

DARK ARCHIVE

ELIN O'HARA SLAVICK

Essay by Dr. Katherine Guinness

elin o'Hara slavick's *Dark Archive*, first shown at the UCCS Galleries of Contemporary Art in 2022, is vast. It is vast in the subject matter it confronts—the irreparable, ongoing, unknowably sublime destruction of war, of nuclear power and the atom bomb—and it is vast in its form—it creates an overwhelming archive all its own, made up entirely of the potential of photography, of light and time, exposure and disclosure.

This *Dark Archive*—a play on the thematic tone of nuclear destruction and the importance of the darkroom in the photographic process—began with a literal, singular photograph. A document, an index of reality, a representation that encodes the trace of an extant past through the inscription of light onto paper. Everything slavick creates is, in essence, photographic. She explains, “Photography is at the heart of my practice. Even if I am not literally employing photographic processes, my work is engaged in a critical dialogue with the photographic at all times.”¹ For instance, when entering *Dark Archive*, we are first confronted with drawings from slavick's previous *Bomb After Bomb*. Painted overlays soak and saturate abstracted maps of locations the United States has bombed. When asked about these drawings' link to the photographic, slavick states:

I chose drawing because of my ongoing struggle with the problematic nature of photography. While the drawings are not photographs, they are photographic. Many of them are drawn from photographic sources and most of them are from the aerial perspective that is inherently photographic. But I cannot make photographs of these damaged places. I did not survive the bombing as a victim, but as a war-tax-paying citizen of the bombing nation. Even if I could make photographs, I would not because there are already too many photographs - too immediate, too true, too real. and too brief - countries, and lives reduced to singular images.²

The bright and bleeding washes of slavick's cartography recall both bright colors of nature that warn of danger, of poison, and the lingering, seeping aftermath of a bombing, present but invisible for generation after generation. In *Dark Archive*, as we turn away from these mapped images, the work becomes grayscale; we are met with collages created from photographs discovered in the archives of the California Institute of Technology, or Caltech. Here, slavick combines seemingly everyday scenes with both humorous and wounding punches of history. In "Sky Atlas: Oppenheimer" the father of the atomic bomb stands in front of an image of a bomb prototype in a wind tunnel at Caltech, his head tipped easily to the side, a cigarette held lightly in his hand. The background for both bomb and man, father and child, is a silver gelatin print of the sky from the Palomar Observatory, part of the Sky Atlas Project. My personal favorite includes a photo of Albert Einstein holding himself as a puppet. Later in the exhibition, collages appear on processing trays, further solidifying their photographic nature.

Then we move into the second room of the gallery and are met with rows of striking blue, sky-blue-but-better, sky blue as I imagine beyond my dreams, lighter and brighter and even more ethereal than Joan Miró's dreamed blue. These blue photographs are cyanotypes, made from a photographic printing formulation that detects a limited light spectrum (near ultraviolet and blue, thus causing their cyan color). One can make cyanotypes with the right paper and chemicals, placing anything on top and opening it towards what all photographs need, time and light (in this case, from the sun). These abstracted things, depicted via cyanotype, include both slavick's work at the Caltech archive and selections from her *After Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima*. For example, "Lone Blue Bottle" is a cyanotype of a bottle melted in the heat of the Hiroshima bombing. It is a beautiful and shadowy work inspired by Henri Becquerel's experiments with uranium and autoradiography. In these cyanotypes, produced during a collaboration with the staff of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, slavick placed A-bombed objects from the museum's collection onto x-ray film, enclosing them in light-tight bags for over a week. The result reveals the invisible radiation lingering in these objects, evidenced and made visible by their direct contact with the film. slavick says, "I am utilizing exposures to make visible the unseen, to reveal what is denied and hidden."³

But then, we turn from the wall of blue skies and the heart of *Dark Archive* overwhelms. We are met with 528 gaping wounds. 528 clouds that threaten our blue skies. 528 white drawings on black photo paper. slavick created these images by drawing with chemicals on damaged or exposed photographic paper found at Caltech, specifically in the Palomar Sky Atlas Processing Room. These works use the alchemical reactions of photography, harnessing them into drawings. slavick drew each of these 528 works from memory, memories of the 528 atmospheric nuclear tests that

have been carried out above ground. These atmospheric tests alone, not including underground tests, had a destructive force equivalent to 29,000 Hiroshima bombs. The impact of their radiation is beyond measure, with epidemics of cancer and other chronic illnesses continuing today. The images of these bombs are grouped by year, and the years are there to document, marking the drawings as evidence, archival. And yet, nothing denotes documentary specificity beyond a repetition of nuclear detonation. The figure of the image lacks the indexical authority supposed by the material ground of photographic paper, placing the physical detritus of Caltech into another history, one too easily obscured by official, institutional narratives of scientific progress.

Nonetheless, these images depend on the canonical narrative of the photo as indexical evidence—the paper, as a material ground for the photographic, contains the physical trace of the past within it. But these images are also ruins. What we see exists on ruined photo paper, abandoned. What is slavick doing by drawing over archival ruins? Drawing over these ruins with a ruining thing? Their ordering, by year, does not form a cohesive whole, it does not unify or justify, but blows apart the coherence and continuity of linear narrative. These photographic drawings bomb the room that contains this *Dark Archive* with image after image after image of weapons and ghosts and clouds and cotton candy and “abortions, brains, skulls, sonograms, stains, orbs, eruptions, Rorschach tests...”⁴ All of these are present in abstracted, remembered images of destructive atomic clouds. As scholar of photography Georges Didi-Huberman writes, “the modalities of the desire to see are extremely refined. The little-by-little of this ‘discovery’ itself takes on the form of a dizzying spiral that is both precise, as dialectic, and overwhelming, as unending baptism of sight. Following it to its source raises the very question of the advent of the visible. And that involves an entire constellation of ideas, conventions, and phantasms.”⁵ What slavick depicts in her drawings are not

“in” the material traces once captured by this ruined photographic paper. Yet the archive nonetheless contains these traces of the history of violence found, obscured, in neglected corners of Caltech.

slavick’s archive shows us that “the history of the atomic age is intertwined with photography technology.”⁶ There are, of course, other intertwinings, of the history of photography as a violent, generally prejudicial archive linked with state and police records. There is artist and scholar David Hockney’s belief that we can trace photography within the canon of western art back to master Renaissance painters like Caravaggio, who used optical lenses to project their subjects upside down, like a camera obscura. Instead of using chemical fixers or photographic paper, they used their paints and brushes to affix the photographic image to canvas. A painted photograph.⁷ Didi-Huberman tells us how photographic history may be linked to the time of Jesus Christ. In his essay, “The Index of the Absent Wound,” he discusses the Shroud of Turin. Didi-Huberman writes,

Let us recall that the historic impetus that rendered the shroud of Turin visible—or more precisely, figurative—is found in the history of photography. When Secondo Pia [in 1894] immersed in the chemical bath his last attempt to produce a clear photograph of the holy shroud—his earlier attempts had all been under-exposed—this is what happened: there in the dark room, the moment the negative image took form (the inaugural glimpse), a face looked out at Pia from the bottom of the tray. A face he had never before seen on the shroud. A face that was, he said, *unexpected*. And seeing it he almost fainted.⁸

Didi-Huberman continues, “The holy shroud became the *negative imprint* of the body of Christ, its *luminous* index miraculously produced and miraculously inverted in the very act of resurrection, henceforth to be conceived of in photographic terms”⁹ Didi-Huberman claims, in this fascinating leap of faith and reason, that the Shroud of Turin is a photograph, an indexical trace of Christ’s body, put not to film but to cloth. Later, he suggestively implies that perhaps the light produced via the power of resurrection is what fulfilled the photographic process. As Slavick always tells her students, “Photography requires light—if nothing else they need that.”

What ties together the Shroud of Turin and *Dark Archive*, more than a conceptual exploration into the history of photography, is the question of figuration. The Shroud of Turin itself (not its photo-negative) has no face on it. There is nothing to be made out but a stain. Like the ruined photographic paper of Slavick’s *Dark Archive*, what is contained “in” the object is not visible on its own. And yet, as with the clouds and bombs above, we want to see definable figures, we want images that make meaning. But sometimes meaning cannot be figurative. It’s really never that easy. To see a bomb and know a bomb? Impossible without physical harm, most likely death.

To see, then, to differentiate the boundaries of a figure as sensible, Didi-Huberman argues, “requires in any case inventing a structure of substitutions, returns, and representations: a structure of *retracement*. Retrace, in other words, tell, *retell* a story, but also trace *a line* over it, a line that, let’s say, will make the original trace ‘represent a subject for other traces,’ those traditional narratives known as the gospels.”¹⁰ The figure, as in the Lacanian understanding of signification Didi-Huberman paraphrases, reveals not an index interpreted without context, as if the photograph can speak for itself. Rather, the photograph is placed within a chain of signification that

overdetermines not only the meaning of the image, but the very possibility of figuration. The power of *Dark Archive* lies in its appropriation of the material grounds of the photographic, revealing a nuclear unconscious essential to the photographic. But it knows that this unconscious cannot be apprehended directly. Its dismissal of our desire to see what we desire to see, or what we think we should see when we enter a space that says it will give us photographic proof of the atomic bomb and its destruction—it makes us search within ourselves, the context we must bring. Does seeing a photo of an atom bomb fill your nose with the stink of burning flesh? No. So slavick searches, creates other photos, in which you cannot see the bomb, so that you *can* see its impact.

The Archive: Never Neutral

But before impact, I need to tell you about the archive. I need to tell you about that first photo with which *Dark Archive* begins. It is, with a wink to those photography lovers in the know, a sort of winter garden photo. You won't see it in the show, but it's where much meaning lies. I will discuss it here, but I will not show it to you.

That first photo, the one which sewed the seed of *Dark Archive*, was not created by slavick, it was found by her, within an archive. After she was invited to the residency at Caltech, slavick searched the University's online archive for the word "radiation." The first image found was of George Beadle and Ernst Anderson, at Caltech's experimental farm in Arcadia, examining dwarf mutant corn, corn grown from progeny of seed exposed to radiation at the Bikini Atoll atomic bomb test. slavick, after relaying this find, explains, "without this information, the photo would be neutral." Instead, the context slavick returns to, conjoined with the photo, creates long, winding, intertwining roads, leading to the creation of the atom bomb, its destructive power, and now, within

this show, the history of Caltech. Only a few brief examples: during the 1940s and 50s over \$80 billion in federal funding was given to the university to aid in the development of nuclear weapons. Robert Oppenheimer, Richard Tolman, Robert Bacher, Robert Christie, and even Robert A. Millikan were associated with the university. The detonators (of which Caltech developed thousands upon thousands) for the bombs Little Boy and Fat Man were designed there, and Project Camel was carried out through the university.

A photo is never neutral. Too often it desires to be ripped from context, taken as evidence of the past, as if evidence exists outside of narrative. The photo of two men sitting kindly alongside one another, hands deep in dirt, shirts white and collars unbuttoned, tells us with all its black and whiteness, begs us to believe, that it is *neutral, neutral, neutral*. slavick's *Dark Archive* knows this, it understands what it is to be both allowed into and fight against an archive—to create art that says, “violence and ruin are at the root of everything, even sometimes arresting beauty.”¹¹ These things—archive, photography, nuclear destruction—are, as Alan Sekula claims of photography itself, “confronting, then, a double system: a system of representation capable of functioning both *honorifically* and *repressively*.”¹² Honorifically, in ceremonially depicting the bourgeois self, “democratizing” access to elite aesthetic forms, serving as evidence to perpetuate official narratives. Repressively, as serving as a means for surveilling, controlling, and limiting the possibilities of knowledge through what is—and what is not—documented, placing these documents of truth into longer chains of signification that permit or prohibit the past’s intrusion into the present.

The overexposed, unusable photo paper is evidence of an event we will never know and never access. These excessive photographic documents fade into nothingness, material traces of forgotten institutional histories. In using chemicals to paint over this paper, in creating her archive of photographic drawings, what is now stored in this new archive is the memory of the nuclear, imbricating the existence of Caltech with the evocation of nuclear destruction, through a different kind of index, a link made through the physical persistence of wasted paper. The archive, as Jacques Derrida tells us, is less about knowing the truth of the past than about determining the future.¹³ But how does this archival temporality relate to the temporality of the nuclear, its seemingly unending repetitiveness, a timeless sublimity, in which the detonation of the bomb leads to, as Jean-Luc Nancy argues, a perpetual interchangeability of apocalyptic disasters, disasters that collapse past, present, and future with their apparent equivalence?¹⁴ The repetitions of Slavick's figures point to this nuclear temporality—even though each of her images are dated, there is nothing to identify one from another in its historical specificity and particularity. Our present knowledge of the past must use interpretive frames that allows the photo to become evidence. The archive is one of these determining frames, explicitly delineating the potentials of not only the present, but the future knowledge of our own past, apprehended through symptoms that, rather than speak of the truth of the past, refuse coherence. Roland Barthes remarks, in his famous analysis of the indexical power of the photograph, “With regard to many of these photographs it is History that separated me from them. Is History not simply that time when we were not born? ... Thus, the life of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of History, its division. History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it.”¹⁵ For Barthes, the photograph and its documentary potential speak of otherness, of a differentiation of

the present and the past. Yet the archive speaks not to the past's absolute otherness, but to the imbrication of past into the present and beyond.

History may be hysterical, but it only has room for us. How then to look, to see something that refuses to remain in the past?

Exposure: Time and Light

The photograph, thus, is evidence, but evidence of what? What interpretive frame is needed to transubstantiate the photo to proof? As Joel Snyder informs us, the documentary truth of early photography was greeted with skepticism. "In a famous American case, the *Howland Will Case* (1870), in which the plaintiff (successfully) used photographically copied specimens of a signature as the foundation of his case, the defense attorney demanded to know how a photograph could serve as evidence at all. In his concluding summary statement, he dangled a photograph in front of the jury and exclaimed: 'It is nothing but hearsay of the sun!'"¹⁶ Before we can decide whether or not we trust the sun, whether or not we can see the meaning of what is abstracted, the photograph needs time.

Yet the primary focus of *Dark Archive*—nuclear destruction—has changed time irreparably. If the temporality of the archive follows a circular structure that leads from present to past to future and back again, simultaneously opening and closing future possibility; if the temporality of the photograph is about documenting the past, making it present in the now, if this authority of the past relies on narratives that transform the photograph into evidence; then the temporality of the nuclear is different. Jean-Luc Nancy, in his book *After Fukushima*, states that nuclear disaster

produces a temporality in which we are always after apocalypse, but the future is inevitably an apocalypse to come. “Nuclear catastrophe—all differences military or civilian kept in mind—remains the one potentially irremediable catastrophe, whose effects spread through generations, through the layers of the earth; these effects have an impact on all living things and on the large-scale organization of energy production, hence on consumption as well.”¹⁷

Nuclear disaster becomes the disaster of time itself. Nancy claims that we no longer have “succession” but “rupture,” no longer have “anticipation” but “suspense, even stupor.” He asks, “Is there an after? Is there anything that follows? Are we still headed somewhere? ... *Where is our future?* ... It is a matter of finding out if there is a future. It is possible that there may not be one (or that there may be one that is in its turn catastrophic).”¹⁸

Nuclear disasters indicate a new form of being in the world: a lack of futurity, a new interconnected disastrousness, a temporality that comes from a need to reconcile with the fact that we now know that humanity is able to end itself.¹⁹ Is it surprising that we find it so hard to visualize this? The nuclear and all it comes to represent is impossible to not only visualize, but feel in our bodies? Nancy writes, “A proper noun is always a way to pass beyond signification. It signifies itself and nothing else. About the denomination that is that of these two names [Hiroshima and Fukushima], we could say that instead of passing beyond, they fall below all signification. They signify an annihilation of meaning.”²⁰ If, as Didi-Huberman notes, the figure emerges from a chain of signification, for Nancy, the nuclear is the figure at the end of all possible chains of meaning.

Dark Archive is able to show us the false linearity and authority of the archive, how its figuration depends not only on material evidence, but on a chain of meaning in which the possibilities of representation are remade and reimagined. By creating a non-figurative photography, a photography in which the archive and its authority are both invoked and undermined, slavick is able to produce narrative evidence that shows how the figure of a photograph leads towards the difficult histories of radiation and nuclear destruction. But slavick is aware of this ouroboros of historicity. She asks, “How do we reconcile science and politics, genius and flawed ideology, institutional memory and inhuman practices? Maybe we can’t reconcile it. But we can try to represent it.” *Dark Archive* represents this history obliquely, upending the possibilities of figure, document, evidence, and archive, looking for a different engagement with the history of science and the power of the photographic image.

¹ elin o’Hara slavick, personal correspondence with the author, September 2022

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ elin o’Hara slavick, *UCCS Visiting Artists & Critics Series, ENT Center for the Arts, 9/01/2022*

⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)”, *October*, Vol. 29 (Summer, 1984), 63.

⁶ elin o’Hara slavick, personal correspondence with the author, September 2022

⁷ David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*, (Avery 2006).

⁸ Didi-Huberman, “The Index of the Absent Wound,” 65.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 67.

¹¹ GOCA, *Dark Archive*, <https://gocadigital.org/exhibitions/elin-ohara-slavick>

¹² Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive”, *October*, Vol. 39 (Winter, 1986), 6.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015)

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 2010) 64-65.

¹⁶ Joel Snyder, "Res Ipsa Loquitur," in *Things That Talk* (Zone Books, 2004), 214.

¹⁷ Nancy, *After Fukushima*, 15

¹⁸ Nancy, *After Fukushima*, 15-16.

¹⁹ "Our time—as it has been able to see itself at least since the first world war—is the era that knows it is capable of an 'end of days' that would be a deed created by humans." Nancy, *After Fukushima*, 19-21.

²⁰ Nancy, *After Fukushima*, 13.