

## **100 SUNS Q&A between Giulio Piovesan, *Photo Italia*, and Michael Light**

April 14, 2004

**GP: I share with you a deep love for pictures, both images and physical objects. But don't you think that the meaning of these detonations might be underestimated by a common viewer, used to watching action movies and spectacular images? Don't you think that cinema and television are annihilating the difference between our perception of a real atomic test and that of a fake one? Don't you think that the viewer might be fascinated more by the entertainment side of it all than by the inspection of the event offered by photography?**

ML: I think that the meaning of a great many images in the larger culture of the West are "underestimated" by viewers, both visually sophisticated ones and those less so. Certainly cinema, television, print photographic media, advertising and computerized virtual reality are all testing our capacity to perceive the difference between reality and fantasy in every arena, and have been for a long time now. These larger problems and challenges apply to many endeavors, not least of which was my own, which was to come up with a fresh way to make a visual book about a totally overwhelming scientific, political and military fact that none of us likes to think about. In making 100 SUNS I chose to give the benefit of the doubt to my prospective reader, by assuming that he or she does not need to be told that war, destruction and death is a bad thing, much less that nuclear weapons increase age-old human capacities to new levels of complete extermination of life on Earth. I chose to assume that my prospective reader has some capacity to understand irony and black humor, as well as an ability to navigate profoundly ambiguous arenas of human culture. I chose to make a complicated, layered artist's book on the subject, rather than a political tract or historical survey. Beauty, power and seduction comprise integral elements in the larger investigation I wanted to make, just as horror, revulsion, anger and sadness do. It is not my job as an artist to dumb down my work because it may be misinterpreted or misused by a prospective audience, but I will say that I have always felt that 100 SUNS is a book for adults, not children or young adolescents. If I could somehow prevent kids from seeing it, I absolutely would, both because of the danger that they might one-dimensionally think the images were "cool" or "extreme" and because full comprehension of the horrors that humans can perpetrate on one other can be so specially destructive to the young. I agonized about this and still do, but this worry over the young was never enough to keep me from doing the work or publishing the book, because I believe it is so important for adults to grapple with this issue. Photography can go only so far as a carrier of meaning in our visually-saturated and commerce-manipulated age, and I think 100 SUNS deliberately takes that photographic meaning right to the edge of comprehension, but I also believe the photographic image can still crash through all the white noise of our lives and create understanding and knowledge, if handled carefully. The risk of possible misunderstanding by some (or in the case of children, probable misunderstanding by most) does not merit oversimplification or outright censorship.

**GP: Looking at the images of your book I find myself caught between two different conditions: the aesthetic pleasure produced by the images and the awareness of the tragedy associated with the events. Do you think that we, as human beings who are responsible for the tests, have the right to enjoy these photographs and express comments on their aesthetic value?**

ML: We have not only the right, but a specific duty, to honestly and unflinchingly look at all aspects of our world, both the one we create as humans and the one we are lucky enough to inhabit as a species. If the examination of a particular aspect elicits feelings of pleasure or revulsion, then we should be aware of that and think about why. It becomes particularly complicated when feelings generally associated with one arena arise in areas considered their polar opposite – but that complication does not mean we should not honestly examine an issue. Why is power, in all its forms, so seductive? Why have civilizations since the beginning of history thrilled to warfare, as much as been horrified by it? Why do humans value so value mastery and control of things, each other, and the natural world? Why do they respond to fundamental things like fire with such primal interest, or consider certain naturally-occurring formations aesthetically beautiful, be they a thunderstorm or cloud formations created by the detonation of a hydrogen bomb?

Part of the point of *100 SUNS* is not to shy away from the simple fact that, for whatever reasons, humans do find aspects of things like nuclear detonations attractive, beautiful and aesthetic. Scientists, politicians, weapon engineers and the general public were equally seduced and repelled by atomic weapons in the last century, and continue to be today. To boldly say so outright is taboo, but that is why *100 SUNS* hopefully advances the dialogue on the subject, and why hopefully as a book it attains the complications and deeper meanings we traditionally associate with art (which these images most decidedly are not, however beguiling they may be). It is my belief that the more sophisticated and knowledgeable we are about the full range of our responses to something like nuclear power, the better stewards of it we will be. On this particular subject, there is of course no room for error in our stewardship.

**GP: You write that you are concerned about the environment and the human race's attitude towards the Earth, not to mention the destructive potentials of nuclear warfare. Why did you choose to produce a book with such suggestive images of nuclear detonation, rather than one containing more shocking pictures documenting the direct effect on landscape and people of such explosions?**

ML: Again, my intention was not to produce an environmental, political or moral tract: my intention was to make an artist's book that would make its points through deliberate breaking of taboos, liberal use of irony, saying one thing while meaning another, and the rage implied by putting something like an atomic detonation into a distilled, elegant package. *100 SUNS* is a view from what might be called the "American imperial veranda," using very carefully-produced imagery made by the American government and military while nuclear detonations were still atmospheric and photographable – it is very

definitely not the view of the victims at Hiroshima or Nagasaki, nor did I want to go down that road by including even so much as a single image of those events. It would have completely changed the essence of my work, which can be seen as a very carefully constructed, extremely dark haiku of implication. In the same way, it was imperative to me that there be no introduction to the book written by either a scientific or moral authority – something that a number of publishers wanted – which would offer a kind of hand-holding to a reader that I very much wanted to keep alone on a difficult journey, thinking for him or herself. There are many crucial and important works on the subject that take the more direct approach you mention; *100 SUNS* comes at the material a different way and hopefully goes places other works don't.

**GP: Nuclear weapons were conceived during the Cold War. Nowadays, although some countries are still menacing the Earth with them (India and Pakistan, for instance), the immediate danger seems to come from nuclear waste, such as old nuclear submarines and missiles that need to be disposed of. Do you think that the images in *100 SUNS* have the same appeal to the contemporary public as they may have had to people living in the 50's and 60's?**

ML: Nuclear weapons were in fact conceived in the 1930's, and made real in the 1940's - well before the beginning of the Cold War. While the geopolitical conflicts of that war seem now to be over, the Earth is still very much menaced by all nations with nuclear weaponry, not least that nation that harbors the most "Weapons of Mass Destruction" on the planet, America. While they certainly are the two nations currently most engaged in a kind of nuclear brinkmanship, India and Pakistan should not be singled out as the only two nations menacing the planet with nuclear weapons. All nuclear powers are constantly engaged in games of intimidation and brinkmanship with all other nation-states, which is why it is so hard for those in the nuclear club to reduce or renounce nuclear weapons, and why non-members continually seek to join the club. While issues of nuclear waste remain have always been important, in my opinion the biggest nuclear danger today is that of proliferation to new nation-states, and even more worryingly, possible proliferation to stateless terrorist entities. I believe the images in *100 SUNS* are just as relevant to the contemporary public today as they were to people living in the 50's and 60's, if not more so – because images from the Cold War period of atmospheric testing comprise the only photographic documentation we have of this cultural fact that will be with us until the end of civilized time. Let's not forget that the United States detonated 217 tests atmospherically from 1945 to 1962, and some 800 more underground from 1963 to 1992. Now the Bush Administration wants to begin U.S. nuclear testing again, under the justification of having new and better weapons to fight terrorism – the "bunker-buster" bomb, amongst other wholly unusable and inappropriate weapons.

**GP: You write that "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", and the book's title references J. Robert Oppenheimer's recitation about an atomic explosion being "brighter than a thousand suns." Nowadays we are**

**studying the human genome, which is the fabric of life itself and therefore is connected to the concept of birth. How do you see this shift in man's ability to manipulate the planet's life, from the extremely big to the extremely small? It looks like we are constantly attracted by what we cannot safely handle.**

ML: I would not say that we are attracted by what we can't safely handle – the jury is, after all, still out on what we can and cannot manage – but I do think tool-bearing humans have done their best to understand, and then fully manipulate, their world since the dawn of time. I see no reason for this to ever change; it would seem to be one of the most, if not **the** most, fundamental aspects of what it is to be human. Big and small have become one and the same – nuclear knowledge with its vast consequences came about by investigation on the smallest of scales; present-day genomic explorations of life may well dwarf the implications of atomic control of matter. There is a human urge to discover new things on the outer frontiers of knowledge, which by definition means we are often in over our heads. I would say, however, that the risks associated with this sort of scientific exploration pale in comparison to simple things that we apparently can't yet handle on this planet, things as basic as nutrition and birth control.

**GP: You write that images of nuclear detonations remind us of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but have deliberately left images of those events out of your book. Could you explain why? It seems that you are concerned more about the potentialities of nuclear warfare than the worst events that actually have occurred.**

ML: I am deeply concerned about both the nuclear past and the nuclear present. I think I've already answered your question, but again, 100 SUNS takes a very particular approach and very particular meaning arises from that approach. Aside from what I consider to be the benefits of subtlety, neutrality and ambiguity, I also feel that when dealing with subjects as vast and overwhelming as nuclear matters, it is better to keep things very focused and simple – even primal. I chose that simple form and stuck with it, and it excluded images of victims, which is not to say that works including those images, or even entirely based on them, are not absolutely necessary and worthwhile.

**GP: What are your next projects? Will you focus on your aerial photographs of the American landscape, or keep on working with archive material as well? If so, what images are you going to dig up next?**

ML: I expect to focus on my aerial survey of the American environment for at least the next decade, and my next big archival project may well focus on the Second World War, using images from many countries that were involved.