

SIUE's Hepner Publishes Book Showcasing The Complexity of Nuclear Impact

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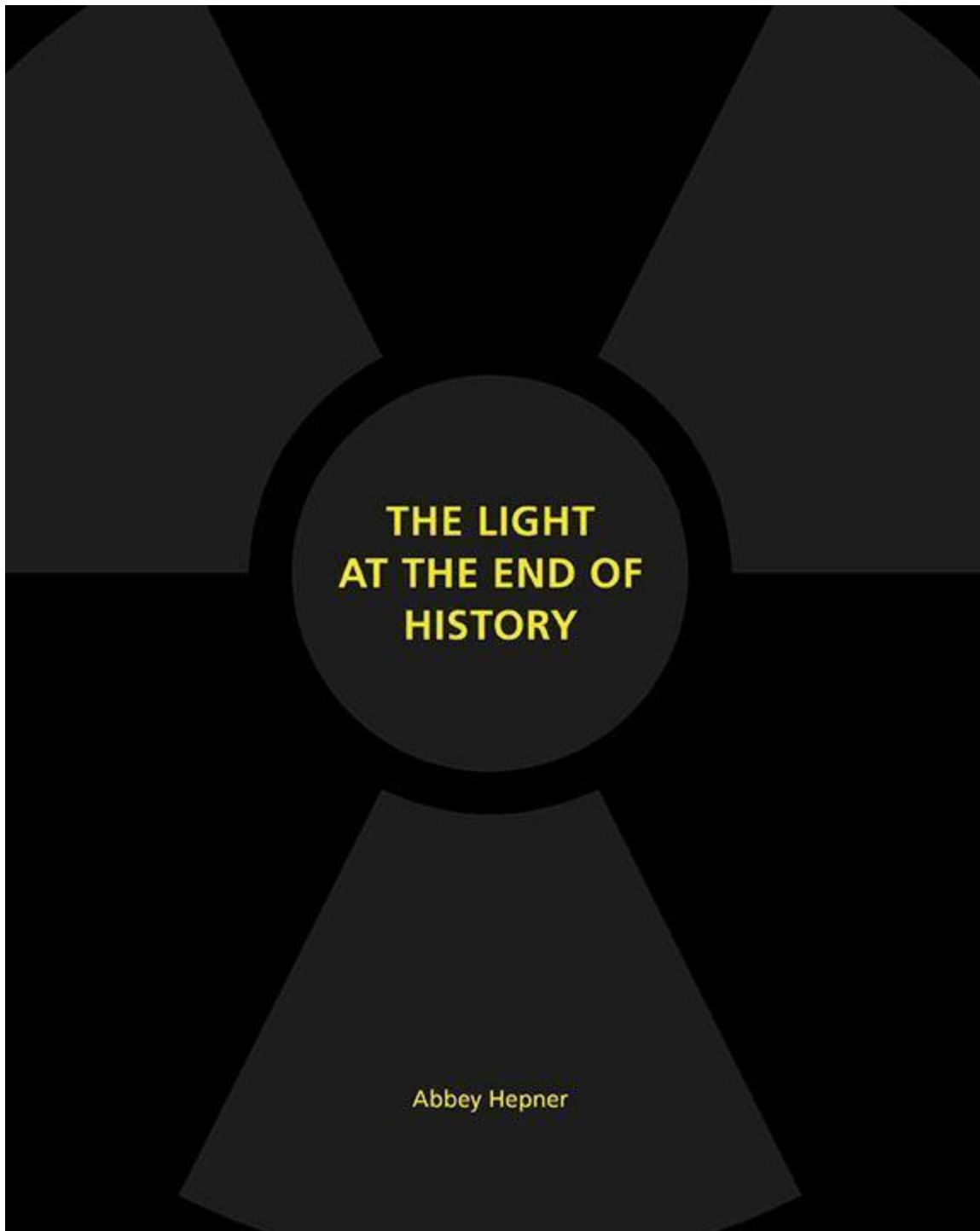
EDWARDSVILLE - The use of nuclear energy and its effects on the environment is a rising topic discussed in modern politics and by environmental conservationists globally. Since the testing and ultimate use of the atomic bombs dating back to the 1940s, the fight for nuclear power and weapons has been growing by the decade.

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Abbey Hepner, assistant professor and area head of photography and digital media in the College of Arts and Sciences' Department of Art and Design, photographs and discusses these issues in her newly published seven-part book *The Light at the End of History: Reacting to Nuclear Impact*.

The book includes over 80 color photographs, three distinct maps and a foldout list of every nuclear testing detonation on U.S. soil.

"I worked with individuals in Waynesboro, Ga. and at Plant Vogtle over the course of three years to complete the series *Control Room*," Hepner explained. "That body of work features photographs from Plant Vogtle, where commercial nuclear energy reactors are being built in the U.S. for the first time since 1979. *Uravan* takes a look at a county in Colorado that was home to active uranium and vanadium mining, that caused such soil and groundwater contamination that in 1986, the Environmental Protection Agency burned and buried the town, creating a 680-acre Superfund site."

Hepner created three-dimensional laser engraved pigment prints, which are used to pinpoint exact locations of different structures that once occupied the space, by laser burning images of the historic photographs into the contemporary photograph.



The series *Transuranic* features Uranotypes, which Hepner described as “an obsolete nineteenth-century photographic process that uses uranium instead of silver to form the image... The red and yellow hue of the uranotypes is likened to the color of the sky after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and the material presence negates the unassuming and banal nature of the sites, reminding us of the reality ever-present in the images and in the places we inhabit.” The photographs are mildly radioactive.

When choosing a title, Hepner drew ideas from Willem de Kooning, an abstract painter who dealt with a serious belief in the atomic bombs' impact on humans visual representation.

“De Kooning's description always haunted me, and it's wrapped up in the complexity of how I feel about the nuclear industry,” she said. “It highlights a fascination with the power of nuclear technology while revealing that it is always at the cost of something. I am interested in visuality and avisuality. My photographic work is often an attempt to make the invisible visible.”

Aside from the influence of other individuals, Hepner's desire to share her work had personal meaning. “The dropping of the atomic bomb pushed us into the Anthropocene,” said Hepner. “Every living being on Earth was touched and forever changed by this event. Phenomenon like radiocarbon dating, or the ability to date every living thing on earth, was made possible by nuclear testing. It connected all human beings on Earth and ruptured the myth of isolation. I began making work on nuclear issues around 2012. My partner is an engineer, and at the time, he worked on nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and submarines. The ships he worked on were often docked in Japan, and so the events surrounding the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster seemed close to home.”

Hepner lived in Japan in 2013, and volunteered to help clean up the disaster zone that the famous tsunami left in that year. She initially credited this as the first event in her life that led her to discover the real issues behind nuclear energy use, the atomic bomb, and the waste left behind, but later realized this wasn't the case.

“The truth is that I have always lived amid the glow of the nuclear industry,” she said. “I grew up in Idaho and Utah between the Nevada Test Site, where the United States tested 1,021 atomic weapons between 1951 and 1992, and Idaho National Labs, an 890-square-mile section of desert in southeast Idaho used for nuclear reactor experimentation and development.”

Hepner encourages students wanting to learn more about a career in art and/or photography to reach out. She stresses the importance of curiosity in artists minds as a driver for continual desire to learn and discover. She quotes Artist Carrie Mae Weems: “Art is the one place we all turn to for solace,” and says that “this last year has proven it. Art is more important than it has ever been, both to comfort and to challenge us.”