a primal aspect of the power of the photograph.

RH: Describe your archival image working procedure.

SHASTA/17 KILOTONS/NEVADA/1957 by Michael Light,
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ML: I scan or re-photograph either film originals or prints, and eventually they wind up as a large file. I live in these pictures on a digital level for long periods of time and become deeply attuned to their subtleties, even though I did not have the original experience of having captured them in real time and space. I am not an astronaut so going to the moon is not possible. Other events, like atmospheric nuclear testing, would be closed to me even if they were occurring in the present. I can't go back into history, but archival imagery is the next best thing that one can get to actually being there. On occasion I'll physically get to an "archival" location to gain a fuller sense. For instance, with *100 SUNS*, I went to the Bikini Atoll in 2003 to do aerial photography. It was a cathartic pilgrimage for me as a photographer. I needed to see this landscape—the clouds, the light and what remained in the land after so much focused violence. The physical act of photographing at one of the test sites was a way for me to complete a circle of meaning.

RH: What about issues of authorship and meaning?

ML: I don't particularly care about photographic authorship. Whether an astronaut who doesn't even have a viewfinder makes an image, a robotic camera, a military photographer, or Mike Light really doesn't matter. What matters is the context of the final photograph and the meaning it generates within that context. While I am very involved in making my own negatives, I've always been just as interested in trying to make some sense out of the trillions of images that already exist. There is no shortage of information out there. What we need are data miners who possess good intellectual prisms and aesthetic senses to create knowledge. The relationship between authorship and meaning is changing, and will continue to do so as information logarithmically explodes.

RH: Do you bring the same skill set and sensibility to bear on subjects regardless of whether you are working from an archive image or photographing directly from life?

ML: I hope so. I don't claim ownership to archival images in the public domain. We all own these and like anyone else I have the right to engage with these images. What I do with these found photographs is to contextualize them and create a story. This is very much my story, the thing that I bring to the party and something unique to my sensibility. That vision is the same whether I am going out and making my own negatives or putting together something based on pre-existing imagery. And all of my work, either archival or freshly generated, finds its home in the book form. Sometimes the books are commercially published and democratic, other times they are handmade by me in small editions and acquired by elite audiences. Photography is made for the book form, unlike painting or sculpture.

RH: How do you go about interpreting these archival images?

ML: With great restraint. I personally feel that iconic subjects, and the archives that house them, are not the right arenas for me to get overtly "artistic" or "inventive." I have a profound sense of respect for the inherent qualities of these images and work outward from there. The images in *100 SUNS* were physical 4 x 5-inch and 8 x 10-inch prints, most of which were faded, funky copies of copies that had been bent and worn and written upon over the years. They conveyed an intense sense of objecthood, and seemed almost sculptures from that particular historical era. It was important to me to capture them as objects, then, rather than cropping them and getting rid of their "defects," or making a modernist frame where the photography disappears and one falls seamlessly into the scene. They were visual nuggets from a particular cultural time and space. I do not use Photoshop creatively, but rather as a production tool—as a thorough but basically conventional darkroom for making exhibition prints.

RH: What technical means do you employ to alter images and how does their use affect notions of the truth of archival images?

ML: I adjust for contrast, density, color balance and saturation, and I spot out blemishes such as dust. I try not to alter the cultural content of the images, but fine printers indulge in an interpretive process involving a thousand professional judgment calls all the time. I try not to remove information, and I never add information that was not in the original. For instance, if a 40-year-old color print has turned magenta then I will compensate to make it look as I think it would have originally. I realize this kind of manipulation can enrage people who believe in the idea of the photographic document as truth, but anybody who has spent time with cameras and photographs knows that images, like gravestone rubbings, are no more than impressions of the truth.

RH: How does this affect the veracity of the images?

ML: What if the type of film used to photograph a particular blast recorded it as green when the blast was really red? Does

the image then lack veracity? Likewise, looking at a faded print of the green blast now gone magenta, how can we know what the exact "truth" was, or is now? Is it the original red blast, the green film or the magenta print? All the lurid colors and intensity you see in *100 SUNS* were in the original prints. I stay faithful to what's in the original print or film, but I do make a "fine" print. In this way I alter the archival originals, but I don't feel that my "interpretations" are deleterious to photographic "truth" or "veracity," because I'm not a true believer in either.

RH: Have critics accused you of aestheticizing the bomb?

MIKE/10.4 MEGATONS/ENEWETAK ATOLL/1952 **by Michael Light, Digital Images © 2003 Michael Light; courtesy Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco**

ML: No, though I have certainly worried that they would. Thankfully everyone seems to get it. *100 SUNS* is about beauty, horror, violence and seduction being all tangled up with each other. I have not aestheticized the bomb—rather, the bomb is inherently aesthetic. If a viewer finds these images beautiful then they need to carefully examine their own response. I have worked with what is present in the images. We are loath to admit it, but we don't know how to deal with things that both attract and repulse us.

RH: Where does the title *100 SUNS* come from?

ML: It is from Robert Oppenheimer's recitation of lines from the *Bhagavad-Gita* upon seeing the first nuclear detonation in 1945: "Brighter than the light of a thousand suns, now I am become death, the destroyer." My book has 100 images, and I wanted to emphasize a nuclear reaction is a kind of star brought to Earth, as well as to reference Oppenheimer, who is considered the father of the atomic bomb.

RH: How did you select images?

ML: I work intuitively, allowing my eye to guide my selection process. I go into archives in stages, getting a sense of what's there, which allows a book to slowly emerge from the archival materials themselves. There are always surprises, which is part of the fun. Often those surprises lead to a fleshing out of an idea—in the case of *100 SUNS*, discovering images beyond the typically known mushroom cloud.

RH: How does your intuitive working process and the surprises it brings affect the structure of your book?

ML: The biggest surprise with *100 SUNS* was finding images of the bomb detonating with people in the foreground, often close to the blast point. They are intimate, human and vulnerable pictures, and have provided me with a narrative rhythm I was not expecting to be there. How to make a story from 100 images of the same thing? Suddenly I could move from the vast and the impersonal back to the human, and back out. My discovery of such intense images made me realize I needed them not just for visual interest, but also for the structural rationale of the book.

RH: What is the driving force of your visual mindset?

ML: I work on a primal level. All my work, whether it's in an airplane or on the moon, starts with myself wanting to go someplace and understand that place. I come at a subject from a profoundly photographic level. I am not interested in pictures that ultimately don't work as pictures.

RH: Do you see your bookmaking process as a journey?

ML: Yes, I first make a visual journey for myself, along intuitive and psychological lines, and hopefully others can follow it as well. The journey is always textless. In *100 SUNS*, the notes on the photographs, captions and a nuclear chronology at the end of the book provide an introduction to the history, technology and science of the bomb, but those ways of understanding the subject are secondary to the overall visual endeavor, however essential they may be. This journey begins with a point of light in space and ends with the Apocalypse. The progression hopefully takes viewers on a voyage they would not otherwise go on and leaves them with a changed perception of an important series of events.

RH: Why a textless presentation?

ML: I want my imagery to be as physical and immediate as possible, and textless, filmic progressions of still images offer a more sculptural form, and a deeper psychological experience. I am frustrated with the formal photo book tradition of white space around images with text in tasteful Palatino.

RH: What artist most informs your work?

ML: A touchstone is Gerhard Richter and his lifetime work "Atlas," circa 1964-2005, which includes over 5000 found photographs, drawings and diagrams. Richter bravely swims in the roaring river of imagery that constantly surrounds us and creates a certain coherency. Depending on where and how "Atlas" is exhibited, there can be 15 or 20 rooms of images, each having a theme—sunsets, criminals, seascapes, postcards of cities and so forth. I am a photographer who likes to make images, but I also want to get a sense and understanding of images that have already been made. I don't fabricate worlds; I pay attention to the things that already surround us. In "Atlas" Richter does this with a dark and melancholy scope.

RH: How does *100 SUNS* approach the landscape concepts of the beautiful and the sublime?

ML: The book is about power and its seductions and terrors. Nuclear detonations invariably and disturbingly raise issues about beauty, the sublime and the created sublime, as well as a multitude of vital issues, like self-induced annihilation!

RH: It seems these issues of the sublime, power and

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violence function on natural and man-made levels throughout the work.

ML: It's true that these elements pervade the book, and that they function on a multi-valent level. I think anyone doing serious contemporary landscape production has to deal with violence. The story of our country is incredibly violent, and what we are doing to the environment today is also extraordinarily violent.

RH: Do you see this as a general lack of regard for, and knowledge about, history?

ML: Absolutely. We build things, and we just as quickly—just as effectively—abandon them. Time and space in this country are manipulated without regard for our surroundings, which is one of the reasons why violence needs to be examined within a discussion of the contemporary landscape. *100 SUNS* meditates on moments of what might be called the "fabricated sublime," which are generated from a militarized universe of destruction and mass annihilation. At the same time, our country is full of splendorous places of beauty, and I am just as much a romantic sucker for those moments of splendor as anyone else. They keep me going. Sometimes it's a dark splendor. The tragedy of the Great American Sound and Light Show shown in *100 SUNS* is that civilization's arguably greatest triumph—the point at which tool-bearing humans figured out how to ignite their own stars—was immediately turned into its darkest hour of destruction and shame, because the knowledge was immediately put to use for purposes of warfare. Humans are talented monkeys, but we are not good at taking responsibility for what we do. Ignoring history only exacerbates this seemingly intrinsic shortcoming.

RH: How have recent world events influenced *100 SUNS*?

ML: I was working on this project before 9/11. I spent the summer of 2001 looking at explosions on the computer monitor in Photoshop. Then September rolled around and I was looking at another kind of monitor with explosions in real time. I wished I was a fireman, or a doctor or somebody with a more direct and effective role in society and culture. What could I do? I moped around for a few days and then realized I was already doing the only thing that I could do, was doing it well, and was going to keep on doing it.

RH: How did 9/11 affect the outcome of *100 SUNS*?

ML: The events of 9/11 occupied my mind as I did my textual research, after the visual sequence was completed. The text became a political document in the sense that the more I learned about the paranoid Cold War excesses of America and the Soviet Union the more parallels I could see between that era and the overreaction that was occurring today. *100 SUNS* has a specific gravity 100 times greater than lead. It is a very heavy subject. In the context of "a war on terrorism," which is a war without end, there is no enemy combatant per se, and it makes everything even heavier. I see *100 SUNS* as a critique of American projection of power, offering a view from the American Imperial Veranda that hasn't much changed from the 1950s.

RH: What is your reaction to the military's practice giving the nuclear tests names like "Mike" and "Romeo"?

ML: I think it's part of the black humor that pervades this entire dark and dirty enterprise. However, it was important to me not to make a tendentious anti-war document. The point of *100*

SUNS is not to hold the viewer's hand and steer them one way or the other. One does not need an outside, expert-style essay telling viewers what to think. I want the viewer to navigate these precipices without any false comfort or preconceptions.

RH: How have viewers responded to *100 SUNS*?

ML: Quite a few people have told me they became sick, physically nauseated, after looking at about 20 images. Almost 50% have told me, with guilt on their faces, that they are shocked that they find the images beautiful. Maybe this combination of beauty and horror adds up to the nausea? I think it's part of navigating the precipices. Power is seductive and as long as nuclear weapons exist there is the possibility they will be used again. Fortunately, these images are the only ones of detonations that we have, because with underground testing there is nothing to photograph.

RH: What effect might underground testing have on how we now view the bomb?

ML: Underground testing drastically reduces the fallout problem, which is a major step forward, but the cost is invisibility: "Out of Sight, Out of Mind." Who wants to dwell on horrendous subjects or death? I'd rather take the dog out for a walk. As there are no photographs of underground tests, the practice has ironically made it harder to contemplate the unthinkable. Since the Limited Test Ban Treaty was signed in 1963, about 800 more U.S. tests have been carried out beyond the first 217 atmospheric ones, but people don't think about that because they can't see them.

RH: On a primal level, what is the driving force behind your imagemaking?

ML: You're seriously asking me that question? That's a big one! It is the urge to understand and comprehend life and history. There is something amazing about plucking an instant from the movement of time. It's not reality. It's a series of artificial and aesthetic choices, a form of ordering and coherency that I depend on to give my life meaning. This is the importance of getting behind the camera and making a photograph: it marks the fact that one has been in a certain place at a certain time.

RH: Is it about paying attention?

ML: Absolutely. One isn't worried about the rent or getting a package off to UPS. It shows one is paying attention to something one thinks is important. It's a reassuring memento of comprehension; proof one has been alive at a particular moment and has had a particular experience. Even in this age of digital manipulation, photographs continue to hold a huge degree of power and meaning. They're beautiful and sad and complicated because every stoppage of time refers to the motion of time. I struggle against photography. I struggle against the fact that it is silent, that it is just a piece of paper on the wall, often presented in a tedious white matt frame. I struggle against these sacred cows. And healthy opposition is good, but essentially I am a believer in the intense meaning of photographs.

***STOKES/19 KILOTONS/NEVADA/1957*by Michael Light, Digital Images © 2003 Michael Light; courtesy Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco**

RH: How does that opposition affect your own imagemaking?

ML: In my work, whether it is negative-making or archival, I am always an environmentalist. If I can enter into an historical framework, like the Apollo space missions, and reconfigure the moon in landscape terms, I am serving the landscape and the environment. I am doing something that I care about. If I can go into the period from 1945-1962 and do a complicated portrait of the American bomb then I am speaking for those landscapes that were detonated upon, while hopefully illuminating something useful about us as well.

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