

Painting in the Wake of the A-Bomb

THE ART OF WAR

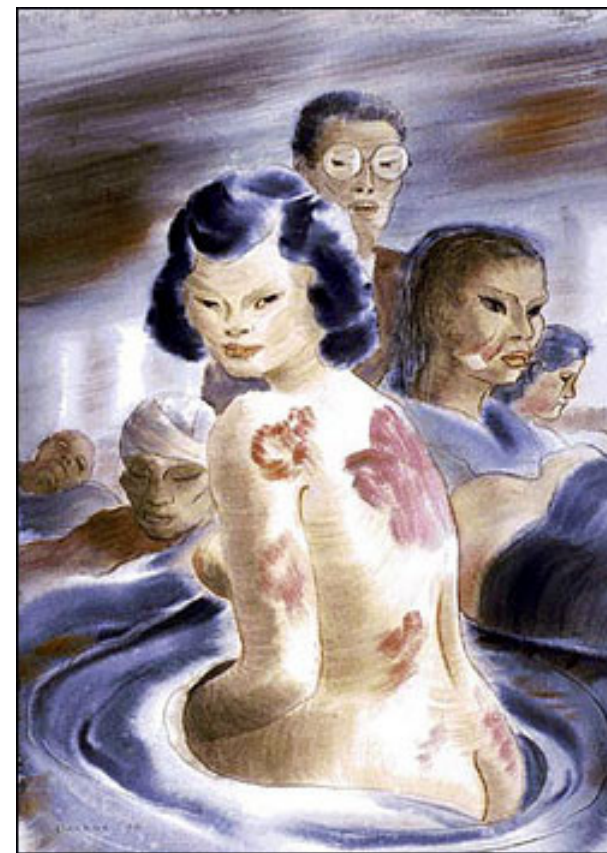
IMAGES FROM THE ATOMIC FRONT

Chung Cheng Gallery, St. John's University
8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens
Through March 21

Picturesque ruins, accreted over decades, lifetimes, and generations, are a romantic staple of painting, metaphors for life's trials and death's inexorable march. Since World War II, though, an entire city can be flattened to scorched rubble in literally the blink of an eye. Paintings by American combat artists who reached the atomic ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are anything but romantic—they are desperate, raw depictions made surreal by destruction on an inhuman scale. Issued paints, brushes, and canvas along with their weapons, these artists were assigned to every branch of the military; "Images From the Atomic Front" brings together their work, which documents the first salvos of the atomic age. Standish Backus's *Still Life, Hiroshima* features shattered foundations, blackened tree trunks, and a large urn brimming with human bones. Curator Denise Rompilla says, "That these images exist at all is extraordinary; we know there were censorship controls. The army has lists of paintings

destroyed before they could be sent back to the U.S." One can only imagine how harrowing the destroyed works must have been, considering Backus's intimate watercolor of a Hiroshima survivor: A pretty young woman gazes over her shoulder, revealing what seem to be crude tattoos on her back and arms. In fact, it is the flower pattern of her kimono, seared into her skin by the blast. On a more epic scale is the abstract, terrible beauty of *Mike Hour*, by the prominent illustrator (and U.S. marine) Grant Powers, in which a massive, roiling orange fireball dwarfs a fleet of mothballed battleships anchored in the azure calm of the Bikini atoll.

Last month, Senator Robert Byrd lamented, "High-level administration figures recently refused to take nuclear weapons off the table when discussing a possible attack against Iraq." Byrd apparently needs no reminder of the horror of these weapons, heightened by the reality that a contemporary suitcase bomb has more explosive yield than "Little Boy," the weapon dropped on Hiroshima. Miraculously, that malignant genie was stuffed back into its bottle after World War II, never since used in anger. Still, tactical battlefield nukes have been envisioned at least since the mid '50s, when army artist Robert Rigg executed the series of large-scale pastels that close the exhibition. With such titles as *Armor and Atom*, the psychedelic colors and bubble-turreted tanks may at first seem charmingly retro, but the mushroom clouds rising over desert hills could soon prove to be more current event than anachronistic sci-fi. —R.C. Baker



"At the Red Cross Hospital"
Standish Backus-1946



"Mike Hour"
Grant Powers, 1946