

# Art in America

November 1999



**Christmas Island** (1998) 50 x 42 inches. Oil on canvas.

Joy Garnett at Debs & Co.  
by Christopher Phillips

A painter whose works are often inspired by scientific imagery, Joy Garnett is also a conspicuous presence in the current on-line debate over art's role in an increasingly technological culture. Visitors to her studio during the past year have noticed, alongside her loosely brushed studies of ghostly solar prominences and the looping paths of subatomic particles, a disturbing new series taking shape. "Buster-Jangle," her first solo show, featured 13 of these recent oils on canvas, all devoted to the atomic explosions carried out in the 1940s and '50s at isolated sites in the American West and the Pacific.

In Garnett's paintings, the Luminist celebration of the transcendental landscape gives way to the 20th-century encounter with the apocalyptic sublime. A few works provide an almost naturalistic sense of locale. With its blurrily recognizable foreground cacti and hints of arid terrain, *Buster-Jangle* might be a relaxed impression of a southwestern vista, were it not for the yellow and white fireball that is burning a hole in the placid blue sky. Other works, while retaining a rudimentary horizon line, tend toward coloristic abstraction. *Sugar Shot*, for example, shows a sketchy mushroom cloud shooting up through the surrounding atmosphere, sending yellow flashes shading into scarlet and green and spreading a deep blue-violet hue that signals a lethal degree of radioactivity. *Christmas Island* zooms us into the heart of a detonation. Dominating the top half of the canvas is a bluish half-globe; inside it is a pulsing circle of brilliant white, and outside it a zone queasily tinged with creams and greenish yellows. Not all of Garnett's works employ such evocative color combinations, however; two of her most unnerving blast paintings consist of near monochromatic grays.

Seen as a group, these paintings inevitably recall the concluding chorus of explosions in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. Is Garnett suggesting that we can stop worrying and learn to ironically love the bomb? Not quite. By means of their titles, her paintings single out the notorious A-bomb tests in which the U.S. military, eager to gauge the effects of human exposure to atomic radiation, purposely stationed thousands of unprotected U.S. soldiers nearby. The brochure accompanying the exhibition contains excerpts from Garnett's correspondence with one of these unwitting guinea pigs, who tersely describes the death of his newborn daughter from radiation-induced birth defects. In today's climate of high-tech euphoria, this exhibition offered a timely reminder that the forces unleashed by science are not always benign or controllable.