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elin o'Hara slavick's *Hiroshima: After Aftermath*

Radiant art

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30 DEC 2009 • by [Brian Howe](#)

Hiroshima: After Aftermath

elin o'Hara slavick

Golden Belt, Room 100 Gallery

Through Jan. 10, 2010

In *Bomb After Bomb: A Violent Cartography*, her book of radiant drawings and paintings, elin o'Hara slavick, a professor of art at UNC-Chapel Hill, examined the consequences of aerial bombardment.

Her current show in Golden Belt's central gallery, *Hiroshima: After Aftermath*, dilates on the theme from a more intimate vantage, with 35 small-to-medium-sized pieces selected by her colleague, the contemporary art historian Cary Levine. There are no mushroom clouds or charred corpses; the raw ceiling beams and piecemeal brick of the gallery itself have a more bombed-out feeling than the show. Slavick works in a muted, beauty-drenched register with a hypnotic insistence on memory through symbols and traces. After the aftermath comes its aestheticization, which deceives and preserves.

Working on-site, in collaboration with the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, slavick gravitated to wherever energy lingered, bottling it in rubbings, silver gelatin prints, cyanotypes and even an audioradiograph—an exposure on X-ray film that visibly captures enduring radiation from the United States' atomic bombing of the city in 1945. (Like most images in the show, it's hard to reconcile with the immensity of its subject—it looks like an evasive scatter of crystals on an unsoundable dark field.) The act of exposure is crucial. Ephemeral reactions of solar energy on paper eloquently euphemize the event whose repercussions they survey: the deliberate evaporation of physical bodies in halos of light.




The art of photography and exposure also entails mediation. To create the show's arresting first image, a curved bridge cascading over multiple panels, slavick made rubbings of the stone, and then silver gelatin prints of the rubbings, to create a textured, glinting chiaroscuro. Blue-and-white cyanotypes produced in natural sunlight—which look both schematic and ghostly by nature—give irradiated objects the aspect of iconic dream images. The end of a steel girder becomes a totemic mask; a comb becomes a fish fossil; strips of bark






Silver gelatin prints of stone rubbings create a textured, glinting chiaroscuro.

Photos by Peter Geoffrion

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become elegant brushstrokes. These layered techniques and disassociations are ways to mute—and thereby begin to approach—the full magnitude of the bombing. Slavick treads the line where the photographic slips into the painterly, events into myth and memory.

The show carries a sharp awareness of how momentous, chaotic events sift down into static images, potent symbols, whiffs of visual poetry. Slavick arranges these in a series of echoes and affinities that lend the show a cunning visual cohesion beyond the blue, white and strong grayscale color scheme. A photograph of a sidewalk rubbing at the hypocenter shows two coiled glyphs, like tiny, stylized renditions of the swirling force wrought there—a force also latent in the broken line of the bridge's dipping panels. These ground zero glyphs are rhymed with another pair of ideograms from a memorial, which in turn ricochet into a pair of leaves from a bombed parasol tree. A gravestone half-buried in the sand, a close-up of a banister's capital and a dandelion in seed all assert strong, columnar figures—the thrust chin of persistence against unfathomable destruction.

The show is rounded out by a selection of more traditional documentary photographs, shot in an unassuming style that relies on the viewer's historical imagination for its effect. Only one rather horror-movie-ish shot of bloody-looking corrosion on a wall flirts with dramatization. What strikes one most about a shot of an abandoned, A-bombed police station is the utter normalcy of its weathered boards, its penetrating vacancy. There is little indication that anything of import ever happened there. But in a photo of a plain concrete basement where a survivor waited out the bomb, that shiver of residual life we crave is more perceptible, in pockets of ethereal light and the trapped fecundity of a little pooled water.

It has to be said that Golden Belt's central gallery is not an ideal viewing place for this particular show. The space is located in the center of a cluster of working artists' studios, so loud conversation and laughter often intrude. This might create a fun and convivial mood for a lighter show, but it felt distracting in this solemn, deeply contemplative one. Otherwise, the only off note is the inclusion of two dandelion photos, when around 65 works are unrepresented. One suspects the image was chosen for how broadly it ties the show together, with its intimations of fragility and resilience, blast and scatter, dispersal and rebirth. But it still looks like a prettily photographed calendar page, out of step with the graceful circumspection that otherwise pervades. An eloquent closing shot of a man washing his feet in a river once clogged with gore injects a more compelling note of hope, suggesting that all this might yet, somehow, be healed. Despite this one minor curatorial quibble, the show is highly recommended—just bring a nice pair of earplugs.

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