

## Michael Light Q&A with David Thompson For Eye Magazine, London October 2003:

**DT: *Full Moon* and *100 Suns* appear to be linked by a causal irony: without the propaganda imperatives of a cold war arms race, it seems unlikely that human beings would have shown such conviction in setting foot on the moon. Why aren't we living on the moon yet?**

ML: Twentieth century civilization's two most notable moments are indeed intimately linked, and both are inextricably bound up with violence and warfare. Hitler and the events he spurred into motion provided the final key for humanity to unlock the forces held in the very fabric of matter. Once the key turned and the door opened, the vast possibilities beyond that new threshold were immediately turned right back into the violence from which they sprang, albeit raising it to scale previously inconceivable. The instant militarization of tool-bearing humanity's greatest triumph become, without doubt, its greatest tragedy. Apollo would not have happened if it were not for the bomb and the distance between the United States and the Soviet Union: delivery of nuclear weapons by intercontinental ballistic missiles, wherein the warhead was rocketed into Earth orbit and reentered the target nation from outer space, was what drove the so-called "space race." At bottom, it was all about rockets and payloads and sizes of nuclear warheads; somewhere along the way both nations realized that they could stick animals on top of rockets and get them back alive almost as easily as they could destroy whole cities continents away at the push of a button. And indeed, the propaganda bang for the buck was immense. It is difficult in 2003 to remember just how total the opposition between the United States and the Soviet Union really was, how massive were each nation's commitments to the destruction of the other. The "space race" portion of the total amount spent on the cold war was a drop in the bucket, and it is astonishing that such a war never finally crossed the line into outright Armageddon. Something for humanity to take some pride in, actually, given the immediate weaponization of atomic energy.

Once the cold war drove America and the USSR to commit to Apollo and its Soviet equivalent, however, very real science and technological advancement was accomplished. Yes, at bottom the driving forces were military, and yes, the propaganda value was huge, but getting humans to the Moon was another tool-bearing moment of undeniable triumph, mastery, and true creativity. It was done peacefully, without national territorial claim, and provided essential hope to the species. It also resulted in a major maturation of our view of ourselves, by offering a view of our home from afar. While manned lunar exploration was framed in the narcissistic terms that have always characterized human civilization, it hammered home what might be called a "planetary perspective" and the concept of ineradicable limits and responsibilities even as we seemed to be breaking the last of them. My goal in FULL MOON, in a nutshell, was to show the moon as a place, as a landscape, as a world *not about us* — to show something beyond footprints, flags, cool hardware and Buzz and Neil.

The reason we are not living on the moon in 2003 is twofold: America's current war — while disturbingly parallel to the hysterias, excesses and false justifications of the Cold War — is not about ICBMs and nuclear weaponry delivered from outer space. And its people, like all those in the rest of the world, still see themselves as the most important things around, whatever the needs of other species or the planet itself. All those places that are inhospitable to us are generally considered non-entities, no-wheres unworthy of our attention. "Deserts." We even have difficulty taking responsibility for the best agricultural land in our own home, much less caring about a difficult, alien and exquisitely spare place 240,000 miles away.

**DT: *Full Moon* and *100 Suns* are sourced from scientific and military archives. Do you think of yourself primarily as a photographer, a historian, or an artist who combines curatorial taste with a photographer's eye? Just how conceptual is your art?**

ML: As an artist I have always been as concerned with making sense of the trillions of photographic images that already exist as I am with making my own. I tend not to distinguish between the two, which I suppose puts me in something of a conceptual camp, but certainly my own negative-making is easier to categorize. I am always a bit startled when someone refers to work which may have been made in my camera as "my" work — as if the work based on found imagery like FULL MOON and 100 SUNS had been fabricated by great legions of elves residing

under the polar ice cap. Who cares who was the actual photographer behind the camera? Richter's ATLAS is not about newspaper photographers and people who make postcards of the Alps; it's about the deep and fast-flowing river of images that surrounds us.

The crucial issue is the experience the book or show is creating in the viewer. It's important to remember that for 30 years in the case of FULL MOON, and for almost 60 in the case of 100 SUNS, no one had done anything with these subjects, these publicly-available piles of photographs owned by everyone and no one, until I came along and ran them through a certain sensibility and made rather odd textless artist's books out of them. The books are known because I worked very hard to get their strange and complex visual narratives published in a trade context (and have a brilliant team of publishers worldwide, led by the great British editor and book artist Mark Holborn), but they are unique, and far more more than good-looking collections of historical imagery. Not to raise myself up too high — there has been plenty of good truly artistic work on both subjects with filmic imagery -- but not with stills.

At bottom I am artistically concerned with power and landscape, and how we as humans relate to vastness -- to that point at which our ego and sense of efficaciousness crumbles. Violence, mostly of the human kind, and deeply seductive beauty, pervade all my work. I am an Americanist, in the sense that all my deepest artistic concerns are played out on a daily level here right here at home, and I have spent a lifetime trying to figure this country out, as well as respond to the terror and splendor of daily existence.

I am a bookmaker first and foremost, whether with found historical imagery or with my own negative-making: the book form allows a kind of distillation and comprehension that I require to get through life. Of course such distillation is wholly artificial, but then so is all art and all comprehension -- knowing is a form of elegant distillation. Books are also perfectly suited to photography's reproducibility, and can be fantastically democratic idea-containers if published intelligently. Shows come down, books are forever. And they are cheap in comparison to other art forms. I do both the democratic and the fetishized elite — something like FULL MOON or 100 SUNS in multiple editions worldwide, big runs, with an affordable price and good but not stellar production values — and something like my recent 36" high, handmade book of my latest aerial photographic work over the the Great Basin area of the US, editioned eight and way out of reach of most people's libraries.

The book form also offers a degree of control and pacing that an exhibition never can — one can always start in the middle, or move right to left, but one can never re-sequence the narrative or see more than the pages made specifically available. In that sense the book form is perfect for intrinsically "hot" imagery like really stunning images of light in the vacuum of space, or the loaded, taboo-ridden world of nuclear detonations, or a book of war imagery — difficult and vast subjects. One can pace a viewer more carefully and exactly, orchestrate an experience on a deeper level, more along the lines of music than history or science.

My reasons for doing work based on preexisting photographs are complex. One of the most fundamental drives is that as a photographer, there are places and events and times that I simply would like to visit and see for myself. Obviously I can't make work anytime or anyplace but here and now, and so historical records are the next best thing if I want to go somewhere else. And if one goes in deep enough, long enough, one does feel that one *is* there, more even than those who actually *were* there, because the view one gains is broader, more comprehensive, and more leisurely than that enjoyed by any of the photographers who made the actual images. Of course the view from the archive is purely, *only* photographic, but that appeals to the distilled fetishist in me. There are also those subjects that are of interest but that would be inaccessible to me even if they were occurring in the present — like being an astronaut, or getting access to a nuclear test without being a weaponeer — again, archival photographs allow me to go to a place otherwise out of reach. And I certainly make my books for myself first, for private and rather selfish reasons.

Then there is the subject of vastness itself: just as I am interested in elemental presences and absences and time and space and so forth, I am interested in trying to wrap my head around really big historical events, things that all of humanity has an interest in. How does one, as a relatively ignorant non-expert citizen, begin to comprehend the Universe? Or what we call "outer space"? How can one come to understand something so complex as a nuclear reaction? A human-orchestrated Armageddon? My works that deal with subjects of historical interest are on a cer-

tain level attempts to educate myself, to come to some terms with a wholly overwhelming subject. The images themselves were never made in the context of art, nor do I see them as art even after passing through my complex (though deliberately restrained) digital process of manipulation, but the *experience* of the book or show in the mind, body and soul of the viewer happens as if the images were indeed art. The experience is art. I am interested in creating a psychological journey that occurs way way down in the inner core of perception, rather inexplicably, perhaps equal parts wonder and horror, such that a viewer comes out the other side permanently changed, with new knowledge that cannot be taken away. That viewer is then able to tackle actual chronological history, the intricacies of science, the puffery of national imperialism, the glamour of technology, or whatever, after gaining the primal comprehension that accompanies art. My aim is musical, using most unmusical materials. I also consider my books themselves, as objects, to very much be art, whatever the status of the images inside them.

I take pleasure in working with the “non-art” photographs that reside in public archives, essentially authorless and owned by the world itself, because I find the world of “fine art photography” to be pretty silly and pretentious. I appreciate true artistic contribution to any medium as much as any other committed artist might, but so much of “art” photography revolves around the deification of technique and materials and process, not to mention the machines that all photography employs. It’s all so much photo-macrame. My approach is to disregard certain sacred cows. Who cares what tool one uses, whether you made the picture or someone else did, whether the photographer was Eisenstadt, a terrified soldier in a trench while a nuclear bomb is exploding two miles distant, or a test-pilot astronaut shooting on the moon with a chest-mounted Hasselblad without a viewfinder? What does the image mean, of itself? What does it mean after you use it a certain way? The issue, in terms of making art, is what the artist is trying to say; any tools at hand can — and should — be used to express a set of good ideas. For me it’s the idea that counts, which I guess does make me something of a conceptualist. Where I differ from much conceptual art is in the dryness of the execution — and in the fact that I’m a passionate advocate for execution itself, and the physicality of the material object. Ideas are primal, but they must be seductive in my world.

**DT: In your 'archival' books, you're named as the author, yet none of the images were originally taken by yourself. How much 'post-production' is involved? What role, if any, is played by your own photographic techniques and digital manipulation?**

ML: I think I’ve answered this question above. I should say that there is quite a bit of “post-production” in works like FULL MOON and 100 SUNS -- many decisions, many months that can easily run into years — but I don’t think the extensiveness of my digital involvement with the images makes them “art”, or me their “author.” What is art, and what I am the creator of, are my books and the exhibitions that spring from them. As an aside, I should say that while my digital involvement is extensive, I limit it with historical, iconic images to the equivalent of making a really fine print in a conventional darkroom. I do not add pixels or remove them (other than spotting), I don’t change basic colors, and I try to respect what is the fundamental spirit of the archival print or negative or transparency that I am working with. FULL MOON was all about removing photographic evidence, about creating a modernist window through which the viewer could fall right onto the surface of the moon, and 100 SUNS revolves around an opposite axis, a postmodern one that acknowledges the archival, photographic objecthood of the material at every step. For the former I sought out the closest thing to the original I could find — one generation away in a slightly delusional quest to “possess” the moon — and for the latter I simply went to two archives and re-photographed and scanned faded, written-upon, creased, punch-holed and worn copies of copies of copies. The detonations that comprise 100 SUNS are tremendously beautiful, of course, because that was part of what I was looking for and beauty is a large player in the story I wanted to tell, but the photographs themselves were also breathtakingly beautiful themselves, as objects, because they reeked of an actual cultural moment that all those alive from 1945 to 1962 underwent, the era of atmospheric testing.

**DT: Both books deal with subjects that are epic in scale, symbolically resonant and loaded with implications. Although you take great care to let the images speak for themselves, the subject matter almost inevitably invites questions and discussion. Is social commentary an intrinsic (if largely non-textual) aspect of your work? Or are you drawn to high drama primarily for aesthetic reasons?**

ML: The short answer to your question is yes, social commentary is an intrinsic, though essentially non-textual, aspect of my work. I don’t consider myself an activist, per se, but I am a committed environmentalist and it informs

my work as an artist. I see all my work as meditations about landscape, about how we relate to the environment around us and to each other, and in my opinion serious contemporary artistic production dealing with landscape must deal with politics and violence in some way, whether explicit or implied. Otherwise it's just fluff, decoration for those wanting false comfort and a delusionally ahistorical and apolitical world. My hero is Robert Adams, not Ansel Adams. Both employ beauty, but to wildly divergent ends. The world is deeply marred, because of humans, and is only becoming more so: the sooner we deal with that fact, the sooner we can take responsibility and begin to live more lightly, as if we were not the only inhabitants of the planet.

Certainly I love high drama, but only because as humans we are so dramatic ourselves. Nothing more dramatic than the human saga, or at least that's how we seem to feel about it. I think it's more accurate to say, however, that I am drawn to the aesthetic of largeness, of all that is beyond ourselves, precisely because we'd be better off if we didn't go around feeling like we were the biggest and most important things around. I like dealing with maximal issues in a minimal way.

**DT: Your imagery often combines the spectacular and inspectable, and your exhibitions feature enormous prints, suggestive of a cinema screen. Does the moving image interest you?**

ML: Interesting question. The FULL MOON exhibition did have some very large prints even by today's post-Gursky-inflated scale, and I do print my aerial work quite large at 40"x50", but the exhibition of 100 SUNS, which opened in mid-October, is comprised of a hundred images ranging in size from 11"x14" to 32"x40." Three quarters of the show is comprised of 11"x14s" and 16"x20s", so I am not simply interested in bigness for bigness' sake. Again it's idea-driven: with 100 SUNS I wanted to honor the "objecthood" of these photographs from an archive, and the way to do that was to keep them smaller and more intimate. And it was also quite clear that they did not need overstatement — a little Armageddon goes a long way — spectacular things can come in small packages, and can be more spectacular for it. The composite landscape panoramas of FULL MOON just cried out for scale — and I was blessed with 18' high ceilings in that last room at the Hayward Gallery. Whether large or small, what is important to me is a sense of photographic *physicality*.

What is particularly cinematic about 100 SUNS are the photographers themselves and the soldiers they photographed — Lookout Mountain Airforce Station, which was charged with imaging the tests, was deliberately based in Hollywood, and drew on the best American cinematic talent. America is nothing if not a nation of production values. And if Lookout Mountain were operating today it would be based just a stone's throw North, in the San Fernando Valley, home to all things pornographic. The pornographic resonance has not been lost on me, certainly. *Climax? Romeo?* My favorite nuclear test name is *Dead*, and it's not some *petit mort* under discussion, either.

The moving image does interest me very much, however, and I dabble in it via video, but it's an interest of appreciation rather than production. Although my books are highly cinematic narratives, and my prints can be large to the point of immersion, my enduring passion is the still image precisely because it is "inspectable," as you put it, in a way that is wholly different from the ebb and flow of experience itself. This is the true intrinsic power of the photograph for me — the ability to stop time and meditate on a frozen moment such that it can expand to proportions and meanings not otherwise perceptible. Films of nuclear detonations, while fascinating to me, are all about the spectacle and not enough about inspection, or for that matter, retrospection. With certain subjects films offer too much: again, my interest lies with maximal issues dealt with in a minimal way.

**DT: I gather your recent work involves you hanging perilously out of aeroplanes. Care to elaborate?**

ML: Well, that's a bit overly-glamorous in description, not to mention a characterization that doesn't really do justice to my profound sense of self-preservation, or deeply serious and intellectual mien. Mike Light the bungee-jumping, thrill-seeking *artiste d'extreme*. Hmm. It is true that I am photographing traces of humanity in big empty spaces in the American deserts with large cameras from small rented, piloted by generally large retired U.S. Marine Corps pilots. It is true that I am happiest when I can have the door removed, so that I get a larger field of view for a very wide angle lens. It is true that I take a piece of duct tape and wrap it around my seat belt buckle so I don't inadvertently fall a thousand feet or so when we are in a tight circle over some scene so beautiful and harsh at 6:47

am that you can't help but ecstatically yell out loud, into air that's rushing by at seventy or eighty miles an hour. And it is true that it's so much fun to make those exposures, and see those spaces, that some little part of me thinks it will never be art. Then I remember that art and play are not necessarily exclusive, and in fact are intrinsically linked.

Then I photograph the great modern template called Los Angeles, where the air is so thick and refractive it's pure white -- air that has become *terrestrial*, versus the black clear vacuum of lunar skies -- and I realize I'm onto something pretty deep. Start with geology, end with our own limitlessly fascinating ongoing apocalypse. Deal with some vertigo in the meantime. Stay tuned.

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