



Walkabout: Artist draws attention to nuclear threat by presenting traces of mankind



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Proof of the magnitude of mankind's madness lies in nuclear weapons. The United States tested the madness numerous times in our country, incinerating thousands of rabbits, coyotes and birds before launching it onto the world stage — and humans — in 1945 in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.

It would make sense to have moved as far from this depravity as possible since then, but all we have is a 50-year-old treaty against proliferation — originally signed by the U.S., the Soviet Union and Great Britain, with 191 countries as signatories today.

In 1982, the mayor of Hiroshima, Takeshi Araki, sought solidarity among cities worldwide when he founded Mayors for Peace. It was a way “for cities to ... work together to press for nuclear abolition... and solve problems that threaten peaceful coexistence within the human family,” according to a statement from the organization.

As of this summer, 7,595 cities in 163 countries are members, 213 in the United States. Pittsburgh is one.

As such, we are the lucky host of an international art and peace project that commemorates the 1968 treaty at 937 Gallery, 937 Liberty Ave., Downtown. It runs through Dec. 9.

Called “50 Cities, 50 Traces: One World Without Nuclear Weapons,” it is an exhibit of abstract photographs from 50 member cities throughout the world, but no one would recognize the cities from the photos.

Artist Klaudia Dietewich, who lives and works in Stuttgart, Germany, describes her photographic subject as traces. They show what mankind leaves behind — on the floors of train stations, sidewalks, streets, the sides of buildings. Images of flattened bubble gum on asphalt, the scratching of wear and tear, the weird shapes of faded paint, layers of billboards, ground-in detritus, partially erased lettering and spillage.

Along the walls of the gallery, the images are numbered to correspond with the names of the cities they represent, 1 to 50. They are reproduced on aluminum and lack context, so you have to try to guess what they represent.

Pittsburgh's trace is a green panel with a vertical, wormlike form down the middle, the color of peanut butter, and a black dot. If you imagine the vertical form as a limbless person, the black dot hovers near its neck.

Close inspection suggests the green background may be part of a bicycle lane. It is pocked like a street. The vertical image could be paint or an encrusted bit of something else.

As you try to make sense of a splotch from Vienna, Austria, or a ghostly shadow from Udaipur, India, your mind is trying to see significance between photo and city, but you can't; the designs are anonymous, random, non-cultural.

In the aftermath of nuclear annihilation, you — if you survived — would not know what that thing lying on the ground was. Is that a limbless person in Pittsburgh? What is that thing that looks like a puff of meringue in Koyasan, Japan?

Ms. Dietewich's photographs call on the imagination even more than art labeled as abstract because we know these images are of something specific. To see significance in the smallest marks of mankind is to see mankind. Our traces would still be there if we were to vanish.

Why cities matter so much is that more than half the world's population live in them and mayors of cities have been the most assertive leaders worldwide against our other existential threat — climate change — said Jackie Cabasso, the U.S. coordinator for Mayors for Peace.

“If one is awake and aware in today's world, we know the dangers are growing to levels not seen in decades,” she said. “I like to quote Frank Cownie, the mayor of Des Moines: ‘If you don't think nuclear weapons are a local issue, ask the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.’”

It's a safe bet most people have little if any confidence that the non-proliferation treaty is grounded in a collective moral and spiritual conscience. Of the three original signers, we and the former Soviet Union's puppet-master Russia have been the most bellicose since the treaty was signed, and both current leaders are amoral and spiritually bankrupt.

No, the public is buying a nuclear future, and we're ponying up well over \$1 trillion in the United States alone. That's money we could insist be spent for a real future.

The exhibition is sponsored jointly by Remembering Hiroshima Imagining Peace, Mayors for Peace, City of Asylum Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust.
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