From the Spanish Civil War to the ‘Nuclear Age’
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British Art in the Nuclear Age edited by Catherine Jolivette, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, 275 pp., 16 col. and 51 b. & w. illus., £63.00

Conscience and Conflict: British Artists and the Spanish Civil War by Simon Martin, Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2014, 160 pp., 100 col. and 45 b. & w. illus., £31.50


On 6 and 9 August 1945, the two atomic bombs code-named ‘Little Boy’ and ‘Fat Man’ were dropped on the Japanese industrial cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Their explosions represented both a fittingly devastating final chapter to the all-encompassing world war of the preceding years and the opening salvo of what would become decades of nuclear uncertainty. Less than a decade earlier, on 26 April 1937, one of the first comprehensive aerial bombings of any defenceless civilian population befell the historic town of Guernica in Spain’s Basque region during the Spanish Civil War. The number of people killed in the bombing of Guernica was placed at 1,645 by the Basque government, though modern figures suggest that between 153 and 400 civilians died.1 By contrast, at least 148,000 people were killed in the Japanese bombings before the effects of the spread of radiation are taken into account as recalled by Catherine Jolivette (218).

That this short period of time saw such an escalation in the means of mass destruction is a mark of the events of the years that bridged the gap. But the atom bomb’s realization was only the most devastating and concrete example of the potential of nuclear power. Its development was a consequence of a longer history of advances in the fields of molecular and theoretical physics that were believed to be leading the way towards a better understanding of, and appreciation for, the physical world. That scientific ambition found its corollary in Britain after 1945 as the circumstances of war set the ground for the Labour Party to implement a wave of social reforms geared towards ‘building a better world’ from its ruins: the engines of what would become known as the Welfare State. Yet the continuing effects of austerity and the gradual decline into Cold War similarly undermined such efforts.

This overlapping sense of hope and despair is mirrored in the artistic output of the years that span these two points, stretching before and beyond in either direction. As Carol Jacobi writes in her essay in British Art in the Nuclear Age concerned with the relation of artistic production in the early post-war years to the cultures of crisis and community engendered by the experience of war:

The social and cultural transformations that [the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki] brought about are conventionally presented as abrupt, like the blast itself. However, for artists born in the first two decades of the century, inheritors of the First World War, the political, class and ethnic strife of the 1920s and 1930s, the Spanish Civil War and then the Second World War, it was experienced not as change, but as continuity (20).

The shifts in both scientific capability and in approaches to art and its value were shaped by the seismic cultural shift that occurred after 1945, but as significant are the points of consistency that span the Second World War, with the continued experience of war and its threat underlying artistic practice and purpose.

In Conscience and Conflict: British Artists and the Spanish Civil War, Simon Martin identifies the bombing of civilian targets such as occurred at Guernica as the occasion for both ‘a fundamental shift in the nature of twentieth-century warfare and in the response of modern artists to such horrors’ (111). The ideological battles represented by the Spanish Civil War for many artists working in Britain are presented in relatively simple terms, ‘as a matter of freedom against tyranny and fascism’ as opposed to the complex web of allegiances that underlay the events in Spain (14).

By contrast, the essays in British Art in the Nuclear Age make clear that the even more ambiguous and multifaceted ‘war’ of their subject was represented in similarly equivocal terms by artists working after 1945, with Jolivette asserting in the introduction that:
While the authors of the essays in this book make reference to the Cold War period, the term ‘Cold War’ should not be seen as a generalized umbrella designation. The individual chapters deal with quite specific discursive territories and time-frames that are distinguished by the authors from the multiplicity of synchronous and diachronic Cold War contexts of other periods and locations during the years encompassed by the volume. (1)

Rather, Jolivette adopts the designation of ‘British nuclear culture’ as the rubric under which the essays in British Art in the Nuclear Age might be grouped, borrowed from Kirk Willis’ work on relationships between atomic scientists and the public in the early part of the century.2 Exploring cultural reactions to both the events of 1945 and the longer evolution of the ‘nuclear age’ of the book’s title – from the earliest pre-war experiments in molecular science through to the nuclear tests conducted throughout the 1950s and 1960s – the essays in British Art in the Nuclear Age avoid the pitfalls of treating the ‘post-war’ as an absolute.

Similarly, Martin’s recognition of the Spanish Civil War as a ‘dress rehearsal for the inevitable European war’ to follow, quoting Ernest Hemingway, establishes the broader context in which his study should be understood (11). Thus it is that the parameters of the two books in review here allow for a circumventing of the impenetrable barriers often presented by the war, with the significance of the years 1939–45 understood as the fulcrum on which histories of the twentieth century pivot.

In tracing developments in British art practice from the pre- to the post-war period through the lens of artistic responses to these escalations in the theatre of war, we might be better placed to recognize both changes and continuities in the fields of British cultural production in the years spanning the Second World War: bridging that gap rather than treating it as an impassable rupture in the twentieth century as is so often the case. The result might be a re-registering of the cumulative and developmental nature of history as it was experienced at mid-century.

What changed in immediate terms with the events of August 1945 was the scale on which war was to be understood, with the shift registered in the few photographs that were published of the atomic explosions in Japan bearing the now iconic ‘mushroom’ cloud (not to mention the incomprehensible images that emerged from the Nazi concentration camps which are not the subject of Jolivette’s volume). The inability to effectively represent the awful effects of the atom bombs, coupled with the censorship of photographic representations from the ground, resulted in an abstraction of the effects of war, with the motif of the mushroom cloud quickly adopted as the sole image of the bombs known, representing the event while quite literally obscuring it as Jolivette puts it (25). That this was contrary to the effect of the explicit photographs published from the frontlines of the Spanish Civil War and Second World War appears analogous to the disjoint between the numbers killed at Guernica, Hiroshima and Nagasaki quoted above.

Christoph Laucht’s essay in British Art in the Nuclear Age explores the problem of representing the nuclear threat as it developed after 1945 by way of photo essays published in Picture Post. In the issue published in the same month as the strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki under the title ‘Man Enters the Atom Age’, the devastation caused by the bombs is described as belonging not to reality but ‘to the world of the imagination. It is far more like the cataclysm foreseen by poets, painters and visionaries for generations than any piece of man-made devastation’ (82). Indeed, in efforts to make the intangible tangible, Picture Post published images of the mushroom cloud alongside aerial images of Tokyo after the earthquake of 1923, while elsewhere in the same issue photographs of Japanese soldiers set alight by a flame-thrower stand in ineptly for the presumed consequence of the 15-kiloton uranium bomb that hit Hiroshima, advanced only by the caption ‘all living things, human and animal, were literally seared to death’ (83).

Following developments in the nuclear race, the February 1950 issue of Picture Post posed the question ‘Can Man Survive the Hydrogen Bomb?’ Inside was an aerial photograph of the South East of England onto which has been superimposed a mushroom cloud billowing up from its attested target, the Houses of Parliament. An inner ring of two and a half miles encompassing both Regent’s Park and Hyde Park represents the limit of destruction of one uranium bomb’ while a second ring with an eight-mile radius encompassing Kew Gardens and Greenwich represents the limit within which ‘destruction by one hydrogen bomb would be complete’. Further out still, the image reveals that buildings would be destroyed up to eighty miles away, moving out beyond the Essex coastline (87).
The image jars markedly in comparison with photographs such as those taken by Edith Tudor-Hart presented at the culmination of the Conscience and Conflict exhibition. Again, the southern coastline is invoked as the threshold of the British Isles, but here we are presented with scores of Basque children posing for the camera, taken at the North Stoneham refugee camp in Hampshire in what could be mistaken for holiday snaps. Tudor-Hart described her ambition with her photography as ‘recording and influencing the life of the people and prompting human understanding nationally and internationally’, and the familiarity of these photographs synthesizes the personal and the political effortlessly (130).

A similarly jovial group of Basque refugee children are employed in a poster bearing the legend ‘Help them to forget’, above which flies a formation of bomber planes silhouetted against the sky. This motif reoccurred throughout posters of the period, standing in for the threat of bombing much as the mushroom cloud would come to stand in for its effect, though on a significantly different scale. But in distinction with the role that the mushroom cloud played in obscuring the reality of the atom bombings, it is the juxtaposition of cause and effect in posters from the Spanish Civil War that the reality of the bombings comes to life, and nowhere with more impact than in the iconic photomontage of a dead child marked with identification tags and encircled by planes bearing the caption ‘if you tolerate this your children will be next’.

The shift in focus from one looking upwards in apprehension as presented by such posters to one looking down from the vantage point of the bomb or bomber might be located during wartime, as coincident developments in communications, transport and aerial warfare allowed for a re-imagining of the British landscape. A painting such as Paul Nash’s Battle of Britain (1941) – where a panorama not dissimilar to the one imagining the effects of a hydrogen bomb in the 1950 issue of Picture Post is defined – goes some way towards interpolating these points of cerebral orientation. But Catherine Spencer’s essay in British Art in the Nuclear Age on the cultural reference points mapped by Prunella Clough in her ‘Urbscapes’ of the early 1960s helps to define the culmination of this shift. For Spencer, Clough’s abstract works from this period are rooted in the ‘expanding urbanized fabric of post-war Britain, with its grey macadamized loops of motorways, airstrips, power plants and factories’ (171). Indeed, the spatial configuration of Electrical Landscape (1960) enables the work to escape the restrictive tag of abstract, and is more recognizable as landscape now in the age of Google maps than it might have been fifty plus years ago. Spencer goes on to describe the way Clough’s ‘Urbscapes’ are ‘closely connected with the aerial viewpoint’ while also invoking ‘connotations including wires, fuses, transistors, pylons and power cables’ (177–8). The effect is a shift between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic that is presented as representative of a coincident interest in ‘technological and biomorphic references’, the latter being ‘shaped by scientific developments in microscopy’ (183–4). It is here that the views from above and below become fused, and that the lessons of science and of cultural experience entwine.

Similarly, Robert Burstow’s discussion of both Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo’s recourse to scientific illustrations of crystalline structures in the 1930s and 1940s, influenced in part by their friendship with the crystallographer J. D. Bernal, presents that interest as one concerned with ‘the structure of natural form’ at its most fundamental level (59–60).

The close relationship between scientific advances and cultural expression in the post-war period is a particularly strong focus throughout the essays in British Art in the Nuclear Age, and is nowhere more effectively demonstrated than in Catherine Jolivette’s essay on the ways in which representations of atomic power at the Festival of Britain helped to forge an image of scientific advancement as a constituent part of what was being proffered by the Festival organizers as Britain’s ‘national image’. In the conclusion to her essay, Jolivette notes that ‘the imminent provision of electricity from nuclear sources was presented as a societal good, with atomic technology offering further benefits in medicine and agriculture’, but then goes on to point out the irony that ‘discussion of the military applications of nuclear science was omitted from Festival exhibition narratives, at the same time as British atomic weapons were secretly under construction’ (121).

Such was the disconnect between this ‘officially’ presented narrative of scientific advancement and the reality of political manoeuvring in the early Cold War that, upon his acceptance of the Nobel Prize in Physics alongside Ernest Walton in the same year as the Festival for their pre-war research on the splitting of atomic nuclei, John Cockroft felt compelled to defend the

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perceived role of scientists in the development of the atom bomb. ‘I feel myself that the overwhelming evil and danger comes not from science but from political ideas which reject the freedom of the human spirit and the values and rights of individual human beings’ (103).

Gregory Salter’s discussion of John Bratby’s personal painted responses to the nuclear threat and Simon Martin’s essay on ‘British Artists and Nuclear Apocalypse’ also in British Art in the Nuclear Age thus serve to illustrate the more candid, individual responses to world events that came after 1945. These texts relate closely to the presentations of personal experience made in Conscience and Conflict. In particular, Salter’s description of Bratby’s Hiroshima Horror: Self Portrait in White Shirt (1956), where the artist presents his bodily disintegration in the wake of a nuclear strike in a burst of Bacon-esque brusqueness, while ‘bleach[ing] out to nothing’ the domestic backdrop of his home that was otherwise so habitually a feature of his work, brings home the considered proximity of nuclear annihilation (158). Similarly, Martin’s description of Leslie Hurry’s watercolour painting Atom Bomb (1945), where three ‘violently contorted women’ fall over and into one another and away from the explosive blast in the top right corner, presents an explicit depiction of anguish and distress which Martin compares to Picasso’s iconic representation of the bombing of Guernica that, in Conscience and Conflict, he positions as a ‘powerful stimulus for British sculptors seeking a vocabulary of forms with which to convey the darkness and violence of their times’ (British Art, 219; Conscience and Conflict, 125). That Picasso’s painting registered as representative of the horrors of war beyond the immediate event to which it was addressed is a mark of the work’s strength, but it also helps to designate the extent to which the experience of war, irrespective of time, place or material substance, was a shared one.

At Pallant House, representations of the effects of war painted in response to, or with relation to Picasso’s work are grouped in a room titled ‘Amongst the ruins’. There, a series of paintings in tempera by John Armstrong depicting shells of buildings set against ‘azure blue Mediterranean skies’ (115) are juxtaposed with Clive Branson’s painting Selling the Daily Worker Outside the Projectile Engineering Works (1937). Only the traces of wallpaper ripped from the interior walls and the occasional item of discarded furniture stand in for human life in Armstrong’s works, while Branson’s painting of workers leaving a London munitions factory ‘suggested the need for an informed working class that would be aware of the political significance of the bombs they were manufacturing’: the cause and the effect (113).

Elsewhere in the same room, Walter Nessler’s nightmarish Premonition (1937) imagines an uncannily prescient portrayal of London under siege, where the dome of St Paul’s cathedral towering above a city choked by the thick red glow of bombardment mirrored its use as a repeated refrain in wartime paintings and photographs of the London blitz, while a painting and an etching by Picasso, both titled Weeping Woman (1937) stand in for the absent Guernica through the echoes of this mother’s tears.

The representation of women and children throughout the Conscience and Conflict exhibition reflects what was a habitual motif in Spanish propaganda images from the Spanish Civil War, and Frank Brangwyn’s Madonna and Child in For the Relief of Women and Children in Spain (1937) (plate 1) presents an incredibly moving realization of the human effect of war and the perceived role of the artist in highlighting the role civilians could play in supporting such humanitarian causes.

Another mother and child work opened the exhibition at Pallant House, though this time it was the artist’s wife and daughter in Clive Branson’s Norcen and Rosa (1939). Huddled together on the edge of a sofa in the corner of a bright living room, they are depicted holding a book titled Spun, though their attention and thoughts are elsewhere. The distinctive orange cover of the book informs us that it is one of the Left Book Club’s paperbacks, produced monthly for a membership of as many as 57,000, many of whom attended one of the many related discussion groups geared towards assisting in ‘the struggle for world peace and against fascism’ (48). This and two accompanying works representing workers buying and selling the Daily Worker in and around Battersea where Branson lived with his wife and daughter reflected, as interpreted by Martin, ‘the political engagement of the working classes and made oblique criticism of British militarism’, while all three works allude to the role that print media played in the education of the British people in the 1930s beyond the confines of the family home and school (47–8).

In the post-war period, advances in television and in mass communications extended access to a groundswell of knowledge, and Kate Aspinall’s discussion of the role of Jacob Bronowski in both advocating for a fuller public engagement with scientific practice—particularly with regard to the development of nuclear physics—and in taking on the role himself as the presenter of the significant BBC series The Ascent of Man which aired in 1973 stands as an important chapter in the development of
British culture. The democratization of knowledge in the post-war period, however, might be traced in inverse proportions to the perceived ability to impact world affairs.

In the introduction to Conscience and Conflict, Martin writes that he sought to ‘consider how and why the [Spanish Civil War] touched individuals’ consciences and made them want to act in some way’ (20). It is this designation of action that defines his study, as he explores the efforts of British artists to respond to and, frequently, to participate in either the conflict or in demonstrations intended to highlight what was happening in Spain whilst rallying support for the Republican cause and the victims of this ideological battle. By contrast, the essays in British Art in the Nuclear Age generally veer towards ‘re-action’, with artists, photographers and scientists all seemingly concerned with seeking to understand or make sense of the events of 1945 and the ensuing years of nuclear experimentation through artistic platforms frequently identified as free – that is, liberated from the constraints of ideological commitment – whilst stymied by the uncertainty of those years. This point might be exemplified by the question posed by Time magazine in 1952 that Martin’s essay for British Art in the Nuclear Age opens with: ‘How should a modern artist react to the atomic age?’ The question was rhetorical.

What defines both studies is a sense of the close relation between British cultural production and its social contexts in the years either side of the Second World War, as well as the shared sense of the horrors of war and of hope for an alternative that engaged with the positive applications of both art and science. So too are they related to international affairs as a result of both national conflicts and the fundamental shifts in the shape and nature of national identity. As the scale of war escalated, so too did the imbrication of peoples through forced emigration and advances in mass communications, a side-effect of which was a distillation of the sense of comprehensibility offered by world affairs. Implicitly underscoring both studies are the advances in the means of both international connectivity and international warfare that developed hand-in-hand through this period.

Notes