Cara Despain, ‘From Dust’: Viewing the American West through a Cold War Lens

Joanna Matuszak


What is most dangerous in violence is its rationality. Of course violence itself is terrible. But the deepest root of violence and its permanence come out of the form of the rationality we use … Between violence and rationality there is no incompatibility.

Michel Foucault

1 Millicent Dillon and Michel Foucault, ‘Conversation with Michel Foucault’, The Threepenny Review, No 1, 1980, pp 4–5
Cara Despain’s exhibition ‘From Dust’, at the Southern Utah Museum of Art in Cedar City, does not pose questions – and, at first, I found that problematic. Instead, the artist documents compromising actions taken by the United States government and condoned by the rationale of the Cold War. As the adage says: ‘The end justifies the means’. The artworks in ‘From Dust’ illustrate the effects of the government’s violence against the inhabitants and lands of the western regions of the US, as well as the significance of official propaganda and popular culture in extenuating or camouflaging such violence. Ironically, during the Cold War, the US and its Western allies typically castigated the Soviets for such deeds while remaining silent about their own actions. Admittedly, any questions Despain could have asked would have been merely rhetorical.

The works in ‘From Dust’ address two intertwined stories: uranium mining in the western states of the Colorado Plateau, predominantly in the Navajo Nation, and the nuclear testing conducted at the Nevada Test Site between 1951 and 1992. For Despain, these are not distant events but have personal resonance. At the time of the testing at the Nevada Test Site, the artist’s mother’s family lived west of Cedar City. Despain, who is currently based in Miami, was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1983, and grew up hearing stories about ‘downwinders’: people who might have been exposed to radiation from nuclear fallout. Many of her artistic projects explore the theme of the romanticised American Frontier contrasted with actual land use in the western territories. From air pollution to extensive fires, Despain focuses on the myriad changes that human activity has wrought on the earth’s natural systems during the Anthropocene epoch. ‘From Dust’ continued her examination of such problems as they unfolded during the specific political circumstances of the Cold War.

Despain introduced the exhibition with an informative wall text that allowed viewers, especially those unfamiliar with this part of Cold War history, to contextualise the works in an accessible manner. The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), which supervised the nuclear tests, chose the area in Nevada for its presumed remoteness and the relatively small population. The first nuclear test took place on 27 January 1951. The AEC continuously misinformed the citizens of the region of eastern Nevada, northern Arizona and southern Utah, claiming that radioactive fallout was not harmful and did not reach hazardous levels, yet tests were postponed when the fallout cloud was to head south over heavily-populated Las Vegas. Information about livestock dying at local ranches after the first atomic tests was excluded from official reports, just as the sudden rise in deadly leukaemia among children was not investigated in relation to the fallout, and the government continued the atomic tests unobstructed.

While nuclear bombs were detonated at the Nevada Test Site to the west of Cedar City, to the east, the uranium that fed the bombs was being mined on a massive scale from the time of the end of World War II. The AEC continued its politics of withholding information: miners were not told about the hazards of radioactivity, and no safety measures were introduced to protect them. Many developed lung cancers. Even after the mines’ closure, contaminated soil and water near the mines have continued to expose generations of Indigenous people to radioactive elements. Not far from the operating mines, in Monument Valley, John Ford created cinematic incarnations of the
nineteenth-century western frontier, helping to spread the myth of the Old West via popular culture and thus diverting public attention from the exploitation of the region through Cold War geopolitics. Winning the Cold War arms race, and by any means necessary, was the goal, and the dissemination of romanticised views of western landscapes among the general public helped that cause.

‘From Dust’ was composed of three immersive and thematically interrelated, yet visually and sensorially diverse works: a relief sculpture, a sound installation and a video installation. The relief sculpture, *Iodine-131*, refers to the radioisotope responsible for so much destruction of human and natural life. This thickly textured, almost 1.5m² panel represents the terrain of the Nevada Test Site. Despain translated satellite imagery of the area into a three-dimensional relief cast in gypsum concrete. It brings to mind raised relief maps of the US states, of national parks and other remarkable localities. Despain, however, defamiliarises this common educational object by aestheticising it; she excludes geographical names and magnifies the area so that concavities indicate the many craters created by underground nuclear explosions. One can focus on the formal elements and experience the tactile and aesthetic qualities of the large cast offset from the wall, with light emanating from behind it. Standing up close, viewers are subdued by its size; it is in *their* space.
The object radiates in the style of the non-representational Light and Space artworks of the 1960s and 1970s (such as Doug Wheeler’s Encasements series), but their avoidance of subject matter is renounced by Despain with the help of a concrete title and the explanatory exhibition label. The radiating work alludes to radiation from the titular Iodine-131 and its pernicious and pervasive devastation. As with raised relief maps, the sculpted surface of Despain’s cast encourages viewers to desire haptic contact. Had I been allowed to touch it, my sensory experience would have been augmented by an immediate awareness that Despain’s work exposes the havoc of the Anthropocene.

The sound installation, on the record: hot milk/yellow cake, vol 1, invites real, albeit constrained, interaction with the viewer. A portable, retro-style turntable, with a vinyl record ready to be played, sits on a pedestal. As soon as a visitor drops the needle, a shared aural space is created. This modern replica of an old turntable not only induces physical interactivity – a feature unusual in immersive sound installations – but also influences the reception of the audio component. It transports viewers to the past; although if visitors from the generation of downwinders feel nostalgic for the times when they and their parents listened to vinyl records, younger viewers might have been challenged by having to operate this unfamiliar device. The interior lid of the record player features a colour photograph showing a panorama of Monument Valley. From afar the image seems alluring, and if
visitors did not try to decipher the barely visible audio list – printed in a small font and in a colour similar to the background – they would have been surprised to hear what Despain recorded on the record. Side one – hot milk – alludes to the expression ‘hot’ dirt, meaning radioactive dirt. This side contains an audio excerpt from the 1951 Duck and Cover educational film for children and three interviews with downwinders, one of them taken from the online Downwinders of Utah Archive. Side two, yellow cake – a name commonly used for a solid form of mixed uranium oxide – includes excerpts from the 1955 song ‘Uranium Fever’, the 2000 documentary The Return of Navajo Boy and two interviews with Navajo activists who draw attention to the uranium legacy (one of which is available on the website of the Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment). The sound is muffled, as if the record were scratched. Maybe it has been played repeatedly and thus these stories are well known? But are they?

The last work in the exhibition seems to offer answers. The video installation Monument appropriates film footage from the final scene of John Ford’s The Searchers (1956), a film starring John Wayne as Ethan Edwards and shot in Monument Valley (which is on Navajo Nation land). Aptly installed in a dark, narrow space, it evokes the experience of entering a movie theatre. Despain loops footage of less than a minute long and slows the soundtrack. The artist also layers in audio of the detonation of a nuclear bomb called Annie, one of eleven nuclear tests conducted in the Upshot-Knothole Operation in 1953. In a jarring act of erasure, Despain removes the body of John Wayne, leaving only his hat, trouser bottoms and boots visible as he turns to walk away into the desert. Through this disembodied figure of the iconic protagonist of popular westerns, the desert background appears unobstructed as if turned into the foreground. Viewers are prevented from losing themselves in the cinematic construct of the western frontier. Despain again uses defamiliarisation to draw attention to the role of popular culture – from westerns like The Searchers and songs such as ‘Uranium Fever’ – in creating illusions about the American west and obscuring its reality. Despain’s work addresses the obfuscation of the harm and devastation these actions had on the land and its people. Monument conveys that the stories told in the interviews and the documentary, played on the squeaking hot milk/yellow cake record, are little known, muted by official Cold War propaganda and the entertainment industry.

Despain authored her own texts for the exhibition, unpacking the history she grapples with through her works. A part of the label for Monument, for example, reads

At the same time John Ford’s cast and crew were in Monument Valley, uranium companies were mining in the area, employing many of the same Navajo families that were also hosts and played roles in the films. I was thinking about how all these histories intersected in pop culture, and played out on the silver screen but people didn’t realize it at the time.

To some, the detail about the artist’s thoughts may seem too explicatory, especially considering that the work itself is rich enough, both visually and conceptually, to lend itself to unaided autonomous readings. Yet, despite the sense of didacticism present in the labels, there is room left for individual observations and interpretations.
The human figure was notably absent in this exhibition. Although surprising at first, this visual strategy effectively broadens the issue of nuclear arms testing. Traditionally, artists criticised acts of nuclear explosion by showing their effects, depicting the body and corporeality. One may recall Toshiko and Iri Maruki’s expressionistic paintings of the mangled bodies of Hiroshima survivors, figurative paintings created by the hibakusha, or Krzysztof Wodiczko’s Hiroshima Projection showing the trembling hands of the survivors and their descendants as they were recalling direct and indirect impacts of the atomic bomb on their lives. This visual strategy perhaps reflects the notion of biopolitics, where a power (biopower), such as the state, exercises control over human bodies and regulates the life of a population. As Michel Foucault argued, commonly the function of a biopower was to improve the lives of its population and to ensure their longevity, yet modern states have also committed genocide to secure the biological existence of their populations. This is what can be witnessed in figurative artworks addressing the nuclear bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The concept of biopolitics is not irrelevant for Despain’s works, because the US government and its agencies exerted biopower over the physical well-being of people living close to the Nevada Test Site and the miners extracting the uranium in the neighbouring states. Those living beings –

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humans as well as animals – were expendable. Despain, however, has translated the story of nuclear explosion into imagery that eschews figuration, which allows her to look beyond the realm of biopolitics. Instead, her works are realised within the so-called posthuman turn – a critical approach that abandons human-centred exceptionalism and does not place humans at the centre of the universe with nature at our endless disposal. Despain renounces the conventional humanistic framework and shows the effects of the nuclear arms race for the lands of the American west – for the soil, water and air. Some tenets of posthumanism have been present all along in the cultural traditions and cosmologies of many Indigenous peoples who were never anthropocentric in the first place and who championed an environmentally sensitive life. Thus, Despain’s approach is also an implicit acknowledgement of Indigenous traditions.

The omission of human figures and the focus on the natural environment are also significant in another way: Despain’s works stand in confrontation with canonical landscape imagery. Critical of landscapes that camouflage acts of Euro-American imperialism and the violent removal of Indigenous communities (and visualise the idea of Manifest Destiny) while touting a Romantic sublime vision of nature, Despain destabilises the conventions of the genre in her works. In Iodine-131 the artist literally changes our perspective: instead of presenting an idealised, grandiose panorama of a pristine and dramatic environment, she magnifies the effects of human actions on a non-spectacular terrain. In on the record: hot milk/yellow cake, vol 1, she overwrites the cliched panorama with titles of recordings that signal the human-caused destruction of the natural environment. In Monument, she erases the human figure to focus on natural surroundings. The works in the exhibition belong to the environmentally-engaged art that has been flourishing steadily since the 1990s, and they enter into an eco-critical dialogue with the canon of landscape art and address the politics of land use.

When the exhibition opened in September 2020, the Trump administration planned to increase nuclear capabilities and develop new classes of weapons, including nuclear warheads, having pulled the US out of some significant treaties. Even before the exhibition closed in May 2021, President Biden’s administration has announced the opposite strategy – the reduction of nuclear armaments. Despain’s ‘From Dust’ exhibition tacitly suggested that the development of nuclear arms has been connected to environmental racism and nuclear colonialism, and has participated in the exploitation of land and its residents. Nuclear weapons are political, not military – and such was Despain’s exhibition.

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