

Daughters of Uranium

Mary Kavanagh looks at the atomic age's lingering residue on humanity.

by Tyler J. Stewart

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Mary Kavanagh, "Rosa the Beautiful," 2019, cast uranium glass objects and ultraviolet light (photo by Jaime Vedres)

Imagine the doors of an archive flung open, the sudden breath of air sending papers somersaulting throughout the room. Picture a drawer of documents wrenched from confinement and pages freed from dusty spines, once more in the light.

This is the metaphorical allusion offered by Mary Kavanagh's exhibition, *Daughters of Uranium*, which pries apart historical narratives about the atomic era, subjecting them to a bodily interpretation and examining the lingering residues on humanity.

Kavanagh, a visual arts professor at the University of Lethbridge, has long made work

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American Southwest.

Her latest rigorous research-based work, on view until April 28 at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge, troubles mythologies around the Trinity atomic test site and other key aspects of nuclear history.



Mary Kavanagh, "Trinity Historical Photographs, 1945-1946," film and photographic archive released in 1999 by the U.S. Department of Energy, Albuquerque Operations Office, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Defense (photo by Jaime Vedres)

Her *Trinity: Historical Photographs, 1945-1946* spills out of the gallery into an adjoining hallway. This archival documentation reveals previously classified photographs, released in 1999, of the first tests conducted at the New Mexico site considered the birthplace of the atomic age. The piece effectively becomes an exhumation of nuclear storytelling, raising questions about who controls authorship and fills editorial roles.

After this historical anchoring, Kavanagh presents a two-channel video projection, *Trinity*, which looks at pilgrims to the mythic location, open to the public only two days per year.

While the site can be seen as one of science's great achievements, conflicting personal



Mary Kavanagh, "Daughters of Uranium," 2019, installation view at Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge (photo by Jaime Vedres)

The exhibition feels most powerful when Kavanagh brings the narrative back to her own experiences. *Breath Drawings: Infinity Series* and *Tumour Timeline* provide her bodily testament through structured-line drawings and watercolours that act as rhythmic measurements of corporality. The history of the atomic age continues to be written every day.

Kavanagh's breathtaking sculptural installation, *Rosa the Beautiful*, makes the era's physiological impact even more apparent. The work includes a pair of legs cast in glass made with added uranium, a technique popular for decorative objects before the Cold War.

Illuminated by ultraviolet light, it evokes the unseen effects of the atomic age, as well as the need for transparency about nuclear issues. Here, the political is personal. Kavanagh evokes how externalized atrocities can come back to haunt individuals.

Curators Christina Cuthbertson and Lindsey Sharman have deftly guided Kavanagh's work into a powerful presentation. But this is not the final chapter. Another iteration will be exhibited in the fall at the The Founders' Gallery, part of Calgary's Military Museums complex. ■

***Daughters of Uranium* is on view at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge from March 2 to April 28, 2019.**

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