

British Art in the Nuclear Age. Edited by Catherine Jolivette. 306 pp. incl. 16 col. + 51 b. & w. ills. (Ashgate, Farnham, 2014), £70. ISBN 978-1-4724-1276-8.

Reviewed by LEE HALLMAN

WRITING IN THE immediate aftermath of the Second World War and its devastating conclusion with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kenneth Clark prophesied in the final chapter of his celebrated book *Landscape into Art* that the 'excitement and awe which this terrible new universe arouses in us will find expression in some way'.¹ Identifying and interpreting a range of these expressions is the overarching aim of *British Art in the Nuclear Age*, a compilation of academic essays whose publication represents the latest in a recent scholarly wave to examine British art and its discourses during the three decades following the War's end in 1945.² The present volume, edited by Catherine Jolivette, frames the Cold War era as a 'nuclear age' in which the overshadowing presence of atomic power inflected cultural production well into the later decades of the twentieth century.

Many British artists publicly opposed the development of nuclear power: Barbara Hepworth, Patrick Heron, Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson and Richard Hamilton were among those who signed the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in February 1958, and several artists participated in the first march from Trafalgar Square to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston. The relationship between an artist's activism and the art he or she creates, however, is inevitably more complex than a campaign signature might suggest. For one thing, as contributor Simon Martin points out, unlike the twentieth century's First and Second World Wars, the Cold War was a 'war of ideologies' whose contexts and consequences were constantly present but not readily comprehended, let alone represented.³ Moreover, as Jolivette notes in her introduction, the connotations of nuclear science shifted substantially from the 1940s to the 1960s alongside an evolving understanding of a technology that could be harnessed alternately as an agent of energy production and a weapon of mass destruction.

The book bills itself as 'rooted in the study of objects', a claim the nine essays interpret and substantiate with notable breadth, exploring how the nuclear age shaped, and in some cases was shaped by, a spectrum of visual culture from painting and sculpture (encompassing social realism, abstraction, expressionism, and Pop), to applied design, exhibition display and photojournalism. A number of essays scrutinise the documentation of atomic science in popular forums and the mass media: Christopher Laucht investigates how images of the bombings of Japan and post-War nuclear testing grounds were communicated to British audiences in the magazine *Picture Post*, while Jolivette surveys representations of

nuclear imagery in the various displays of the 1951 Festival of Britain.

Other authors approach the nuclear context more obliquely. Carol Jacobi considers the atomic threat to be an implicit aspect of what Eduardo Paolozzi characterised as 'a kind of cold war feeling about art' in the immediate post-War years, exemplified in the spread of Existentialism from France to Britain. Robert Burstow explores the extent to which nuclear concerns had an impact on a range of post-War British sculpture, from Peter (Laszlo) Peri's overtly social-realist protest piece *Aldermaston marchers* (1960) to the more 'coded' sculptural language of Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick and others whose spiky, anthropomorphic forms prompted Herbert Read's famous phrase 'Geometry of Fear' – an epithet whose own evolving connotations Burstow skilfully unearths. Drawing upon theories of family dynamics from contemporary psychoanalysis, Gregory Salter argues that nuclear anxieties permeate the bunker-like domestic spaces depicted by John Bratby, one of the best known of the 'Kitchen Sink' painters.

Some of the strongest essays locate visual reflections of the nuclear age's widespread doubts in artists' deliberately fluctuating forms. Catherine Spencer provides a well-researched context for the 'indeterminate', semi-abstract shapes in Prunella Clough's 'urbiscape' paintings, stimulated in part by military cartography and the aerial photography of industrial landscapes. Meanwhile, as Burstow reiterates, Henry Moore's *Atom piece* (1964–67), commissioned to commemorate the first nuclear chain reaction, invokes both the mushroom cloud and a human skull.

Other artists found inspiration in the 'micro-iconography' of atomic science: British advances in crystallography provided a formal catalyst for the Constructivist explorations of Naum Gabo and Barbara Hepworth, for example. It is one thing to identify sources of formal motivation, however, and another to assume that any singular context determines a work's meaning. Fiona Gaskin extends the discourse of Read's 'Geometry of Fear' to the metamorphic post-War landscape paintings of Graham Sutherland, Peter Lanyon and Alan Reynolds, but her assertion that their paintings can be read as 'metaphors of the nuclear threat' (p.127) is overstated and largely unsupported.

Simon Martin considers British responses to the bomb, from Gustav Metzger's 'auto-

destructive' works to the Pop appropriations of Derek Boshier and Richard Hamilton, alongside parallel imagery by American peers Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist. Few artists, British or otherwise, represented the actions and aftermath of atomic war itself, however. Martin explores the notable exception of Colin Self, whose *Fall-out shelter* series and works produced in response to the Cuban missile crisis depicted the real and imagined victims of nuclear destruction (Fig.61).

Although centred on British culture, the volume's attention to transcontinental exchange and émigré artists underscores the omnipresent experience of the nuclear age. In one of the most absorbing essays, Kate Aspinall recounts an instance in which science cast its gaze onto art. In an episode of his 1973 BBC television series *The Ascent of Man*, the Polish-born scientist Jacob Bronowski suggested that the synthesis of subjective judgment and fallibility embodied in the dynamic, overlaid process of the painter Feliks Topolski (a fellow Polish-born emigrant) might be understood as a visual analogy to the fraught ethics of scientific authority. Topolski's paintings, too, transcend Bronowski's metaphorical context. But as a cross-disciplinary case study, the essay is a testament to the way one field can shed light upon another, perhaps most importantly by helping it to frame critical questions – in this case, the urgent questions about civilisation's hopes and fears that permeated the nuclear age and that this book, generally speaking, does not shy from.

¹ K. Clark: *Landscape into Art*, London 1952 (first edition 1949), p.142.

² These include M. Garlake: *New art, new world: British art in postwar society*, New Haven and London 1998; J. Hyman: *The battle for realism: Figurative art in Britain during the Cold War, 1945–60*, London 2001; see also L. Tickner and D. Peters Corbett, eds.: *British art in the cultural field, 1939–69*, Chichester 2012, which also includes an essay by Catherine Jolivette about art in the nuclear age.

³ S. Martin and M. Livingstone: exh. cat. *Colin Self: Art in the Nuclear Age*, Chichester (Pallant House Gallery) 2008, pp.19–20, cited here by Jolivette, p.14.

Lynn Chadwick. By Michael Bird. 192 pp. incl. 120 col. + 40 b. & w. ills. (Lund Humphries, London, 2014), £45. ISBN 978-1-84822-135-2.

Reviewed by JUDY COLLINS

MICHAEL BIRD'S MONOGRAPH on the sculptor Lynn Chadwick (1914–2003) begins with an illuminating introductory section called 'Blowtorch poetry', which gives the reader a good feel for Chadwick's workshop empiricism, and a greater understanding of the variety of sculptures discussed in the subsequent seven chapters. The book is well arranged and visually attractive, with some unusual personal photographs, especially one by Lee Miller of a naked Chadwick sharpening kitchen knives at the home of Miller and Roland Penrose.



61. *Waiting woman with nuclear bomber*, by Colin Self. 1963. Gouache, pencil and crayon on paper, 34.5 by 57 cm. (Richard Saltoun Gallery, London).