

# A head in the clouds

Michael Light explores the ramifications of the 20th-century atomic experiments in '100 Suns'

By Kurt Shaw  
TRIBUNE REVIEW

An icon of the 20th century, a mushroom cloud caused by a nuclear blast is an ironic image, for at once it presents a beautiful spectacle and yet creates total destruction. So it's not surprising that it is the subject of part of a powerful exhibition on display at Wood Street Galleries, Downtown, "Silence + The Big Blast."

In the third-floor gallery, 85 photographs line the walls. The images are drawn from 100 reproduced in the 2003 book "100 Suns" by San Francisco photographer Michael Light (a copy of which is available at the gallery for \$40, \$5 less than the cover price).

Primarily photographs of mushroom clouds, save for a few interspersed among them that include human, mostly military observers, they are images of nuclear test explosions Light pulled from the archives at Los Alamos National Laboratory and the U.S. National Archives in Maryland.

Although these images initially were intended as documentary photographs, which Light has scanned and retouched to remove unwanted flaws and specks of dust, what should surprise visitors most about these images, many of which are in dramatic full color, is their unbelievable beauty as art objects.

"Pictorially, they're just gorgeous to look at," says Wood Street's director-curator Murray Horne.

As they are in the book, the images in this exhibition are divided between the test sites that they depict in the ocean and on land, specifically those in the Nevada desert and those in the Pacific Ocean around the Bikini Atoll.

All told, they span the years from 1945 to 1962 — the year before the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union

## 'Silence + The Big Blast'

**What:** The installation "Bulbes" (Bulbs) by Montreal-based artist collective Artificiel and the exhibition "100 Suns" by Michael Light, which documents the era of above-ground nuclear testing.

**When:** Through July 24. Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays.

**Where:** Wood Street Galleries, 601 Wood St. (above the Wood Street "T" Station), Downtown.

**Details:** (412) 471-5605 or [www.woodstreetgalleries.org](http://www.woodstreetgalleries.org)

## 'Artificiel: The Bulbes as an Instrument'

**What:** Come see a live performance by Artificiel as they perform a live sight/sound work using their installation "Bulbes." It will be followed by electronic music by members of the Kracive Collective.

**When:** 7 p.m. Friday.

**Admission:** Free.

forced nuclear testing underground — and range from unusual tests such as those performed for "operation PLUMBBOB" (1957), in which the bomb "Stokes" was detonated in the vicinity of an unmanned Navy ZSG-3 airship, to "operation CROSSROADS" (1946), in which the bomb "Baker" was detonated under an anchorage of empty Japanese battleships.

Although only limited information is provided next to each piece — such as the name of the test, its explosive yield in kilotons or megatons, the date and the location — Horne says he hopes visitors will avail themselves to copies of the book's text, which is available in



Courtesy of Hosfelt Gallery

Michael Light's "YANKEE" is an image of a 13.5-megaton blast at Bikini Atoll in 1954.

photocopied form at the front desk, that relates to each.

"It's serious stuff," Horne says about the copy. "That's why people should read it when they walk around."

For example, as Light writes about the "Stokes" blast: "Its brightness is more than 50 times that of the sun; despite their shut and shielded eyes, many troops saw their bones of their arms and hands."

In light of such weapons of mass destruction, Horne hopes visitors will get the underlying point of the exhibition.

"This is something that we should never forget," he says. "This is one of those events that we need to be constantly reminded about."

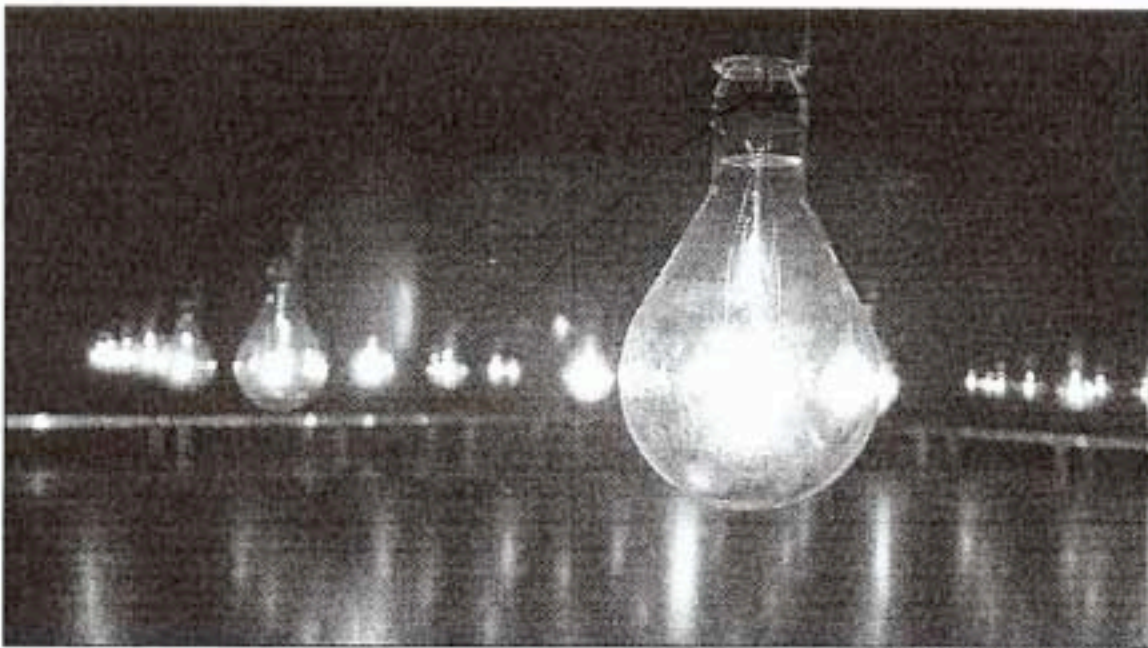
To make sure the images on the third floor resonate with the gallery's visitors, Horne asked the Montreal-based artist collective Artificiel (Julien Roy, Alexandre Burton and Jimmy Lakatos) to install its piece "Bulbes" (Bulbs) on the second floor of the gallery. Made up of 36 oversized light bulbs, 1,000 watts each, that hang in grid formation from the gallery's 15-foot-high ceiling and

hover just three feet above the floor, "Bulbes" is both an installation and a sound instrument.

Controlled by a computer program that orchestrates both the acoustic resonance of the bulbs, which are amplified thanks to tiny microphones attached to each, and their varying intensities of light, the piece goes through six sequences throughout a 30-minute loop.

Although visitors are encouraged to enter and walk through the installation, those patient enough to endure the entire 30 minutes are rewarded with a spectacular display of light and sound that more than drives home the idea of something being 50 times brighter than the sun.

As phenomenal as it is to witness the piece in person — especially the disco sequence, where afterward the back of one's eyelids will be filled with a dazzling array of white dots — it will be no match for Friday evening when Artificiel shows up to play the piece live.



Caroline Hayeur/Agence Stock

The Montreal-based artist collective Artificiel exhibits "Bulbes" (Bulbs) on the second floor of the Wood Street Galleries. It's made up of 36 oversized light bulbs, 1,000 watts each, that hang in grid formation from the gallery's 15-foot-high ceiling.

Kurt Shaw can be reached at [kshaw@tribweb.com](mailto:kshaw@tribweb.com).