

Michael Light: 100 Suns
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Introduction/Abstract

Michael Light's second major book project, *100 Suns*, contains one hundred photographs of above-ground nuclear tests selected by Light from the archives at Los Alamos National Laboratory and the U.S. National Archives in Maryland.

Biographical Note: Michael Light

Michael Light is a San Francisco-based photographer, bookmaker, and pilot whose focus is the environment and how contemporary American culture relates to it. His work is concerned both with the politics of that relationship and the seductions of landscape representation, particularly as found in the arid Western spaces of America. He works with found, appropriated imagery gleaned from public archives and his own 4 x 5" negatives, most often taken from the air. Visual books are at the root of most of his output.

One strain of Light's practice has been to rework familiar historical photographic and cultural icons into landscape-driven perspectives, often with an aerial component, by sifting through large and overlooked public photographic archives. His first such book and exhibition, *Full Moon* (1999), used lunar geological survey imagery made by NASA's Apollo astronauts to show the moon both as a sublime desert and an embattled point of first human contact. His second archive-based book and exhibition, *100 Suns* (2003), focused on the politics and landscape meanings of U.S. atmospheric nuclear detonations in Nevada and the Pacific, 1945-1962.

Another longstanding aspect of Light's production has been to physically fly over both settled and unsettled areas of western American space while photographing with a large-format camera, pursuing themes of mapping, vertigo, human impact on the land, geology, and various aspects of the sublime. A private pilot, Light has a small, two-seat, high-wing aircraft specifically designed for aerial photographic work. He is currently working on an aerial photographic survey of arid America tentatively titled "The Inhabited West."

Scope and Content

Michael Light's second major book project, which followed the publication of the book *Full Moon*, was likewise an archival edit, this time with one hundred photographs of above-ground nuclear tests selected by Light from the archives at Los Alamos National Laboratory and the U.S. National Archives in Maryland. It covers testing in both Nevada and the Pacific Ocean.

Between July 1945 and November 1962, the United States is known to have conducted 216 atmospheric and underwater nuclear tests. After the Limited Test Ban Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1963, nuclear testing went underground. It became literally invisible—but more frequent: the United States conducted a further 723 underground tests, the last in 1992. *100 Suns* documents the era of visible nuclear testing, the atmospheric era. It includes previously classified material from the clandestine Lookout Mountain Air Force Station based in Hollywood, whose film directors, cameramen and still photographers were sworn to secrecy. Since the tests were conducted either in Nevada or the Pacific the book is simply divided between the desert and the ocean. In the book, each photograph is presented with the name of the test, its explosive yield in kilotons or megatons, the date and the location. The enormity of the events recorded contrasts with the understated neutrality of bare data. Interspersed within the sequence of explosions are pictures of the

awestruck witnesses. Detailed captions are provided for each photograph in a section at the end of the book, as well as a chronology of the development of nuclear weaponry and an extensive bibliography.

Materials include book dummies, correspondence, research materials, hundreds of images of nuclear detonations, and a complete study set of the book's 100 images (not for exhibition). Light's complete space research library and complete set of press ephemera will arrive in spring 2025.

This archive is currently in process.