

Boom

Taking risks with explosives and photography.

BY DARIUS HIMES

All throughout childhood, summer was the much-needed ecstatic break from the doldrums of a long, dreary winter. One could escape from the tyranny of school and the rigors of study and the mind. It was a time to dive into the realm of the senses, to swim and bike and run around in the fields and ditches and gravel roads of the countryside like little maniacs. And, away from the prying, worried eyes of parents, it was the time when we got to blow things up. The Fourth of July seemed to legitimize our experiments on a certain level, but we had plenty of practice in the weeks leading up to Independence Day.

Greg MacGregor takes the joy of blowing things up and turns it into art.

MacGregor began his career teaching physics, at the age of 23, in Wisconsin. Shortly thereafter he moved to Berkeley, Calif., where he worked at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory from 1966 to 1970, employed officially as a research physicist.

Livermore, at the time the sister lab of Los Alamos National Laboratory, was engaged in producing hydrogen bomb components that were then coupled with the atom bomb “pits” made at LANL. Atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons and H-bombs had been outlawed, and the mid-range rockets used to test the atmosphere at the moment of detonation were

sitting around Livermore unused. The team that MacGregor worked with used these rockets for X-ray astronomy. “I basically hid out in that lab,” MacGregor says.

Having left the lab, MacGregor, who had pursued art and photography for a number of years, initiated a graduate program with Larry Sultan at Lone Mountain College in San Francisco. This was the era of the Vietnam War and the first instances of “terrorism” against civilians (at least in modern memory) happened during the early 1970s.

“Living with Explosions” was a tongue-in-cheek project that came as a direct response to the war and the changing social landscape. MacGregor divides his time now between Oakland, Calif., and Santa Fe.

SFR: You made a rather large leap from a science-based career under the auspices of the federal government to the pursuit of edgy art using comedy and military technology. How did that happen for you?

GM: Looking back, it can be explained as the arrogance of youth. However, at the time I wanted a career that engaged society on a more direct level. Much of the art done in the '70s Bay Area scene was in response to a very dynamic decade of social change. So at the age of 30, I just quit science and went back to art school.

Your first project was ‘Living with

Explosions.’ What was the impetus for this work?

There were all sorts of wacky events going on in our country and around the world at that time and my way of dealing with the reality of bombs was to use humor (with an underlying tone of seriousness). The suitcase bomb was one of the first terrorist devices, so I decided to blow up a suitcase of my own to see what that would look like. There were organizations that were targeting newspapers and reporters, so I decided to blow up an actual newspaper. I staged mini-explosions all around the home—for landscaping, for unclogging the kitchen sink, as backyard BBQ entertainment—and photographed all of these events. The ‘Home Improvement Blasting Kit’ came out of that body of work.

My work came about as social protest and as engaged with the history of protest. I wasn't in it for the aesthetics, though there are many artists and photographers who have been. Explosions are extremely beautiful events, from an aesthetic standpoint.

What was the reaction (both public and within the art world) to this work?

Well, this is obviously pre-9.11. It was all light and funny. These are satirical bombs. They're aimed at cultural comment, they're not harmful, and they're not about the aesthetics. The ideas came straight from the newspaper headlines. The explosions themselves were mostly black powder bombs and gasoline bombs. The gasoline ones you have to be really careful with and we only did those out in the desert. You can get hurt by those. But the black powder bombs weren't harmful. You could stand right on top of those. It was just a bunch of dirt that blew upwards. If I did this stuff today, I'm sure I'd be considered sick.

Again, so much of it was in relation to what was happening in my life or in the newspaper headlines. We really played around with things. At one point, most of my photography students were business majors, so I concocted a character that was a door-to-door bomb salesman. I gave demonstrations and everything, just to show how harmless (and potentially useful) homemade bombs could

be. Later, in the '80s, after the space shuttle program was begun, and they had put a teacher, a scientist, a man, a woman, etc., all into space, we decided to put an artist into space. So I built a rocket, and my good friend Clayton Bailey, who was a ceramicist, was going to be our astronaut. He was going to throw a bowl on a potter's wheel in zero gravity. We filmed and photographed the whole thing. Of course, it was all a sham and a joke, but it was fun.

How long did you do this type of work?

I did this satirical work up into the '80s. For awhile I did a routine as a visiting professor and art critic. It was in response to the proliferation of actual visiting professors in the art-school world. I'd arrive in a lab coat and goggles and I'd use a megaphone and say things like, ‘I hear you've got a lot of bad art at this school. I'm here to solve your problems.’ We would have gathered all the students out on the school field and at that point I would trigger an explosion using loads and loads of student photographs and canvases, all propelled by one of the black powder bombs. It was big fun to blow up ‘bad art.’

It sounds like part theater, part stand-up comedy routine, part art theory and criticism. In short, it sounds awesome! Tell me about the genesis of the rocket bicycle. When was the first one that you made and how did it come about?

That was 1987. People magazine had called and wanted to do a little feature on the art critic routine. I had kind of moved beyond the explosions, but I wanted to be in People. So, I told them that I was going to build a rocket bicycle and an explosion would be part of the whole thing. We did this at the Crockett California High School race track. My good friend Clayton was still involved. He's the guy on the mini-bike that I'm racing. We made a big explosion at the start and out of the cloud I came flying on the bike. The point of the work was to set a land speed record on a rocket bike and show that we could get to work faster if everyone had one. Again, it was all tongue-in-cheek.



Greg MacGregor built a rocket bicycle and raced it as part of a satirical art piece. “Crocket Rocket Bicycle,” 1987.

You made a rocket bicycle recently as well, didn't you?

Yes. It was for the exhibition 'Driven to Distraction' at the [New Mexico Museum of Art] Governor's Gallery in 2007, which was curated by Joe Traugott. This show had all sorts of great, funky transportation devices. He knew about my history and asked if I'd make a new rocket bicycle.

Are you still engaged with the history and present-day use of arms and explosions and all that?

Oh, yeah. A couple years ago I was doing a fellowship at Langmuir [Laboratory for Atmospheric Research] down in Socorro, where they do research on lightning and its effects, when someone told me about the EMRTC just down the road. I said, 'The what?!' EMRTC stands for the Energetic Materials Research and Testing Center.

Let me guess. Projectiles and explosions constitute 'energetic materials.'

Exactly. These guys are part of [New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology]. They blow holes in things just to see what happens.

Government funded?

Funding comes from corporate as well as government. They do more than just blow things up. They will test various types of ordinances for accuracy and for penetrating power, which has obvious military applications. But they also test the effects of various types of explosions that have been directed against civilian populations. Understanding how to minimize and prepare and protect against this type of possibility is very important, obviously. My early explosions had a 'weird science' and Wile E Coyote theme with all sorts of absurd applications. I was fascinated by the real world-applications at EMRTC.

I can imagine the landscape outside of Socorro, where they're doing this, must have a rather post-apocalyptic feel. Some of these photographs remind me of the Mad Max movies.

The juxtaposition of the backdrop landscape is an important element in this work as well as the unexplained technology. Yes the geography does get altered. And it sets up a visual puzzle trying to unravel just what happened here. All the evidence is in the photos yet the story is elusive.



Photographer MacGregor captures the juxtaposition of geography and technology. "Steel Targets," 2007 EMRTC.