

ArtSeen

Jeff Weber: *Image Storage Containers*

By [Hannah Sage Kay](#)



Jeff Weber, *Untitled (Operation Ivy, Mike / 3)*, 2011-13. Silver gelatin prints, 43 1/3 x 51 inches. Documentation of the restoration of photographs from the collection *The Family of Man* at the CNA by Studio Berselli.

Since 1994, Edward Steichen’s landmark exhibition *The Family of Man* has been on display at Clervaux Castle—an outpost of the Centre national de l’audiovisuel (CNA)—in northern Luxembourg. Between 2011 and 2013, these works underwent a campaign of conservation treatments that Luxembourgish photographer Jeff Weber was invited to document. While such preservationist practices could be imagined as shoring up the ability of the photograph to serve as an objective arbiter of sociohistorical truths, the series of images that Weber captured instead illuminates the irony of repairing an image of mass destruction—the iconic photograph of an atomic mushroom cloud that Steichen used to close his exhibition—and more generally highlights the potential for the medium’s manipulation by way of its very conservation.

Six of Weber’s photographs from the resulting series, titled “Untitled (Operation Ivy, Mike)” (2011–13), are now on view at the CNA in Dudelange as a part of his solo exhibition *Image Storage Containers*, curated by Michèle Walerich. From what began as a purely documentarian project, something far

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more uncertain ultimately emerged: a body of work characterized by willing abstraction and ambiguity of subject. When photographed in a lived environment, outside of an exhibition setting, an artwork inevitably takes on new meanings through associations with objects and individuals both external to its frame and that of the gallery space. In “Operation Ivy” Weber thus necessitates a consideration of the inside and outside of the work, as well as the many actors that play upon its reception.

Sited in a conservation lab, Weber’s series focuses on the restoration of one iconic image: the mushroom cloud produced upon the detonation of Ivy Mike, the first hydrogen bomb tested by the United States on the island of Elugelab in Enewetak Atoll in 1952. A conservator in a white coat and gloves gently attends to the surface of this print in one of Weber’s images, while other prints from the historic exhibition lurk in the shadows of the background. Some remain obscured by their wrappings, but one visible image pictures what looks like an extended family portrait—the very symbol of the American ideal that Ivy Mike and all its demonstrations of strength via the possibility of annihilation sought to protect. By capturing this uncannily truthful juxtaposition within the bounds of a single photograph, Weber unveils the oxymoronic cycles—of restoration and destruction, unity and violence, leadership and coercion—that were (and still are) employed to hold up the pillars of American exceptionalism.



Jeff Weber, *Untitled (Operation Ivy, Mike / 1)*, 2011-13. Silver gelatin prints, 43 1/8 x 51 inches. Documentation of the restoration of photographs from the collection *The Family of Man* at the CNA by Studio Berselli.

The political valence of this photograph contrasts sharply with others from Weber’s series that take a surprisingly abstract turn, considering their supposedly documentarian aims. One merely depicts the swirling residue of a

soap stain on a recently washed table while another, possessive of a similarly allover quality, can only be described as *trompe l'oeil*: picturing three sheets of irregularly cut wax paper which overlap to protect that same print of Ivy Mike. A small piece of tape curls away from the sheets it is meant to hold together, producing a slight shadow under its lip and a slightly larger shadow where the two pieces of paper part ways. Even though this photo is hung and framed in the same manner as the other five images from the series, this work continues to demand close inspection and confirmation that it is in fact a two-dimensional image. By photographing a flat surface straight on at full scale, Weber creates an image that, in its very exactitude, throws the medium's veracity into doubt.

Accompanied by the institutional hallmarks of an archive or conservation lab, Weber also pictures Ivy Mike hanging on a wall either pre- or post-restoration. A crate intersects its bottom left corner, as does a stack of slatted wooden boxes on the right in which images are housed between pieces of foam. This image storage container, from which the exhibition takes its name, attains new life as a subject that unifies the two bodies of work on view: speaking to the larger processes of housing and carrying, collecting and disseminating photographic records around the world in the service of an ideological message—an analog counterpart of the predominantly digital image storage containers of the present, which achieve much the same thing through far more insidious networked channels.



Installation view: *Jeff Weber: Image Storage Containers*, Centre national de l'audiovisuel, Dudelange, Luxembourg, 2023. Photo: Martin Argyroglo.

Having created a physical replica of the image storage container, which is displayed in the center of the gallery, Weber repeatedly rephotographed it against a plain white ground. Subtly changing lighting conditions produced a variety of effects, from the illusion of deep space extending behind its bisected opening, to a striped pattern with alternating bands of light and shadow. Unfolding across the back wall, nine of the resulting images exemplify the

infinite possibilities that can be produced with limited variables: a demonstration of the innate subjectivity and illusory nature of all images. With a shift in perspective, with a change of light, what might have been present can be made absent, and what might have appeared solid can be made fluid.

Weber's consideration of the photograph's inherent malleability and contingency functions here as an extended metaphor for the poorly-veiled propagandistic aims of *The Family of Man*. As Allan Sekula has argued in "The Traffic in Photographs," "The worldliness of photography is the outcome, not of any immanent universality of meaning, but of a project of global domination. The language of the imperial centers is imposed, both forcefully and seductively, upon the peripheries." This function is made most baldly evident by *The Family of Man*'s global circuit of the 1950s and 1960s, its appearance in political hotspots around the world, and its exploitative use of peoples and places outside the Western world to support a narrative of Western superiority and American dominance as exemplars of freedom, democracy, and, dare I say, humanity.

Weber understands clearly that this is still what the "image storage containers" of the present do best. They do not operate, however, through blockbuster traveling exhibitions and blatant political messaging, but by more inconspicuous means: algorithmically-determined social media feeds and their inherently classist organizing structures, which reward images of a privileged life lived by few, either ignoring or infantilizing others as the necessary recipients of goodwill and charity.

Through an uncommon economy of means Weber's *Image Storage Containers* serves up a diagnosis of our (unfortunately) perpetual politicized relationship to images—and to each other.

Contributor

Hannah Sage Kay

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