

Slain dictators and cities under attack: the photographers telling stories through dust

From 9/11 to Hiroshima, from a vandal in the Louvre to the car Mussolini was dragged from, the Whitechapel's fascinating new show *A Handful of Dust* sees seismic events in a different light



Wreckage of a city ... a detail from Jeff Mermelstein's shot of a statue in New York on the day of the 9/11 attacks. Photograph: Courtesy the artist

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In 1920, on a visit to Marcel Duchamp's studio in Manhattan, Man Ray's ever-curious eye was drawn to a large sheet of dust-covered glass. When viewed through his camera, its surface, he later noted, "appeared like some strange landscape from a bird's eye view". He opened the camera's shutter and the two friends then went for lunch.

The resulting photograph, made in his absence via an exposure of around an hour, is the starting point for an intriguing exhibition, *A Handful of Dust*, at the Whitechapel Gallery in

London. Man Ray's mysterious image, later titled *Dust Breeding*, had a long and curious afterlife. For a good while it was known, if at all, as a piece of surreal art rather than as a disruptive moment in photography's history: a kind of unconscious collaboration between Man Ray and Duchamp, whose arrangement of lead foil and fuse wire on two panels of glass - called *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* - had been rendered almost unrecognisable by the layer of dust that so intrigued the photographer.



Dust Breeding (*Elevage de poussière*) 1920, by Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. Photograph: © Succession Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray Trust/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2017

The exhibition is a playful and at times provocative response to Man Ray's photograph, not so much a history of dust in photography as a series of tangential nods to his image, encouraging viewers to make connections. The title references TS Eliot's bleak modernist poem *The Waste Land* - "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" - published two years after Man Ray took his shot.

There are several images in the show that carry a similar ominous charge, from an anonymous press photograph of Mussolini's dust-coated Lancia, consigned to a garage for 10 years after he was dragged from it and executed, to the deadly nuclear dust that settled on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the wake of America's bombs.

David Company, the show's curator, has trawled eBay as well as art history, filling one large frame with a grid of postcards depicting apocalyptic dust storms in 1930s America, as well as unearthing some very untypical photographs by Jeff Wall of grainy rock surfaces that recall Nasa's early images of the moon.

Here and there, too, we see how dust has been used as a creative tool rather than a subject: the French surrealist Jacques-André Boiffard seems to have shot his grainy human figures through an encrusted lens, while American Aaron Siskind's photographic response to the abstract expressionists was a process of tracing, rubbing and smearing on the surfaces of his negatives and prints, the dirt, dust and grime so anathema to the generations of documentary and art photographers who shot on film being embraced almost as an end in itself.



Ominous charge ... Italian dictator Mussolini's limousine in 1955,

The conceptual thrust of the exhibition is interrupted by a handful of more traditional documentary images whose drama is, if anything, amplified by their seeming almost out of place here. Walker Evans's image of a child's grave in Hale County, Alabama, in 1936 is stark and poignant. The shadow cast by the headstone, the empty plate that rests atop the mound of dry soil, and the flat, arid land around all summon up the desolate suffering of the nomadic sharecroppers he moved among for his classic book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.



Robert Burley's Implosions of Buildings 65 and 69, Kodak Park, Rochester, New York [#1] October 6, 2007. Photograph: Courtesy the artists and Musée Nicéphore Niépce

The dust that enveloped downtown Manhattan after the 9/11 attacks is rendered almost unearthly in Jeff Mermelstein's photograph of a statue of a man at rest in what has become a ruined square, the trees and buildings dusted with grey ash, the ground covered in rubble. Only the hint of ochre at the base of a tree alerts us to the fact that this is in fact a colour photograph, but rendered monochrome by what fell on the traumatised city.

The more you linger, the more the visual echoes become apparent. The Czech photographer Tereza Zelenkova's shot of the French thinker George Bataille's grave echoes Evans's more desolate image. In its degraded state - it was the last frame in a roll of film and emerged pockmarked from the printing process - it also speaks of the inbuilt decay of analogue photography. Likewise, on a larger scale, Robert Burley's photograph of a crowd of former employees watching the dust cloud left by the demolition of the Kodak plant in Rochester, New York, in 2007.



Break-in ... a photograph from John Divola's Vandalism series taken in 1974-75. Photograph: © John Divola, courtesy of Gallery Luisotti

The most provocative series is probably John Divola's Photographs from the Vandalism Portfolio, 1974-75. The Californian artist broke into empty houses and disturbed the dust of disuse with spray cans, a knife, string and cardboard, creating images that suggest all manner of dark references, from ritual magic to drug-fuelled creative reverie.

A more bare-faced intervention was carried out by Robert Fillou who, in the late 1970s, had himself photographed cleaning - without permission - the surfaces of paintings by Old Masters in the Louvre. Back then, unbelievably, no one seemed to mind and Fillou exhibited his polaroids alongside his dust-smearred cloths - which, he suggested, held the auras of the paintings themselves.

The exhibition ends, inevitably, with Sophie Ristelhueber's homage to Man Ray's iconic image. The Parisian's shot is remarkable for, among other things, its reversal of scale, being an aerial photograph of an expanse of the Kuwaiti desert marked by the debris of war following the allied force's assault on Saddam Hussein's army in 1991.

The photograph was made with Man Ray's remarkably small image in mind - so much so that Ristelhueber did not include it in *Fait*, the series she made on her return. In 2007, though, she printed it as a standalone work, entitled *Because of the Dust Breeding*. It would have made a good alternative title to this endlessly thought-provoking exhibition.

A Handful of Dust is at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, until 3 September.

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