



**Nicole Liao** *AGAINST THE DAY*

JANUARY 21 - FEBRUARY 27, 2016



## AGAINST THE DAY

Parallels emerge, slowly, in the strategic juxtaposition of images. Nicole Liao's work is an exercise in appreciating detail, noticing convergences, and seeing things more deeply. Works often emerge from arduous repetition. Processes enacted again and again to reveal not just new forms, but a record of the impressions and procedures that made them. Exploring the potential of film, photography, architecture, and printing, Liao invites us to take a second look at our experiences and perceptions of the world.

Liao's recent work takes a turn towards the sublime by confronting technology directly. We live in a digital age when voices and images are instantly broadcast across time and space. Such a vast ephemeral network challenges how we position ourselves in the world and alters our ability to assess the changes we make within it. Like the sounds of icebergs cracking as they melt, the blasts in space that Liao shows in her work are an index of the terrifying extent and impact of our own human disruptions. Using found-footage, Liao highlights the often-overlooked drama of discovery, projecting images that reveal the enormity inherent in exploration; experiments so monumental that they light up the sky, mimicking large scale, natural phenomena.

The similarities between high altitude nuclear blasts—in part set off to study the radiation belt around the earth's orbit—and the Aurora Borealis are striking. Such uncanny duplications speak to how the science of inquiry impacts our ability to visualize environments. Before the advance of photography, the Aurora Borealis was a marvel that defied capture. Etchings, woodcuts and drawings often gave the lights curiously hard edges. Such methods simply could not convey the soft and phantom like contours of the dancing lights. Instead they appeared like daggers or shards of ice, mimicking the glacial landscape explorers struggled to cross as they followed the mysterious illuminations.

The Aurora Borealis is in fact a geomagnetic storm. The phosphorescent colours are the result of speeding, high-energy particles that travel from the sun and collide with the gases of the earth's atmosphere. The Northern Lights have the power to shut down the electrical grid of entire cities, disrupt radio waves, and destroy satellites. Their beauty often belies the violent forces that create them. They paint the sky with their own spectacular burn out.

Advances in scientific research on the Aurora Borealis took off in the 19th century as soon as photography developed more precise techniques for recording the capricious qualities of the Northern Lights. However, even in early photographs there is a sense of straining to look beyond what is there, and survey the vast territorial expanses of outer space. Whether it is applied to the foreboding landscape of the arctic or the mysteries of the earth's upper atmosphere, the drive to move beyond is evocatively played out in a compulsion to record new and fantastic events.

After the Second World War, innovations in propulsion technologies helped launch mankind further into space. James Van Allen, the renowned American astrophysicist, was one such explorer on a mission. He began launching rockets into the atmosphere to better understand the electromagnetic field surrounding the earth. The nuclear bombs that were released at high altitudes as part of these studies were beautiful in their own right, soon nicknamed "Rainbow Bombs." The found footage of these tests exists today in the U.S. Nuclear Testing Archives. They form one part of this exhibit, placed in dialogue with scenes from the NFB documentary "The Northern Lights," encouraging comparisons between the violent, man-made explosions and the Northern Lights they resemble. Side-by-side, the images speak to a common push towards discovery, the shared dimensions of which are captured in the second part of Liao's film. Juxtaposed, the cramped image of an astronaut and the broader views of terrestrial explorers acknowledge the shared efforts and ambitions of the adventurers who made such visions possible and help us to appreciate their thirst for the unknown.

The process of triangulation that helped determine the heights of the Aurora Borealis above the Earth—the same trigonometric methods that allowed empires to be mapped and helped launch humans into space—is employed to new effect in Liao's work on display. Here the indescribable finitude of communication is presented as an echo. Rather than the earth's topography or the flare of combustion gasses, the collected images speak to a tectonics of the ineffable. They invite us as viewers to feel and sense what we may not always comprehend or remember: that our world is large and that it sits within an infinite expanse of space.

*Padma D. Maitland, 2016*

*Padma D. Maitland is a doctoral student in the Departments of Architecture and South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. His research focuses on the art and architecture of religious pilgrimage sites and countercultural exchanges between India and California.*

# Nicole Liao *Against the Day*

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ODD Gallery

*Daily skirmishes were now being fought, no longer for territory or commodities but for electro-magnetic information, in an international race to measure and map most accurately the field-coefficients at each point of that mysterious mathematical lattice-work which was by then known to surround the Earth. As the Era of Sail had depended upon the mapping of seas and seacoasts of the globe and winds of the wind-rose, so upon the measurements of new variable would depend the history that was to pass up here, among reefs of magnetic anomaly, channels of least impedance, storms of rays yet unnamed lashing out of the sun.*

- Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*

*Against the Day* is a photo and video installation composed of found scientific drawings, photographs, models, and footage based on early records of Auroral research and documented nuclear bomb tests in outer space. In 1962, the detonation of high altitude nuclear bombs known as “Starfish Prime” resulted in an artificial extension of earth’s magnetosphere, creating stunning atmospheric lights over Honolulu in its wake. The light show that resulted from these tests reproduced the Aurora Borealis – something that has long occurred on its own over the Arctic Circle. In this doubling of the Aurora, the catastrophic is no longer simply an “Act of God”, but integrally tied to human activity.

Video footage was sourced from declassified films from the U.S. Nuclear Testing Archives and juxtaposed against records of the Aurora Borealis from the NFB documentary, “The Northern Lights”. Placed side by side, the line between cosmic phenomena and manufactured acts begins to collapse. It’s no coincidence that early research into the electrical mysteries of the Aurora Borealis is directly tied to the Space Race during the Cold War.

The exhibit seeks to understand the Aurora Borealis in terms of its relation to the science of optics and electromagnetic forces; incidentally, this complex physical and chemical relationship between particles, radiation and light in the Aurora is also the nature of the photograph, film stock, and the bomb. Like *Doubles in a Science Fiction Film*, recordings, simulations and images of the Northern Lights begin to take on an apocalyptic life of their own, moving independent of time and space, returning again and again to haunt the present.

-Nicole Liao, 2016

## BIOGRAPHY

Nicole Liao was born in Calgary and currently lives and works in Toronto. She has a background in Print Media and Architecture. Her work explores representations attempting to map, record and break down real world phenomena; she is interested in exposing the rifts between data and their sources, as well as finding moments of connection between disparate events. This is her first show in Northern Canada.

Images: Nicole Liao, “*Against the Day*”, 2014, two channel digital video

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