Personal Preparedness in the Nuclear Age

Master of Fine Arts Thesis - Printmaking

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Artist’s Statement

This body of work explores the complex American response to the threat of nuclear weapons during the Cold War. Through the use of various printmaking techniques, I aim to visually communicate the sense of urgency, fear, and vulnerability that was pervasive during that time. The subject of each piece delves into the cultural and political aspects of the atomic arms race, shedding light on the human experience of living under the shadow of the mushroom cloud. Through my prints, I hope to contribute to a broader dialogue of education and disarmament of nuclear weapons.
Personal Preparedness in the Nuclear Age

This body of work focuses on the history of the atomic bomb and nuclear weapons testing and what they have done to humanity culturally, particularly on the homefront. My work engages with the problems of nuclear war and radioactive contamination through the nostalgic mid-century style, media, and iconography to raise questions about how and why nuclear culture became so vastly normalized. Ostentatious nuclear testing, provocative weapon brandishing, and the idea that an all out nuclear war was survivable, had all simply become a way of life for many people. By carefully emulating the imagery and propaganda of the Atomic Age, my goal is to highlight the absurdity of it all. The creation and utilization of the atomic bomb forced millions of people to acclimate to a new lifestyle of fear and preparation. It had governments coming up with inventive ways to deliver destruction to their enemies while creating new ways to prevent it from happening to themselves. The belief was that they had to adapt or be destroyed.

For most of my prints, I elected to individually stain the paper with black tea, either by brush dyeing or soaking in a bath for a few hours. This adds a great deal of tone and texture to the otherwise bland white paper and more importantly, gives the paper an aged look as if it has oxidized over many years. You will see this darker yellow/tan color in most of the papers and Civil Defense pamphlets of the 50s and 60s because of the degradation of cellulose brought about by sunlight or poor pH balance. Depending on the print and its subject matter, I gave the ink a faded look to compliment the stained paper. This is most effective when working in silkscreen because I can intentionally flood the screen only partially which will leave out splotches of information. This method is rather hard to control however, so it is important that I always make multiple prints so that I can have numerous attempts to get the right appearance. Some of my work uses appropriated imagery, however I take steps to edit the imagery and make
it my own in other ways. This is done through combining multiple images or completely
remaking the image myself. A good example of this is in the sculpture Family Fallout Shelter,
each food can label was carefully reconstructed in Photoshop by using multiple reference photos
from different angles. Though the scale of the cans is too small to make out most of the text, it
was still important to me that they were made to be identical to their life sized counterparts.

All of my prints start with vigorous research with raw information gathering. Primarily, a
decent amount of this information was obtained from Wikipedia due to the ability to jump from
subject to subject through hyperlinks. This method grants me the ability to branch out from a
broad subject involving nuclear technology or radioactivity into more specific examples of that
phenomena. For example, I may look up “Atomic Testing” and read up on that subject for a
while until I start to discover more specific tests by name such as “Castle Bravo” where the US
was testing a hydrogen bomb which led to the massive consequences of radioactive fallout on the
Marshall Islands. Granted, Wikipedia is often met with a lot of scrutiny due to the potential for
misinformation, so naturally most of the research I gain on that website is backed up by an
additional source to ensure any hard facts that I am using are accurate.

Another very important form of research I have been conducting is the use of popular
culture and entertainment as a way to gain information and ideas. Books such as The Dragon's
Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age and Nuclear Culture provide testimonies and hard facts
about what nuclear devices and radiation have done to American people and culture. There are a
multitude of classic Cold War era movies such as Dr Strangelove, War Games, Atomic Cafe, etc.
that are centered around the doomsday level problems with a push-button war. There are also
other forms of media such as video games that deal with the same concepts such as the aptly
named Fallout game series that I have extensively experienced.
Additionally, I have sought out and viewed countless photographs and hours of archival footage of atomic tests and other cultural primary sources. Luckily, most (I'm sure not all) footage of the atmospheric testing done from 1945 to 1963 has been declassified and is online to view on Youtube and other similar streaming websites. One of the most influential declassified tests for me has been the footage from the first ever atomic explosion during the Trinity Test and the Upshot-Knothole Annie test when the US government built a series of houses to observe the effects of a nuclear bomb on modern homes and amenities. There is also a decent amount of Civil Defense documents such as the 1952 instructional film *Duck and Cover* and *Walt Builds a Family Fallout Shelter* from 1959 which highlight what was expected of the populace for their survival.

The most profound aspect of my research has been acquiring and personally interacting with physical items and documents from the era I am working with. I could look at pictures all day long but never actually get the full feeling of interacting with the object. My first purchases for research were 2 nuclear preparedness pamphlets from the United States Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization which educate people on the dangers of radiation and fallout as well as instructing people how to prepare for a nuclear attack. To get a feeling of what sorts of equipment the standard civilian would have used in a nuclear scenario, I acquired canned emergency water rations intended for a fallout shelter packaged in 1953, as well as a government issued 17.5 gallon water barrel for larger shelters like the ones found in some public school buildings. I also purchased a radiation suit and gas mask which were designed to prevent radioactive particles from sticking to the hair, skin, or clothing. Neither protects the wearer from gamma or ionizing radiation. The smell of the mask and suit is arguably one of the most memorable aspects, as each of those items has a musk of dusty rubber. I also learned through
physical use that, due to the protective nature of the radiation suit and mask, no body heat is able to escape which leads to a great deal of discomfort in a matter of minutes. This would be exceptionally challenging if the suit was required to be worn for an extended period of time. Engaging with these items helps me further place myself in the shoes of someone who was expected to use them to defend themselves and their families from the most devastating thing humankind has created.

I had decided early on in this project that I will not expose myself to contaminated areas or objects due to potential reproductive harm and other health concerns. This decision then removes Chernobyl, Fukushima, Oak Ridge, the Hanford Site, and Los Alamos from places I would visit. This would also include engaging with objects such as Trinitie due to its radioactive nature as well as any contaminated equipment used for the detection or handling of radioactive materials.

Throughout my research into the Atomic Age, there were a few questions that repeatedly came up. I wanted to know just how we got to the state of almost completely obliterating ourselves and how, through no fault of their own, people were fearing for their very existence on a daily basis. I wanted to know why would the US detonate almost 1000 nuclear devices on its own soil irradiating the land and people above and around Nevada. And I wanted to know how people responded to the instructions of the Office of Civil Defense and Mobilization and how common it was that people saw the futility of it all. My artwork is centered around these questions that I have, not to answer them, but to create a space to deeply ponder them. We have the privilege today to look back on these events with our modern knowledge and declassified information. With this level of hindsight, we can hopefully come to more concrete conclusions on how society found itself facing these gargantuan dilemmas.
In the intaglio print *Don’t Look Up*, I wanted to emphasize the willingness to confront or ignore the nuclear dilemma that has become completely intertwined with American culture. The cow has 3 options that all hold the same outcome. It can look up and watch, it can go back to grazing, or it can choose to never even look up from the grass in the first place. The silkscreen print *Another Day in the Atomic Age* poses a similar circumstance, however the use of a person in place of the cow shows that eventually, at any given point, all people will be forced to confront the issues of nuclear weapons one way or another. In the print *Atomized Earth*, I use the common iconography that the Civil Defense utilized of the American home under attack. Not only does it intentionally defy the notion that the home is a safe place, but it also shows that the thermal and blast waves are not the only threat. Should the home and family within be spared, they are still at enormous risk from radioactive fallout which comes with some of the most sinister and quite literally life-altering effects. These prints all deal with a scenario of “what if?”, but what about the scenarios that actually took place?

*Where the Giant Mushrooms Grow* is an etching inspired by a real photograph taken in Las Vegas in 1953 where people are watching a mushroom cloud rise from the Nevada Test Site only 65 miles North of the Vegas Strip. The US government did not try to hide the fact that it was conducting these tests as it was eager to exploit the propaganda value of atmospheric detonations as a form of atomic saber rattling. As depicted in the print, this was a very public warning to the enemies of the United States of its destructive power. In the book *Tools for Conviviality*, Ivan Illich writes, “[T]he attempt to overwhelm present problems by the production of more science is the ultimate attempt to solve a crisis by escalation” (Illich, 9). Over a lengthy period of weapons testing, the US government used just under 1,000 nuclear devices in the Nevada Test Site alone, irradiating Nevada and several other states with fallout and
effectively bombing ourselves. While a nuclear war thankfully never did take place, the harmful effects of atomic testing can still be plainly observed today in soldiers exploited for nuclear tests and Downwinders in the surrounding areas in, above and around Nevada and Utah. What was it worth? As someone who was born and grew up in Utah, I constantly wonder what damage was inflicted on my family members, myself, and my home state. This led me to make the silkscreen print *Nuclear Family*. I chose a test for the background known to people in southern Utah as “Dirty Harry”. Upshot–Knothole Harry was a 32 Kt test conducted in 1953 that, due to poorly tracked weather, deposited an unusually large amount of radioactive fallout in St. George, Utah. “[T]he blanket of fallout left a bad taste in many people's mouths--in more ways than one. Lifetime residents of the town reported, for the first time, an oddly metallic sort of taste in the air. This condition would surface again at Three Mile Island, twenty-six years later” (Wasserman et al. 66). The Dirty Harry test produced the most fallout out of every test conducted in the continental US and the people in St. George are still dealing with the consequences to this day.

I wanted to expand on the concept of placing myself in someone’s shoes during the Atomic Age. Due to widespread anxieties, the Civil Defense Administration ended up launching a massive effort in an attempt to curb public fear by promoting the idea that a nuclear attack can be survived *if* the American public is prepared. “Should a nuclear attack ever occur, certain preparations could mean the difference between life and death for you” (Office of Civil Defense, 5). In two separate works, *Family Fallout Shelter* and *Personal Preparedness in the Nuclear Age*, I am attempting to convey the manic energy of someone who was fearful of nuclear annihilation by closely following the instruction of the Civil Defense. This approach to educate and reassure the public was moderately effective until Operation Cue was conducted in 1953 where a series of homes were constructed to gain a more practical understanding of the effects of
nuclear bombs on civilian structures. This test is depicted in the silkscreen print *Corner of Elm and Main* where the house closest to the blast (3,500 ft) is shown being burned by thermal radiation and then being almost completely obliterated by the pressure wave in less than 3 seconds. The aftermath of this test is rendered in the aquatint print *Victims at Yucca Flats.* “Annie” was the first nationally televised nuclear shot and, consequently, many people became skeptical of the Civil Defense’s advisement because their messages of survival did not match the images of violent destruction.

The intense focus on my own education throughout this investigative and artistic process has made me want to impart the knowledge that I have gained. I want to share this work to educate others in the same way that researching for my art has educated me about the development of nuclear weapons, the wicked effects of radiation, and how to be personally prepared for an atomic attack. While nuclear energy can provide prosperity and dreams of a more utopian future, it also poses a constant threat of total annihilation. Even if our atomic anxieties today don’t compare to the overwhelming terror of the Cold War, the threat will never go away. Robert A. Jacobs, the author of the book *The Dragon's Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age,* writes about this turning point in human history. Jacobs explains that; “This alchemical narrative told a fundamental story about the Atomic Age: it was a turning point for human society; it was a transformation. To people around the world, nuclear weapons announced that the past was gone and the future had arrived” (Jacobs, 3). In 1945 the world suddenly found itself catapulted into the Atomic Age and with it, the nuclear dilemma. There was no going backwards to the way things were, only adapting to the way things are.
Works Cited


Acknowledgements

There are several forms of media that greatly assisted my research and provided heaps of inspiration that deserve an honorable mention. The *Fallout* video game series made by Bethesda Game Studios and Published by Bethesda Softworks has been the core of my fascination with nuclear culture and Cold War iconography and I am grateful to have experienced these games throughout my life.

Popular films like *Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, *War Games*, *Atomic Cafe*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *Them!* as well as documentaries like *Atomic Age Declassified* and *Hiroshima* taught me so much and helped me gain a perspective I could not have found elsewhere. I also was inspired by TV series such as HBO’s *Chernobyl* and the Twilight Zone episode *The Shelter*.

I am grateful that we live in an age where a decent amount of primary sources from the US Government is freely available from United States Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization films and pamphlets to declassified footage of nuclear testing. May the accessibility of this media help us learn from the mistakes of our past.

This body of work is dedicated to all those who have been affected by nuclear weapons, atomic testing, and radiation.
Exhibition Images

Family Fallout Shelter

(25 x 18 x 15)

Steel cans, aluminum tape, resin, oil based printmaking ink, Modge Podge, cotton fabric, paper, cardboard, foam insulation, dirt, PVA glue, modeling grass, Strathmore 400 paper, and miscellaneous found objects.
Personal Preparedness in the Nuclear Age

(85 x 28 x 70)

Wood, pegboard, silkscreen ink, found objects.
Don’t Look Up

(14 x 11)

Etching and aquatint on copper, printed on Strathmore 400 paper.

Where the Giant Mushrooms Grow

(10 x 8)

Etching on copper, watercolor, printed on Strathmore 400 paper.
**Atomized Earth**

(12 x 4)

Drypoint on plexiglass, printed on Strathmore 400 paper stained with black tea.

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**Victims at Yucca Flats**

(10 x 8)

Aquatint on copper, printed on Strathmore 400 paper.
**Corner of Elm and Main**

(15 x 7)

Photo silkscreen, printed on Strathmore 400 paper stained with black tea.

**Another Day in the Atomic Age**

(14 x 9)

Photo silkscreen, printed on Strathmore 400 paper stained with black tea.
Nuclear Family

(15 x 17)

Photo silkscreen, printed on Strathmore 400 paper stained with black tea.
Ash Globe

3D printed PLA house, acrylic paint, varnish, black glitter, distilled water, modeling grass, DIY snow globe
Exhibition Performance

Rubberized radiation suit, gas mask with storage bag