



Boltzman (1999) 20 x 26 inches. Oil on canvas.

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Art Review

Joy Garnett, "Buster-Jangle"

Debs & Co., through Sat 5.

by Tim Griffin

How many atomic bombs did the U.S. explode between the years 1945 and 1963? Twenty? Fifty? One hundred, maybe? Try 354, detonated above ground, under the sea and even in midair, where high-ocean or desert breezes could keep their radioactive particles aloft for hours. Painter Joy Garnett took these tests as her subject when she discovered a cache of photos of the blasts on the Web—many of which had only recently become available through the Freedom of Information Act. Some of these images are official government records; others are snapshots by soldiers who were fatefully exposed to the experiments at close range. Garnett's interest has its deepest roots in the latter: Many of the G.I.'s said that the towering atomic mushrooms were the most beautiful things they'd ever seen.

It's in this paradoxical realm of terrible beauty that the canvases are most engaging, tying together the histories of the bomb and American landscape painting. Cactus plants are silhouetted in the foreground of *Buster-Jangle*, a desert scene dominated by a white-hot orb of light that suggests the contoured, expressionistic landscapes of Thomas Hart Benton. In *Cherokee*, horizontal stretches of cloud are illuminated by a scorching red light that could easily have come from the palette of Frederick Church. Many of the canvases evoke the work of Rothko; *Cherry Bomb*, a long horizontal canvas featuring a sizzled field of red broken by a single band of pink, recalls Barnett Newman. Most of the titles themselves, which Garnett took from actual test-project names, would nicely fit the Abstract Expressionist mold. Who do you think came up with a title like *Apache*: Jackson Pollock or the Atomic Energy Commission?

Of the 60 paintings in this series, Garnett chose to show only 13, an admirable penchant for self-editing that nevertheless has a darker parallel in current events. In the wake of the Los Alamos spy scare, government agencies are curtailing the declassification of these images. So these paintings may wind up commemorating not only atomic tests, but the brief time when their number and visual power were publicly acknowledged.

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