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Examining strangeness of Utah desert

Video, photography, sound, found objects on display

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The desert has appeared in Western fine arts for almost three centuries, so its treatment in *John Arndt, Empire*, the ambitious exhibition at Gallery 400 of the University of Illinois at Chicago, has a long tradition in literature and painting upon which to draw.

However, unlike two popular 20th Century novels about the Near-Eastern desert—R.S. Hichens' *Garden of Allah* (1905) and Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* (1949)—Arndt's exhibition that treats the Great Salt Lake Desert in Utah does not idealize or romanticize or even find it a place of existential meditation.

Instead, Arndt uses video, sound, photography and found objects to convey something of the American desert's strangeness and hint (through the show's title, if nothing else) that this barren domain represents the sovereignty of the U.S. at the beginning of the 21st Century.

For two months last summer, Arndt used Wendover Airfield in Utah as a base for explorations, some near, others far. Wendover was the training base for the B-29s that dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So the artist takes us back to a site important at the threshold of America's world supremacy, only to illustrate through many small particulars of sight and sound—the gallery has produced a 51-minute CD of field recordings—the atmosphere around it more than 60 years later.

At the end of World War II, Wendover had 668 buildings. More than 100 survive, in varying states of decay. Arndt has photographed in some, but also has gone far enough afield to record a work by Camille Saint-Saens played on a church organ in Salt Lake City as well as a tour in Japanese of Kennecott's Bingham Canyon Mine, which has the irony of being 100 miles away from a former Japanese internment camp.

Here and there the artist retrieved a salt-encrusted tire, typewriter and cowboy hat, observed military movements and a potassium chloride operation, even contemplated a legendary work of art, Nancy Holt's 1976 *Sun Tunnels*, plus some of the people who came to it to revel. All of this and more is represented in the sparsely installed exhibition.

The vignettes are meant to accrue to give a larger picture of the desert and, presumably, the "empire" of the work's title. Written commentary is laconic and purely descriptive, leaving viewers to make connections between what Arndt dryly presents and what it might imply.

Although the CD provides some sounds auditors will interpret as benign, the project as a whole suggests an American "Ozymandias" moment, in which—as in the eponymous early 19th Century poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley—a traveler in the desert comes upon a boast of imperial power amidst the scarcest of ruins.

Other interpretations are, of course, possible. But in relation to the desert—any desert—the mightiest of man's efforts last only for a day, and the American empire, so young in relation to the others of history, already is crumbling and fading.