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 is a New York-based artist whose work is both concept-driven and emotionally charged. His work challenges the viewer to question the power structures that govern our lives. Through his photographic documentation, he seeks to reveal the unseen aspects of power, the psychological presence of nuclear weapons, and the fear of nuclear annihilation.

An Interview by Robert Hirsch

Robert Hirsch Talks with Paul Shambroom

How did you design your project?
The project was designed with the goal of exploring the different manifestations of power. It involved the psychological presence of nuclear weapons, the fear of nuclear annihilation, and the powerlessness I felt about this invisible thing. I worked with the notion that in the face of nuclear war, the psychological presence of nuclear weapons is the ultimate in power and a professional challenge to show what was unseen.

What made you do this project?
My inspiration was the atomic bomb. I was fascinated by seeing Picasso’s greeting card photographs that were seen by others while carrying out work on weapons of mass destruction. I decided to create a project that would highlight the psychological presence of nuclear weapons and the fear of nuclear annihilation. I used a photojournalistic approach to reveal the unseen aspects of power.

What motivated you to make these photographs?
The core means was to confront the bomb images, which were psychologically powerful. The project was a terrifyingly powerful image that brought to mind the atomic bomb, the psychological presence of nuclear weapons, and the fear of nuclear annihilation. I used a photojournalistic approach to reveal the unseen aspects of power.

What is your photographic outlook towards this project?
I aim to expose the truth and challenge the reality. The goal was not to show the truth but to make compelling and beautiful photographs that people would look at. Ultimately, I wanted to convey the power of nuclear weapons. I worked with the notion that in the face of nuclear war, the psychological presence of nuclear weapons is the ultimate in power and a professional challenge to show what was unseen.

What connections do you now see between your book and the world situation since the Cold War?
One of the key aspects of the Cold War was the psychological presence of nuclear weapons. It was an opportunity to learn things about yourself. If I knew why I was doing it, what the pictures were supposed to look like, it wouldn’t be worth doing.

What artistically influenced this project?
I was influenced by seeing Picasso’s greeting card photographs. Other times I used a photojournalistic approach to reveal the unseen aspects of power.
I don't really see any and that is the problem. The same problem exists at the Pentagon and to people where I made repeat site visits. In the latter group, one man's response to the photos was, "They do 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.

How the military people you worked with saw your work?

My publishers sent copies of the book to every man I worked at. The problem is that some of these pictures were taken 10 years ago and military personnel states of service can be 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 military 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, as a man in response to the photographs reminisced in my memory. He made it clear to me he was proud of his work. He saw the photographs as depicting technical details of his design and not as critical documents. His mention reminded me of the need of photography 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 Frank, an American living in Munich, 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 more to mas than one person." He introduced me to other inspire photographers, such as Peter Clark, Mark Kessel, and Sarah Halliday, who are part of the Atomic Photographers Guild, a MVK loosely knit organization that was founded and of which I am now a member. There has been a traveling show, Viability and Indisputability in the Nuclear Era, organized by the Toronto Photographers Workshop. It features the work of members with international photographers who are committed to recording atomic evidence.

Looking back I see the hypocrisy of the U.S. and Russian stance on non-proliferation, on limiting the development of nuclear weapons by other nations because we have not led by example. We have significantly reduced our nuclear arsenal, but we maintain a huge arsenal, and 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 said that we have squandered the opportunity with the ending of the Cold War. When working with the Russians we could have relativized and safely dismissed to a very minimal level. This would also have provided us some moral high ground, which is subject to 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 arsenal of weapons. To maintain a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons, particularly mini-nukes. The notion of mini-nukes is to make them more palatable, which in turn raises the idea of using them as a fait accompli, whether or not we intend to use them. It is part of the bizarre logic of nuclear deterrence. There is no deter- rence if your enemies think that you will use them under any circumstances. There is research underway on mini-nukes that will allow deep underground the project before it is detonated. The logic is that they would have such a small yield that the radioactive fallout would not harm the surface of the ground. It is a very question- able whether any is possible.

What is your hope for your book today?

During the 1990s, 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 discredited. I believe that a lot of that debate was appropriate in the I do not think that photography can change the world. As a result, I have tended my exhibitions quite a bit with this project. How- ever, I do still believe that there is a great power in the images, regardless of the questions of validity 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 is still to bring nuclear weapons out of the realm of abstraction and present them as a concrete subject rather than a theoret- ical policy issue. Because we have seen the pictures, we know there are still 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.

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 and I do not think.”

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?

I do not.

Do you think that advanced technology improves the coverage of war or is it a curse?

No.

How do you think your personal views have changed in regards to changes in technology and the influence of media?

The use of time and energy dealing with technology.

Do you have other venues for your images, such as the book form or gallery space offer your work?

A personal vision of the world. When I see it - not as a concept, but as a concept.

What is your experience with visual awareness? Ownership 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?

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How are you involved with the coverage of war by the media?

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How do you see the evolution of the coverage of war by the media?

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