

## BOMBS AWAY!

Curated by Sophie Jerram

Megan Adams, Tony de Lautour, Fiona Jack, Jo Randerson, Richard Reddaway

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Coordinated to celebrate 15 years of Nuclear-free policy in New Zealand, *Bombs Away!* was a group show specifically put together to examine pro-nuclear discourse. The curator, Sophie Jerram provided contributing artists with film propaganda from five nuclear nations (France, Britain, U.S.A, Russia and China) as a starting point to contextualize this discourse within “New Zealand’s long and fascinating history of anti-nuclear protest” (intro catalogue). Consigned a film apiece, each artist was given a brief to examine “the smokescreens of pro-nuclear nations” in an attempt to situate New Zealand’s “anti-nuclear reasoning” (press release). Jerram’s stated intention for the show is to foster a greater awareness of New Zealand’s nuclear policy given that we are now a generation removed from its inception during those heady days of the early 1980s. As she herself claims, “I was born into the ideology, without understanding the cultural basis of the anti-nuclear position”.

If nuclear weapons are really methods of deterrence then the propaganda films of the nuclear nations act as an integral component of this psychological warfare. Intended to shock, awe and wow the opponent into meek deference these pro-nuclear films act as the vanguard of diplomacy, shut down argument and open out paths of negotiation. Which means that as far as the bomb goes, the filmmakers are the first and hopefully only, point of contact. This action turns the bomb into a surface commodity that acts at the level of the signified. Sure it is full of intent, but its pronouncement as cipher is one of shock that is meant only to stun. Articulating beyond such a relay is what Jerram has in mind. By providing artists with the documentary films of nuclear states, the curator’s intentions commodify the bomb, reducing the impact of the cipher and turning it about in a way that reduces its controlled and manipulated visibility.

The representations chosen for *Bombs Away!* all centre around a dystopic view of the pro-nuclear choice. Tony de Lautour’s contribution *Monument* is a perfect example of this. Mounted upon two skulls like a site in a horror flick, the British Empire’s lion emblem clutches despairingly at a bomb whilst trying pointlessly to hoist his ship beyond the impending oblivion. This imagery and cohabitation is of a leader gone astray. Similarly, in Megan Adam’s dance piece, the mimicry is unambiguous and pointed in a satirical way. The calisthenics are too eager, too strained, whilst the patriotism, costuming and coordination make short work of the machinery of nuclear rationale. The work of Fiona Jack and Richard Reddaway focus on the sinister aftermath of bomb impact. Secreted behind veneers of beauty, Reddaway’s meltdown, and Jack’s smoke-out penetrate that cipher of bomb logic. Reddaway’s mere title, *No-one believes they are evil* points at the way the cipher of deterrence so easily becomes the reality of impact - an impact which Jo Randerson’s diorama doesn’t let us forget!

Jerram’s claim to set about “understanding the cultural basis of the anti-nuclear position” seems also to have updated the anti-nuclear arsenal of propaganda. A different approach to this investigation could have resulted in an exhibition of anti-nuclear art by the likes of Hotere and Hanley. Yet, what *Bombs Away!* proved is that there is still a resistant fear of nuclear weapons within New Zealand, one that can be easily cultivated and continued for another generation or so.

Jim Henley

