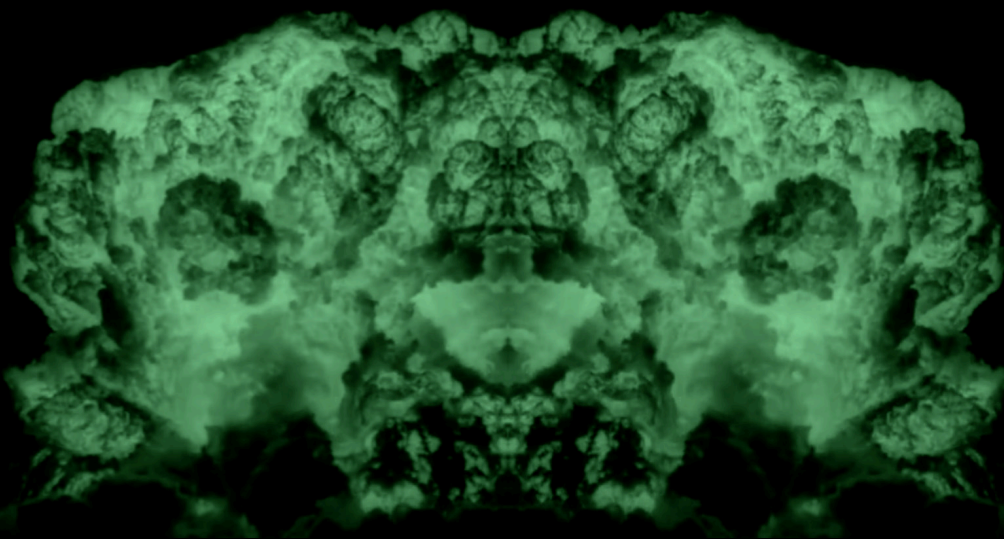


JUN 11 — SEPT 18, 2022

ENGLISH

CARA  
DESPAIN:  
SPECTER



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# CARA DESPAIN:

## SPECTER

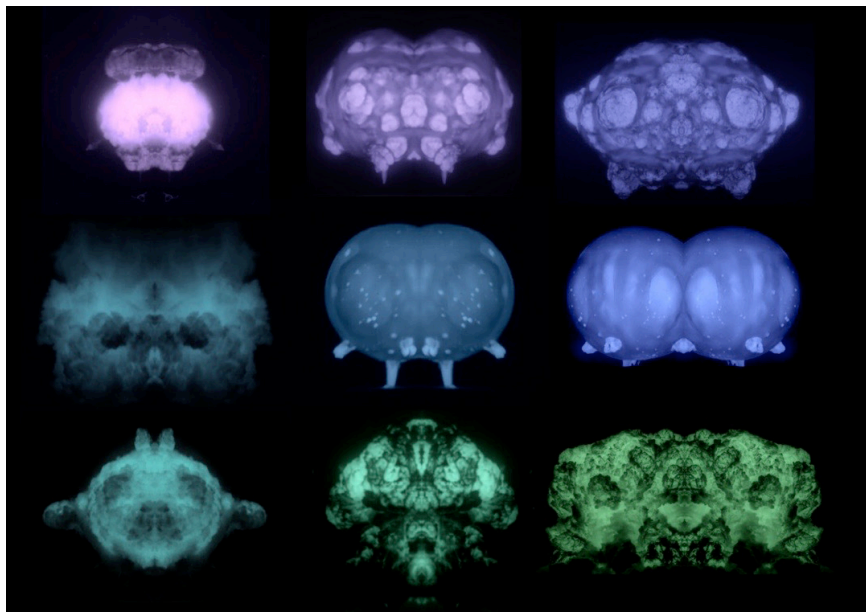
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Cara Despain's practice addresses the difficult history and legacy of territory expansion, industrialization and empire building in the United States. Through site-specific research processes, she visualizes the current geological age, the Anthropocene, by exposing the consequences human activity has on ecosystems and the environment.

In her recent work, Despain explores nuclear weapons development — including the obscure history of testing bombs and mining uranium in the American West, using the midcentury Atomic Age and Cold War era as a lens to interpret the present looming threat of nuclear war. In *Specter*, Despain presents video, sculpture and installation created with found objects and archival film from the 1930-60s, to underscore the irreversible environmental consequences while conveying the hidden psychological effects and cultural memory left in the wake of weapons development and testing. Impacts from both government-sponsored activities were particularly devastating in the artist's home region of the Colorado Plateau (encompassing parts of Utah, Navajo Nation, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico), but carry larger global implications and aftereffects to this day. Starting with the micro — her own family history, adjacent local histories and living memory — Despain links parallel and hidden narratives, arriving at a macro view of the

literal and figurative fallout of the nation's push for global military supremacy.

At the entry to the exhibition, *house of cards* (2022) shows the end title cards from educational films and PSAs created by the US Department of Civil Defense, other military entities, and corporations, repeating "The End" in an indistinguishable, ominous loop. Disseminated mostly in the 1950s and 60s during the height of nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site, these films were intended to educate people about how to protect themselves against nuclear fallout, while also encouraging support for nuclear weapons technology to defend the country against the threat of communist invasion. The films were meant to convey scientific and analytical information about the tests, as well as military propaganda to school children and general audiences. Some films were regionally specific to areas "downwind" of testing, such as St. George in Southern Utah, where Despain's mother grew up, though actual advanced warnings about tests had a limited reach. However, when the educational and ideological content of the archival films is removed, *house of cards* only shows the nonspecific finality of the phrase "The End" on a continuous loop. This repetition leaves the viewer unsure of what is ending—a documentary, a horror film, PSA or a fairytale?



Cara Despain, *test of faith* (2021), 3 channel digital video installation, (3:39).  
Courtesy of the artist. Photo Credit: Cara Despain.

Despain's works *and the desert shall blossom as the rose* (2022), and *under the rainbow, behind the curtain* (2022) explore the ambivalence of uranium, which was used in both nuclear bombs and popular domestic glassware. The works feature curio cabinets containing mass-produced Depression Era glass dishware and decorative objects that contain uranium oxide as a colorant. In 1942 at the onset of the Manhattan Project — the American-led effort to develop a functional atomic weapon during World War II — all uses of domestic uranium, including as tint for glass, were banned. Choosing Art Deco-style pieces and arranging them in an architectural installation, Despain conjures the aspirations of a glittering era just before the Iron Curtain came down as well as the insidious implications uranium

would go on to have. The acid green and vaseline yellow uranium-containing glass fluoresce in UV light, glowing a brilliant green in the lined cabinets.

Nearby, also emitting an otherworldly glow, *Iodine-131* (2022) is a topography cast out of concrete of the Nevada Test Site, created using Google Earth satellite imagery to produce a geo-accurate relief sculpture. Civilians are not allowed to view this site on the ground, but the scars from testing are visible from space.

Despain's film, *test of faith* (2021) uses recently restored and digitized films of nuclear weapons tests from the Nevada Test Site — located a mere 65 miles from Las Vegas and less than 150 miles from where her mother and grandmother were born



Cara Despain, *under the rainbow, behind the curtain* (2022), wood, antique depression glass and UV lights. Courtesy of the artist. Photo Credit: Cara Despain.

and raised — heavily researched by Despain to grasp the far-reaching implications of the legacy of nuclear testing.

From 1951-62, there were 100 atmospheric atomic bomb tests conducted at the Nevada Test Site, many of which were considerably larger than the bombs dropped on Japan. Tens of thousands of films were taken of these tests on hyper-sensitive film stock to collect data and to preserve and document the development of the US nuclear arsenal. Most of these films were kept hidden from the public eye, but in recent decades many have been digitized, declassified and released in an effort to render future need for such testing obsolete. Altering the images of the fireballs and atomic clouds to create Rorschach test-like imagery,

Despain obscures the iconic military and cultural propaganda images of mushroom clouds — which were widely utilized in cultural ephemera from Hollywood films and sci-fi books to punk band album covers — into a psychological, hypnotic meditation on the precarious present and future of militarism and weapons- development. The film's soundtrack is a layered version of the Mormon hymnal "Love One Another" Despain created as a play on the appeal made by the military specifically to the many Mormon settlers in the fallout region, as well as to the entire country, to support the testing under the guise of united patriotism. Capturing the spectacle of testing was an endangerment of the camera operators — especially in the early days when the radioactive fallout was purportedly not

fully comprehended. Like many downwind civilians near test sites, many of these filmmakers working in secret fell ill with cancer. Although their work was perhaps the most important in terms of making this awesome and awful endeavor visible, and documenting this dark period of history, like the films featured in Despain's works on view today the filmmakers remained unseen for decades.

The ghostly, cinematic staging of works in *Specter* provides a historical context as well as a haunting reminder of the obscured history and hidden injustice buried in the legacy of the Cold

War. Impacts from both domestic uranium mining and atomic weapons testing were particularly devastating in the artist's home region, but also continue to reverberate across the entire globe to this day. Despain notes, "*Specter* is a glimpse into the quasi-spiritual, otherworldly, dark shared connection that quite literally radiated out from the day we first tested and continues to haunt the bodies of every living thing on the planet." It is an atmospheric monument to having irrevocably crossed the threshold into the Anthropocene, and into a nuclear age that continues to push us to an existential precipice.



Cara Despain, *under the rainbow, behind the curtain* (2022), wood, antique depression glass and UV lights. Courtesy of the artist. Photo Credit: Cara Despain.



Aim your phone's camera at the QR code here for more information on the exhibition or visit:  
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