

SWANS: Slow War Against the Nuclear State

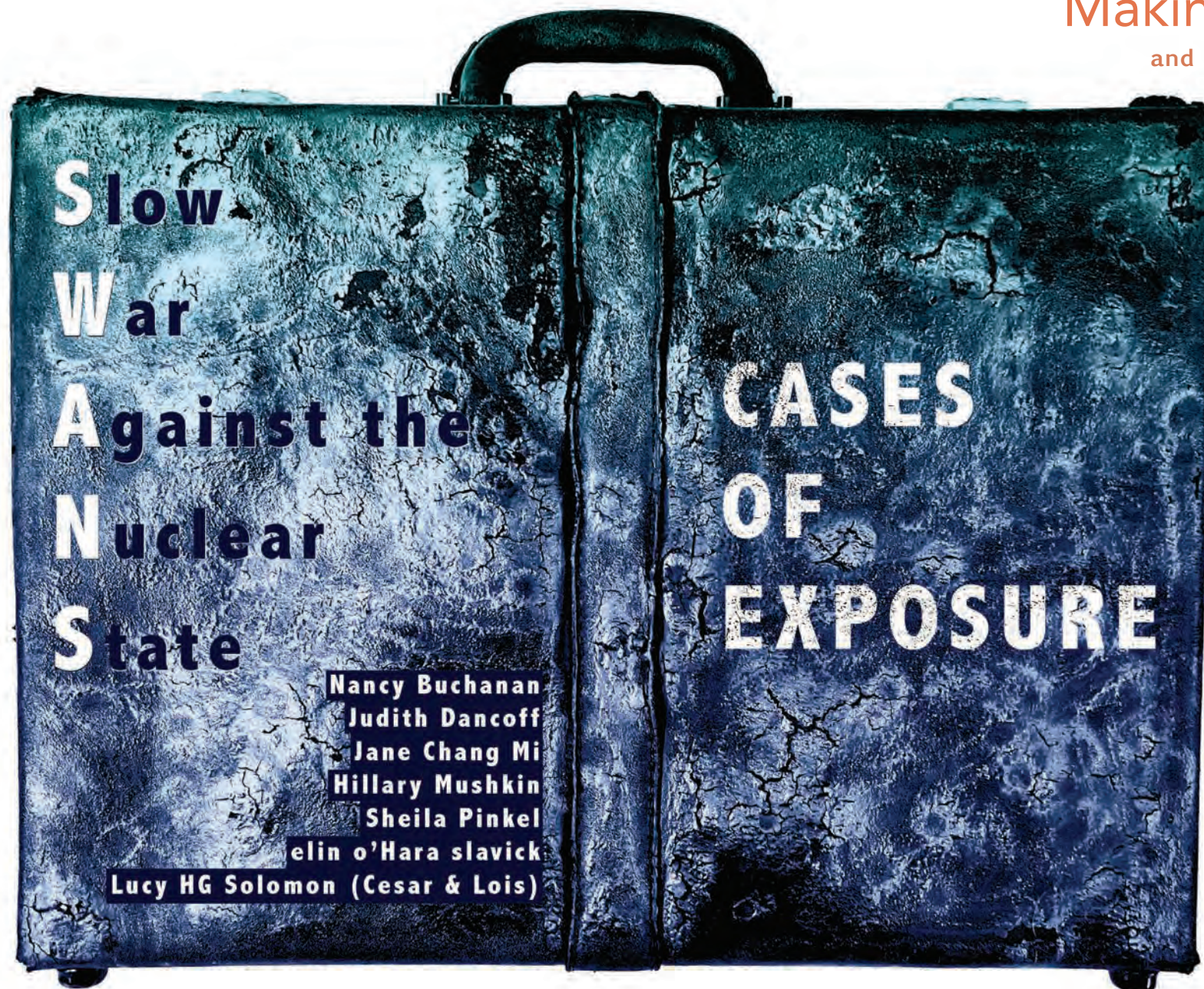
Making Art After Alamogordo

and Hiroshima and Bikini Atoll and Chernobyl and Fukushima and...

essay by James MacDevitt

James MacDevitt is director and curator of Cerritos College Art Gallery and Associate Professor of Visual and Cultural Studies at Cerritos College. His essay coincides with *Cases of Exposure* (October - December, 2023) at Cerritos College Art Gallery and a panel presentation by SWANS at California State University.

The cultural theorist Theodor Adorno famously claimed that "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric."¹ The implied danger, generalized perhaps to any and all artmaking, is that the most abhorrent and grotesque aspects of human suffering are inherently diminished when filtered through the limiting contrivances of purely aesthetic formulations (i.e. one always runs the risk of their art devolving into ruin porn or even participating in a kind of genocidal sublime). As she often did, however, the philosopher Hannah Arendt had a slightly contrarian take on the whole matter, pointing out that, despite these risks, art is the only tool at our personal and collective disposal by which such trauma can ever be truly tolerated and, more importantly, ultimately rectified. Art, by this measure, functions as a much-needed mechanism for revealing the deeper meanings "of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of happenings."²



Images (clockwise from bottom)
Endless Studies and Reports, elin o'Hara slavick (2023)
Milk Pathway Briefcase, Judith Dancoff (2023)
avec mon amical souvenir, Jane Chang Mi (2019)
 detail of *Brief Scroll*, Nancy Buchanan (2023)
 detail of *Hiroshima Again?*, Sheila Pinkel (2023)
Don't pick the blueberries, Lucy HG Solomon (2023)

Images
 center. *Cases of Exposure* exhibition image design by James MacDevitt with
Hibakujumoku (A-bombed) Briefcase, elin o'Hara slavick (2023)
 top. Detail of *There Have Been 528 Atmospheric, Above-Ground Nuclear Tests to Date*,
 elin o'Hara slavick (2022)
 lower right. *Studies for Project Camel*, Hillary Mushkin (2023)



A Chain of Reactions

If ever there was “an unbearable sequence of happenings” in human history, it was the invention, production, and deployment of the first atomic bomb. The Manhattan Project worked to harness the very smallest of microscopic chain reactions and amplified its destructive impact exponentially: nuclear fission rippling outward, cutting a swath through time and space. The resulting horror was, of course, instantaneous, melting the sands of Alamogordo in New Mexico and, shortly thereafter, eviscerating flesh in the irradiated cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, as Akira Mizuta Lippit points out, “the initial destruction was followed by waves of invisible radiation, which infiltrated the survivors’ bodies imperceptibly. What began as a spectacular attack ended as a form of violent invisibility.”³ In the decades of the so-called Cold War that followed, this violently invisible specter continued to haunt the world, almost unchecked—nuclear testing exploded, both in size and in number; nuclear arsenals were irresponsibly expanded and nuclear power plants were recklessly erected. The nuclear-industrial complex has now become all too normalized, not unlike the damaging radiation that metastasized in the bodies of Japanese *hibakusha*, those exposed near to the hypocenter in Hiroshima, as well as those sickened later through ingestion or groundshine, especially by living and/or working near test sites, extraction zones, or production facilities around the world (often, it should be noted, this means Indigenous communities; like the Marshallese displaced by Operation Castle or the members of the Navajo Nation surrounded by the remnants of over two hundred uranium mines), the global *hibakusha*, as Robert A. Jacobs describes them.”⁴

SWANS: Slow War Against the Nuclear State

Our current nuclear normal finds itself, not surprisingly, at a critical juncture. Authoritarianism is on the rise, conflicts are growing, and the global institutions and international treaties that have historically restrained nuclear ambitions, however minimally, have begun to severely fray. Most recently, Vladimir Putin signaled Russia would be pulling out of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, suggesting the start of a whole new destructive cycle to the nuclear arms race. Unfortunately, it’s at this very moment of increased danger that awareness of the global threat of nuclear annihilation has largely diminished. As Arendt well understood, moments like this demand that storytellers and artists piece the disparate fragments of the puzzle together in order to reveal their deeper implications. The members of a recently-formed art collective, SWANS (or Slow War Against the Nuclear State), have given themselves just such a mandate. Their exhibition at the Cerritos College Art Gallery, *Cases of Exposure*, proves not only that art after Hiroshima can, and should, exist, but that it serves an absolutely vital role in confronting the horrors of our past and counteracting any (potential) future fallout. Each an artist with laudable practices of their own, SWANS consists of Nancy Buchanan, Judith Dancoff, Jane Chang Mi, Hillary Mushkin, Sheila Pinkel, elin o’Hara slavick, and Lucy HG Solomon (of Cesar & Lois). Both collectively and independently, these seven women artists explore personal, political, geographic, scientific, and militaristic conditions through an irradiated lens, focused on the nexus of violence and borders, the body and war, memory and history, nuclear power and ecosystems, and weapons and waste. Some are the daughters of nuclear physicists, some the daughters of anti-nuclear activists, and some work (or have worked) at institutions linked to the origin of the bomb itself. All understand, through either firsthand experience or close proximity, the specific dangers of our nuclear age and make work to address, as Howard Zinn explains in the foreword to elin o’Hara slavick’s monograph *Bomb After Bomb: A Violent Cartography*, “that failure of imagination [which] is critical to explaining why we still have wars, why we accept bombing as a common accompaniment to our foreign policies, without horror and disgust.”⁵

Cases of Exposure

In a subtle play on the titular phrase, briefcases are the common denominator in the current SWANS exhibition, highlighting the many ways these seemingly innocuous, bureaucratic devices serve as both symbols of the patriarchy and as literal tools of the military-industrial complex (with leaders carrying nuclear codes at all times, as well as scientists and researchers producing endless reports about the deadly effects of radiation and war).

SWANS Artists and their work in *Cases of Exposure*

Nancy Buchanan—whose father, Louis N. Ridenour, Jr., worked at the MIT Radiation Lab, notably refused Oppenheimer’s request to join his project, and later published an anti-nuclear play called *Pilot Lights of the Apocalypse* in Fortune Magazine—presents a long paper scroll, printed with recent news headlines about the growing threat of nuclear war, winding its way in and out of a series of briefcases strewn along the gallery’s floor. Buchanan, a founding member of F Space Gallery and Double X, a feminist art collective, critiques aberrant political power with the curation, accumulation and performance of information.

Judith Dancoff, a writer and filmmaker, presents a powerful installation of historic items pulled from her personal archive—her father’s slide rule, the certificate he received for his work on the Manhattan Project (backdated to August 6, 1945, the day Little Boy was dropped on Hiroshima), and a box of crayons she once angrily threw at Robert Oppenheimer’s head. Nearby, she presents a faux-grass-filled briefcase holding two antique milk bottles alongside a confessional-style video, *The Milk Pathway*, which traces the cyclic trajectory of nuclear contamination originating at research facilities from particulates released in the air to rainwater runoff in the ground soil to grass cud eaten by dairy cows to milk ingested by young children making them sick, and then explores how her own father, Sidney Dancoff, himself killed by a youthful cancer brought on by exposure, took her to his job at the Oakridge Uranium Enrichment Plant as a toddler and inadvertently exposed her to radioactive materials that had a lifelong impact, including an episode of uncontrollable lactation.

Shelia Pinkel, a longtime contributing editor to the art and science journal, *Leonardo* (originally founded by Caltech graduate and blacklisted physicist Frank Malina, noted as a member of the so-called ‘Suicide Squad’ that tested rockets in the Arroyo Seco at the site of what would eventually become the Jet Propulsion Lab), includes a black tote bag with the ominous warning, “The tactical nuclear warhead in this suitcase is strong enough to severely damage downtown Los Angeles and environs,” alongside an historic photograph of the bombed-out Genbaku Dome of the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall.

Hillary Mushkin, a professor of art at California Institute of Technology, includes new drawings from her ongoing Incendiary Traces series featuring en plein air documentation of militarized zones, this time exploring the exterior of the historic W.K. Kellogg Radiation Lab on her home campus of Caltech where Oppenheimer and other members of the Manhattan Project once gathered. In her series of drawings, Mushkin reveals the hidden and sometimes classified activities that are in fact occurring in seemingly ordinary institutional spaces out of the public view, shifting the power dynamic of people and place.

Lucy HG Solomon frequently collaborates with Cesar Baio as part of the duo Cesar & Lois. A professor at California State University San Marcos, she is also the daughter of an anti-nuclear activist, Margaret Hermes, who HG Solomon recalls kept a red phone in their home for calls from nuclear power plant whistleblowers. HG Solomon’s contribution to the exhibit is two mid-century wood briefcases, one carved with a glowing grid representing the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone with backlit imagery from Google Earth of a re-wilded radioactive forest, while the other’s carvings are made from tracings of blueberry plants with glowing residues from blueberries dried on watercolor paper, a reference to blueberries maintaining their radioactivity through successive generations of fruiting (blueberries in the region are still radioactive).

Jane Chang Mi’s nearby briefcase also glows with luminous intensity, backlighting a reproduction of a gloved hand holding a postcard of an oceanic-based atomic mushroom cloud with the carefully inscribed phrase “Avec Mon Amical Souvenir” (translation: “With My Fondest Remembrance”). Here the word souvenir also mirrors the French and American use of militourism as a strategy to colonize places such as Tahiti, the greater Ma’ohi islands, and Hawai’i. This image was found as part of Mi’s archival research, where she focuses on the occupation and militarization of the Pacific Ocean.

elin o’Hara slavick, a child of outspoken anti-war activists, initiated SWANS and contributed a number of pieces to *Cases of Exposure*, including a briefcase piled high with copies of official reports on the effects of radiation, some of which her husband epidemiologist David Richardson worked on. Richardson’s research on the effects of radiation dovetails with o’Hara slavick’s artistic documentation of the effects of the atomic bomb. She also presents what appears to be a violently-burned briefcase sitting precariously on a pile of rubble holding ashes and fragments of bark from a *Hibakujumoku* (a tree that survived the atomic bombings in Hiroshima or Nagasaki) alongside an autoradiograph (inspired by Henri Becquerel’s 1896 work capturing the radiation from uranium salt) made from a silver gelatin contact print of x-ray film exposed to the lingering radiation in a fragment of another A-bombed tree. During her 2022 artist residency at Caltech, o’Hara slavick created 528 photo-chemical drawings, each resembling atomic mushroom clouds, one for every known atmospheric, above-ground nuclear test conducted globally to date. According to the artist, these drawings were largely a result of her feelings of impatience, frustration, and a sense of “helplessness in the face of impending possible annihilation and the knowledge that we are all living in a contaminated world.”⁶

1. Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967), 37.

2. Hannah Arendt, “Isak Dinesen” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970), 104.

3. Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 86.

4. Robert A. Jacobs, *Nuclear Bodies: The Global Hibakusha* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

5. Howard Zinn, “Foreword,” in elin o’Hara slavick, *Bomb After Bomb: A Violent Cartography* (Milan: Charta, 2007), 9.

6. elin o’Hara slavick, *Atomic Index* Exhibition Press Release, Cerritos College Art Gallery (2023).