

PAUL SHAMBROOM

FACE TO FACE WITH THE BOMB

AN INTERVIEW BY ROBERT HIRSCH

Robert Hirsch Talks with Paul Shambroom

Face-To-Face With the Bomb: Nuclear Reality After the Cold War, Photographs by Paul Shambroom. Introduction by Richard Rhodes. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

The following dialogue is a distillation of conversations between Paul Shambroom and the author about Shambroom's project and book *Face-to-Face With the Bomb*. Paul Shambroom's next book, dealing with power, *Meetings*, is due in September 2004. It is the result of Shambroom attending hundreds of small-town America council meetings and photographing the participants with a large format camera to depict the humble practice of local government in a classic, tableau scale. This latter project was shown at *Le Mois de la Photo* in Montreal last fall; it will be exhibited at the *Rencontres d'Arles* this summer.

Paul Shambroom is represented by the Julie Saul Gallery in New York.

Info: <http://www.paulshambroomart.com>

Robert Hirsch: **Briefly describe your project.**

Paul Shambroom: In a fairly encyclopedic fashion, I photographed the U.S. arsenal of nuclear strategic weapons that were deployed at the end of the Cold War. Around 1990 I began a long and tedious access and research process that continued for the 10 plus years of the project. It involved a Christo-like interest in process and negotiation with the military. I had letters of recommendations from my congressional delegation, but none of this would have happened without the cooperation of the top public affairs officials of the U.S. Air Force, Navy, and the Pentagon. I was allowed to photograph bombers, missiles, submarines, warheads, and associated facilities throughout the U.S.A. Since 1992 I made 35 visits to more than two-dozen weapons and command sites (plus hundreds of individual ICBM silos) in 16 states.

How did this project come about?

It's been an interest of mine to explore the different manifestations of power. Previously I did several series on hidden places of power such as corporate offices, factories, and police stations. I've always been interested in politics and like many other photographers I wanted to show things that had not been seen before. Nuclear power was an extension of this work—the ultimate in power and as a professional challenge to show what was unseen.

What led you down this path?

My father was in the U.S. Navy and visited Nagasaki 8 months after the atomic bomb was dropped there, but I was not aware of that at the time I embarked upon this project. It really stems from my experience of growing up at the height of the Cold War and thinking about it a lot and imagining what I would do if there was a nuclear war. Would I go down into a shelter? I told my friends that I would stand outside and watch the inside of my eyeballs melt. Of course that was a juvenile, rebellious response that went along with a total package of rejecting the older generations values, but it did indicate the powerlessness I felt about this life and death situation, and the madness of planning to survive an all out nuclear war.

What motivated you to make these photographs?

The core reason was to confront the bogeyman, which was the psychological presence of nuclear weapons, the fear of a terrifying invisible thing. I worked with the notion that these things do not have to be invisible. These are real things and if I made the effort, it might be possible to photograph them.

For me the nuclear bogeyman was being led down a long

hall of our grade school, having to get down on our knees in front of our lockers, putting our hands over our heads, and hearing the sound of the bomb doors closing.

It was part of emotional environment of that time. In the fifth grade I wrote what I considered to be a sarcastic, wise guy poem that also contained a modicum of truth:

Look up in the sky.

See the pretty mushroom cloud.

Soon we will be dead.

Since then I have come to learn that the intention of civil defense procedures was not really to protect people, but to convince the then Soviet Union that we meant business and were equipping our population to survive. As kids we saw pictures of atomic tests and knew what they were doing was ridiculous.

What was your photographic outlook towards this project?

First I ask myself what the goal is. The goal was not to



convert someone's attitude to what I thought was the right attitude. The first goal was to make compelling and beautiful photographs that people would look at. Ultimately I wanted to convince people that nuclear weapons were real and not phantoms that we could dismiss. Within that framework, I was open to any and all styles of picture making. Some images are straight landscapes, almost greeting card photographs. Other times I used a photo-



journalistic approach of recording the action of the people in the scene. For some, such as the submarine interiors, I keyed into the clutter and the chaos, taking a more abstract expressionist approach, filling the frame with lots of junk while trying to maintain some order.

How did you handle working in a physically confined environment?

I worked with lightweight equipment and no assistants; it's just my two cameras and me. Ninety percent of the photographs were done with a Plaubel Makina 6 x 7 wide-

angle and the remainder with a Pentax 6 x 7 with a 45mm lens, sometimes with a waist level finder. I also had a hand-held bare bulb flash. In addition, I used a colorimeter to balance the flash with appropriate filters. At one time I worked as a commercial photographer and learned to mix flash with ambient light. I have worked in small environments with an assistant and 400 pounds of lighting equipment, but I didn't want the photographs to have the slick, polished look of advertising photographs. Plus, it was difficult enough to get myself into these places, and security concerns would have made it impossible to bring an assistant and all that lighting gear.

How did the process of making the photographs help clarify your undertaking?

When I first began photographing for this project, I had little understanding of my own motivations. Projects are an opportunity to learn things about yourself. If I knew why I was doing it, or what the pictures were supposed to look like ahead of time, it would not be worth doing.

How did Richard Rhodes come to write the introduction?

Rhodes received the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for his *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1986) and he also wrote *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (1995). He has the kind of intelligence and credibility I admire. He has the talent to blend science, culture, and politics together to tell a compelling story.

What connections do you now see between your book and the world situation since 9/11?

One is that the attacks of 9/11 radically altered the security situations and effectively stopped the possibility of further access. It provided the closing bookend for the project with the beginning bookend being the ending of the Cold War. The other aspect is the filter of irony that it places over the topic of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). In terms of the pretext of our invasion of Iraq, our foreign policy rhetoric was based on the urgent need to find WMDs. Yet our vast, highly sophisticated, and more lethal arsenal continues to remain invisible, making my impulse to picture the actual working of nuclear technology even more relevant today.

Who artistically influenced this project?

When I was younger, I was struck by seeing Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) at MOMA in NYC. I admired Jackson Pollock's pictorial strategies of cramming stuff into a rectangle and having the order fight its way out of the chaos. Photographically, Diane Arbus has had great staying power in my mind as well as Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander. Plus I value Christo for the public nature of his art. For Christo's process and access became not just the conceptual underpinning of his art, but the art itself.

Who conceptually influenced this project?

Long before Google, my research into the psychology of the Cold War produced a trail of breadcrumbs that led to a fellow Minnesotan, Eric Markusen, who with psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton wrote *The Gerontic Mentality: The Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat* (1990). It is about psychological processes—how professionals who work with weapons of mass destruction do their work, go about their day, and live with themselves. Lifton is the patriarch of a small, informally organized group engaged in psycho-historical studies. Lifton, who is the author of *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (1982), has spent 40 years analyzing how men and women lose and recreate their humanity in extreme situations—Hiroshima, the Holocaust, the Viet Nam War, and now terrorist cults. I found Lifton's approach to be remarkably nonjudgmental in that he scrutinizes and analyzes how people can think of themselves as decent human beings and be thought of in that way by others while carrying out work on weapons of

mass destruction. These findings also apply to people going off to war, which is a time when societies suspend or make up new rules so that one can do such work.

Do you think people in the atomic professions are different from you and me?

I thought that before I got into the project, but afterwards I thought they were just like you or me except that they had made different choices, had different values in some areas. I made judgments that I should not have made. They did not seem like they were programmed robots or that they were stupid. Some people were very thoughtful and they knew what they were doing and what it meant.

Have the military people you worked with seen your book?

My publisher sent copies of the book to every base I worked at. The problem is that some of these pictures were taken 10 years ago and military personnel rotate around so often that it is hard to keep in touch with them. I haven't heard directly from them, but I have gotten very positive comments from nuclear veterans and contractors. I did show work in progress to people in the military and at the Pentagon and to people where I made repeat site visits. In the latter group, one man's response to the photographs remains vivid in my memory. He made it clear to me he was proud of his work. He saw the photographs as depicting technical devices of his desire and not as critical documents. His reaction reconfirms my belief that the reading of photographs mirrors the attitudes of the viewer rather than that of the maker.

Did your research lead you to other photographers who had similar inclinations?

Yes, I became aware of Robert Del Tredici, an American living in Montreal, whose work resulted in *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb* (1987). I was rather deflated when I first came across this book, but I contacted him anyhow. He was very encouraging and since then he has become a mentor and friend. His comment to me at the time was: "This was a very big subject and there is room for more than one person." He introduced me to other inspiring photographers, such as Peter Goin, Mark Ruwedel, and Carole Gallagher, who are part of the Atomic Photographers Guild, a VERY loosely knit organization that Bob founded and of which I am now a member. There has been a traveling show, *Visibility and Invisibility in the Nuclear Era*, organized by the Toronto Photographers Workshop that features the work of thirteen such international photographers who are committed to recording atomic evidence.

How have the world changes, since you undertook this project, affected your thoughts about nuclear weapons?

Let me preface my remarks by saying that I intended for my photographs to be non-judgmental and neutral in tone and would not have wanted to engage in his type of discussion in the book. That said, and now that the project is over, I feel I can share my personal views. I am not a foreign policy expert, but I am a self-educated outraged American citizen. I started the project believing that nuclear weapons might be mankind's greatest folly and that belief has only been strengthened and confirmed by what I have seen and learned over the past 12 years.



Looking back I see the hypocrisy of the U.S. and Russian stance on the non-proliferation, on limiting the development of nuclear weapons by other nations because we have not led by example. We have significantly reduced the number of weapons, but we both maintain a huge arsenal and we both are actively engaged in developing new nuclear weapons and delivery systems. In effect, we are telling other countries to do as we say and not as we do. It is sad that we have squandered the opportunity with the ending of the Cold War. When working with the Russians we could have realistically and safely disarmed to a very minimum level. This would also have provided us with some moral high ground from which to limit worldwide proliferation.

How has this failure led to the development of the so-called "mini-nukes"?

There is an impulse within the current administration and the Pentagon, which is probably fueled by the economic concerns of defense contractors, to develop a whole new family of nuclear weapons, particularly mini-nukes. The notion of mini-nukes is to make them more palatable,

which in turn makes the idea of using them more feasible, whether or not we intend to use them. It is part of the bizarre logic of nuclear deterrence. There is no deterrence if your enemies think that you will never use them under any circumstance. There is research underway on mini-nukes that will burrow deep under the ground before they are detonated. The theory is that they would have such a small yield that the radioactive fallout would not burst the surface of the ground. It is very questionable whether this is possible.

What is your hope for your book today?

During the 1970s, when I was a student at the Minneapolis College of Art & Design, the notion of documentary photography as a means of political and social change was being questioned and debunked. I believe that a lot of that debate was appropriate in that I do not think that photographs can change the world. As a result I have tempered my ambitions quite a bit with this project. However, I do still believe that there is a great power in the image, regardless of the questions of veracity raised by digital imaging. People still want to believe in photographs, and if they are presented in specific contexts we still believe them, including the context of this book. I have worked to establish myself as a credible and believable source. That said, my ambition was and still is to bring nuclear weapons out of the realm of abstraction and present them as a concrete subject rather than a theoretical policy issue. Because we have seen the pictures, we know there are still 500 missile silos with people sitting in them with their fingers on the button. There are over a dozen submarines, fully armed with nuclear weapons, on patrol in the oceans just as they were 20 and 30 years ago. Currently the U.S. has some 10,000 active nuclear warheads, 7,500 of which are deployed in delivery systems that are on the same level of alert as during the Cold War. Besides the reduction in their numbers, not much has changed since Robert Lifton wrote in his 1986 essay "Examining the Real: Beyond the Nuclear 'End':

"Given the temptation of despair, our need can be simply stated: We must confront the image that haunts us, making use of whatever models we can locate. Only then can we achieve those changes in consciousness that must accompany (if not precede) changes in public policy on behalf of a human future. We must look into the abyss in order to be able to see beyond it."

Robert Hirsch is the author of the soon to be released *Exploring Color Photography: From the Darkroom to the Digital Studio*, published by McGraw-Hill, NY.

ANTHONY SUAU ON WAR

I am not a war photographer. I have photographed war because it is an inherent and a highly unfortunate part of human life.

What situations have you photographed so far?

Check my web-site : www.anthonysua.com or anthonysua.com/clients

Who are your role models and why?

Cartier-Bresson, Koudelka, Peress, Burke-White, Klein, Szard just a few

What were your intentions when you started photography? How have they evolved?

Currently I am interested in documenting the effects of international events on the lives of people around the world.

How have you seen the evolution of the coverage of war by the media?

I don't really see any and that is the problem. The same images are made and published over and over again.

Do you think that increased technology improves the coverage of war or it's content?

No.

How has your personal way of working changed in regards to changes in technology and the influence of media?

Too much time and energy dealing with technology.

What do other venues for your images, such as the book form or gallery space offer your work?

A personal vision of the work as I see it - not as a publication sees it.

What is your experience with visual censorship?

Censorship happens within publications more than in the field.

What is the impact of your images on society? What changes should be made to improve the impact of your images on society?

I do not live or work under the foolish illusion that I am changing or can change anything. This can not be changed.

How does war affect you personally? What are your views and concerns about your personal safety?

In the same way it affects everyone. Nothing special. I use my instinct when I am exposed to open fire.

How do you deal with objectivity? Is it possible to remain objective as a war photographer?

I do not want to remain objective - I am a human being not a machine.

What is your ultimate goal?

To document the effects of international events on the lives of people around the world.

How long do you see yourself continuing in this profession?

As a photographer?, my entire life.

Do we need a museum of war photography?

God NO! Definitely not.

