



HOPEFULLY THE LAST CITY IN HISTORY

For photographer Fiona Amundsen, a recent trip to Hiroshima to document the site of the world's first atomic bombing was not only a lesson in history, but an insight into the human impact of the event.

Earlier this year I travelled to Hiroshima, Japan to undertake a new series of photographs which focus on the repercussions of the city's 1945 atomic bombing, now memorialised through the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and the Genbaku Dome. Titled *The First City in History*, the series seeks to explore the disparity between the uniquely subjective experiences of being in historically and culturally loaded public sites such as the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, and their representation through photography. Ultimately, this project uses photography's affectual potential to investigate how socio-cultural historical narratives (ie: Hiroshima's nuclear bombing) are preserved and then re-enacted through a city's architecture and planning.

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As a city, Hiroshima really wants visitors to know its history. All around this self proclaimed 'City of Peace' reminders of the 1945 atomic bombing serve the dual purpose of educating tourists while honouring those that died, and those that survived this horrific event. These memory jolts take the more obvious forms of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Museum, which is constructed around the remains of the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, now known as

the Genbaku or A-Bomb Dome. Little Boy – the bomb's codename – was detonated almost directly above this building, and due to the bomb's blast occurring outwards as opposed to directly downwards it remained structurally intact. There are also a handful of street names – Promenade of Peace and Promenade of Culture – along with various information plaques, explaining the significance of this or that area prior to the bombing, which together work to narrate Hiroshima's post-atomic tale. Then there are the less obvious mnemonic features; for example what initially appears as a pattern of differently coloured squares of paving stones on the outskirts of the Peace Park are soon transformed by their own history when re-contextualised as having originally occupied the site pre 1945. There are countless other examples of these seemingly small yet totally loaded signifiers of what happened to this city. So, coming to Hiroshima is a twofold experience of 'trauma-immersion' which aims to raise understanding of just how destructive humans and nuclear warfare are, along with how cities and their people deal and live with such suffering – an honouring of memories to locate events in their past, but their spirit as active and in the present.

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Opposite left: Genbaku Dome and Motoyasu River, Hiroshima

Right: Tourist riverboat passing Genbaku Dome

Finally I've arrived: Auckland – Seoul; Seoul – Osaka; Osaka – Hiroshima. Finding the ryokan wasn't as hard as expected, what a relief – this camera gear is so heavy. There's enough time to go and see the Peace Park and think about what to photograph before it starts to get dark; I'd better time how long it takes to walk there so I know how early to get up tomorrow morning. It's chilly; the air is cool and those clouds hugging the mountains look like rain. Fingers crossed it will hold off until after sunrise: it's going to be freezing in the morning: too cold for the sakura (cherry blossom) to be out. I'd better check the weather forecast again.

That's good, just over a five-minute walk to the Genbaku Dome: the park is bigger than I imagined. There are people everywhere (this is worrying; will this be the case each morning?), so many tourists all waiting to have their portrait taken in front of this ruin, in front of the Aoi bridge. I will definitely photograph from this position tomorrow: this will be the first image. – "Excuse me, where are you from? Are you American?" Should I try and answer in Japanese... "Watashi wa Neue jilando-jin desu". "Eh. Is this your first time to Hiroshima? Are you interested in peace?" Think. Think. You know how to reply to this. – "hai, heiwa ni kyoumi ga arimasu." Relief, she understands me.

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Comprehending the devastation of nuclear warfare is the easy part of experiencing Hiroshima. The museum, an imposingly proud building situated at the entrance to the Peace Park with its tiny fifty yen entrance fee (less than \$NZ1), steps visitors through Hiroshima's history pre, leading up to and immediately after the bombing, as well as the city's reconstruction. The goal here is education, and subsequently the exhibits of photographs and dioramas work hard to do just this: facts, figures and statistics dominate.¹ However, there is something strangely familiar, even habitual, to all this – although this documentation is specific to Hiroshima, it does not appear outstandingly different from other war imagery. This is not to say that all wars look the same, but rather their standardised representation does not seem to offer a way to think, encounter and understand what war

¹The atomic bomb was detonated six hundred metres above the city centre on 6th August 1945, at 8.15am, making Hiroshima the first city in history to experience nuclear warfare. Heat rays and the bomb's blast decimated most of the buildings (92%) within a two-kilometre radius of the hypocenter. However Little Boy's presence could be seen far beyond the immediate city centre through partially ruined buildings and also the 'black rain' that began falling about half an hour after the explosion. This 'rain' was produced by the intensity of the initial blast which sucked up dirt and debris into a huge puffy cloud (ie: the recognisable mushroom cloud attributed to atomic bombs) and subsequently released this as radioactive substances as the cloud drifted across the city.



does, or even looks like, beyond a stock standard kind of imagery. In the case of Hiroshima, the representation of what happened focuses around exhibiting history as an event. Accordingly, the story of Hiroshima's atomic bombing is contextualised by timelines of world significance. However, although the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum does fall into a familiar telling of war tales there is also something distinctly different about this museum and its' surrounding park: the first city in history tells its story another way too.

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I've been here for ten days now. Yesterday morning the light was perfect – so clear and pastel soft, so still: beautiful. I wonder what it was like on the morning of the bomb; it would have been summer with lots of people busily doing whatever it is they needed to do. Hard to imagine, compared to what this area is now. It's so empty at dawn – thank goodness – despite the morning walkers, the joggers, the cycling commuters on their way to work, and the hungry crows perched on the edges of rubbish bins. It's impossible not to feel this city's history, impossible not to reify its trauma, attach it to the stones in the park, the A-bomb dome, the people who are Hiroshima now. Ideology reaches its limits here.

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Fiona Amundsen will receive a selection of fine wines from St Jerome.



Hiroshima Peace Museum



Fiona Amundsen

Like most memorial museums, Hiroshima's also uses a range of left over remnants from the bombing, coupled with photographs to help convey its' messages. Ranging from bits of severely misshapen building remains to scraps of people's burnt clothing there is nothing particularly special about the way in which these objects are displayed. However a few of these museum-encased objects operate in a manner that goes far beyond their representational abilities to signify, or allude to, what this catastrophic event might have been like: they defy logic.

One example is labelled 'Human Shadow in Stone' which is exactly this – a man's shadow permanently scarred on to a stone's surface. This came from the bomb's powerful explosion which created X-ray heated air, producing a fireball that sent out extreme shock and heat waves at a velocity faster than the speed of sound, and reaching temperatures of up to 5000 degrees Celsius. In other words, the blast was so intensely bright that it created and then fixed, due to the heat, shadows to the ground and surrounding architecture. This is really difficult to comprehend; it simply does not make sense: shadows are impermanent. The bomb itself is complex enough – the fact that a single explosion could decimate an entire city – let alone the idea that Little Boy was so powerful 'he' made and then recorded these shadows as architectural imprints: such an abstract concept, producing concrete sensations. There are more examples which operate in a similar way. Grim as they may be, these exhibits are significant in that they push against the usual conventional ways in which war is both represented and subsequently comprehended. This happens by any sense of logic being suspended which in turn influences known – as witnessed through media representation – understandings of what war does and looks like; the feelings that these exhibits produce get lodged in viewer's memories and in their bodies.

Hopefully, it is that man's fixed shadow, or the remnants of torn clothes, or the charred lunch still in its box which resonates with visitors as they wander around the peace park posing for this photograph or that, thinking about this city and its history.

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It's cold, and the light just isn't getting any brighter: f45 at 15 seconds – the shutter speed is still too long; I'll have to keep waiting. Quite a few people around this morning: the elderly folk's exercise group are doing their thing in front of the museum and joggers are jogging their way around the park – "Ohayo gozaimasu. Hai, samui desu." That man looks like he is cycling towards me; setting up my camera with my back to the cenotaph is a pretty prominent place to be – I hope I'm not in his way. Gosh he's come here so early to pray – he's old too, between seventy and eighty. He would have been five-ish when it all happened. The light is changing: 6 seconds, good to go.

Japanese curry is so warming; perfect for lunch on what has become a cold day. I can't stop thinking about that man: his simple action of praying in front of the cenotaph, the public-ness of his private ritual – because of his age, I assume he must have lost his parents, and brothers, or sisters, and aunties, or uncles: loss of some kind. This loss is obviously historical but still exists now; well, this is how it feels. There must be people everywhere in this predicament: what wars do becomes so much more 'real'. I'm not thinking about the facts and figures from the Peace Museum, instead it's the image of the elderly man praying which is etched into my memory: I really hope this will be the last city in history.

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Fiona Amundsen, *Pathway Towards Aioi Bridge, Hiroshima, 26/03/2010, 6.28 (weeping blur)*. Courtesy of McNamara Gallery



Fiona Amundsen, *Looking Towards Sorazaya Bridge, Hiroshima, 06/04/2010, 6.08 (outlines)*. Courtesy of McNamara Gallery



Fiona Amundsen, *View Across Motoyasu River Looking Towards Genbaku Dome, Hiroshima, 29/03/2010, 6.19 (quiet)*. Courtesy of McNamara Gallery