

Art Reviews

An Artist's Radiographic Photos Cast New Light on Chernobyl

Anyone willing to view Alice Miceli's *Projeto Chernobyl* on its own terms, to see radiography as both a practical tool and a potential art form, will be richly rewarded.



by Ilana Novick
November 25, 2019

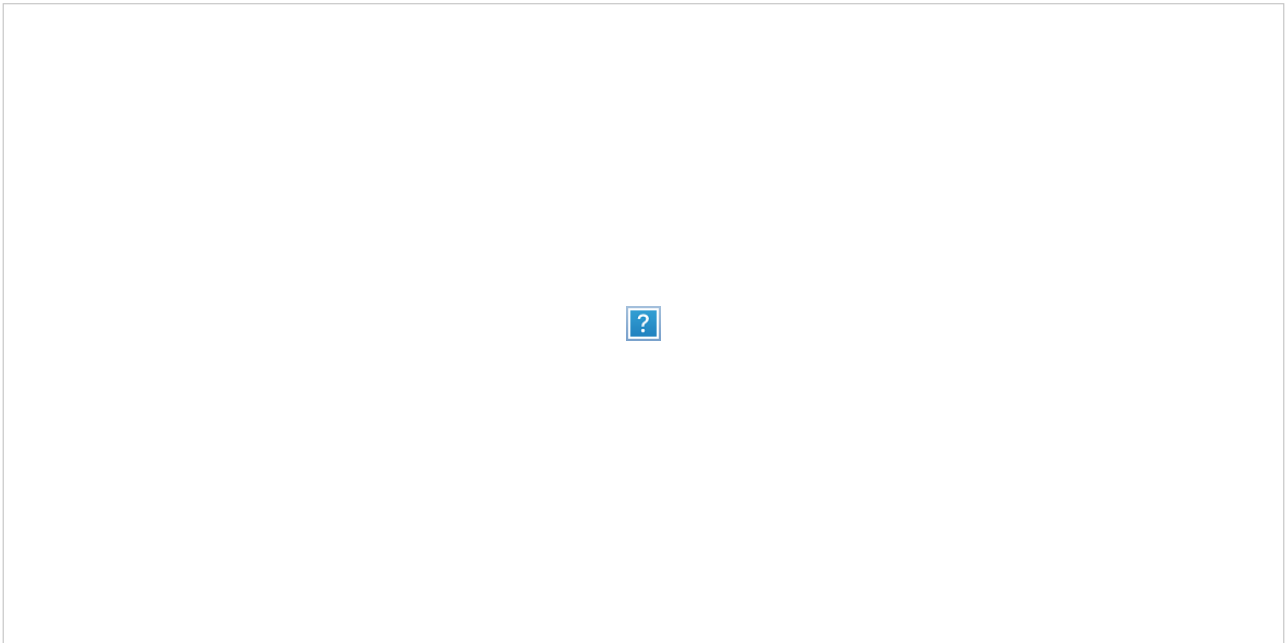


Alice Miceli: *Projeto Chernobyl* at Americas Society, October 9, 2019–January 25, 2020 (photo by OnWhiteWall.com)

Alice Miceli photographed the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine between 2006 and 2010, 20 years after the area's famous nuclear reactor explosion. She didn't focus on the buildings reduced to cracker crumbs, the rusted and abandoned ferris wheels, or other stops on what's becoming a [disaster tourism](#) destination, especially after the release of the eponymous HBO series. Miceli was there instead to capture an invisible villain, the gamma rays that lingered from the explosion — dangerous, even fatal, but invisible to the naked eye and traditional photography. Instead, she used radiographic film, typically for X-rays, to make the gamma rays visible.

[Projeto Chernobyl](#), a selection of 30 radiographs now on view at The Americas Society, is the

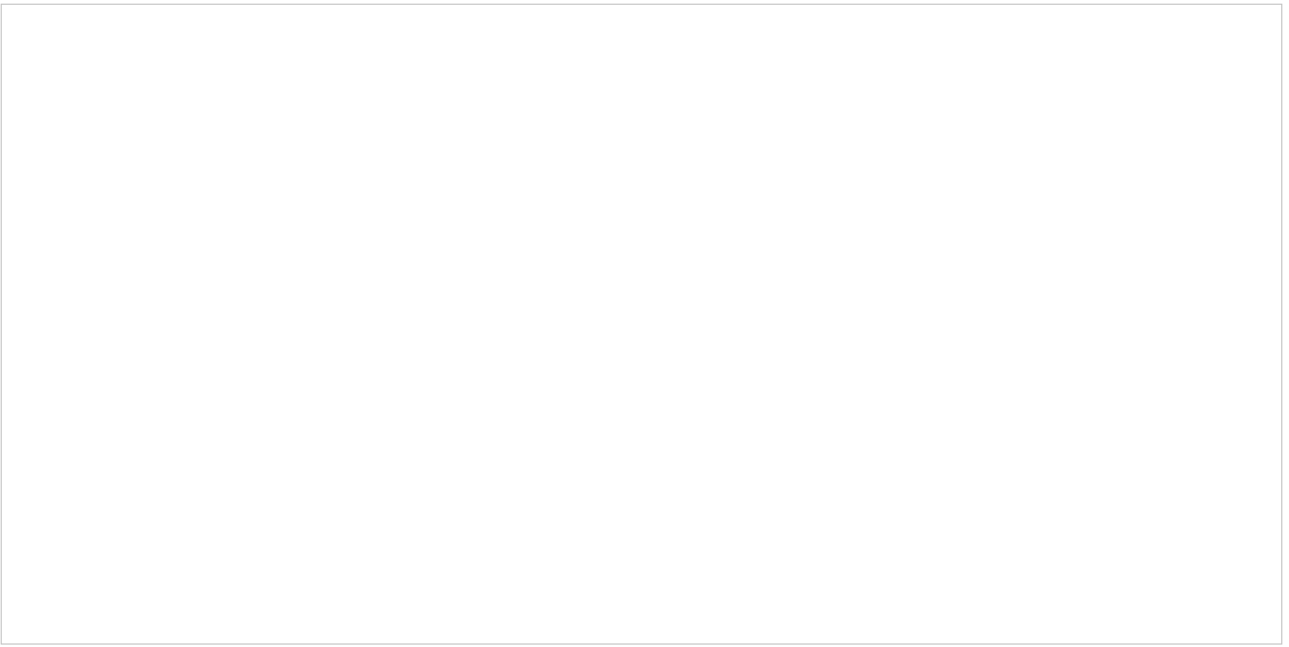
result of this experiment. Before visiting, I wondered whether seeing the gamma rays alone would have the emotional weight of depictions of the destruction they caused. Was Miceli akin to an X-ray tech for environmental disaster, assessing damage regular cameras couldn't penetrate?



Alice Miceli, "fragment of a field VI – 9.120 μSv (07.05.09 – 21.07.09)," backlight, radiographic negative (courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler)

Visitors hoping for more information about Chernobyl itself might be disappointed, but fortunately the radiographs work very well as artworks on their own. Visitors enter through a room containing a short film and wall text explaining Miceli's process. Together, they provide just enough information to elucidate what's on view. Past a black curtain is a dark hallway lined on both sides by radiographs, whose backlit glow is not much stronger than the average candle, which gives the room a haunted quality. Although limited to gray-scale the radiographs are remarkably expressive.

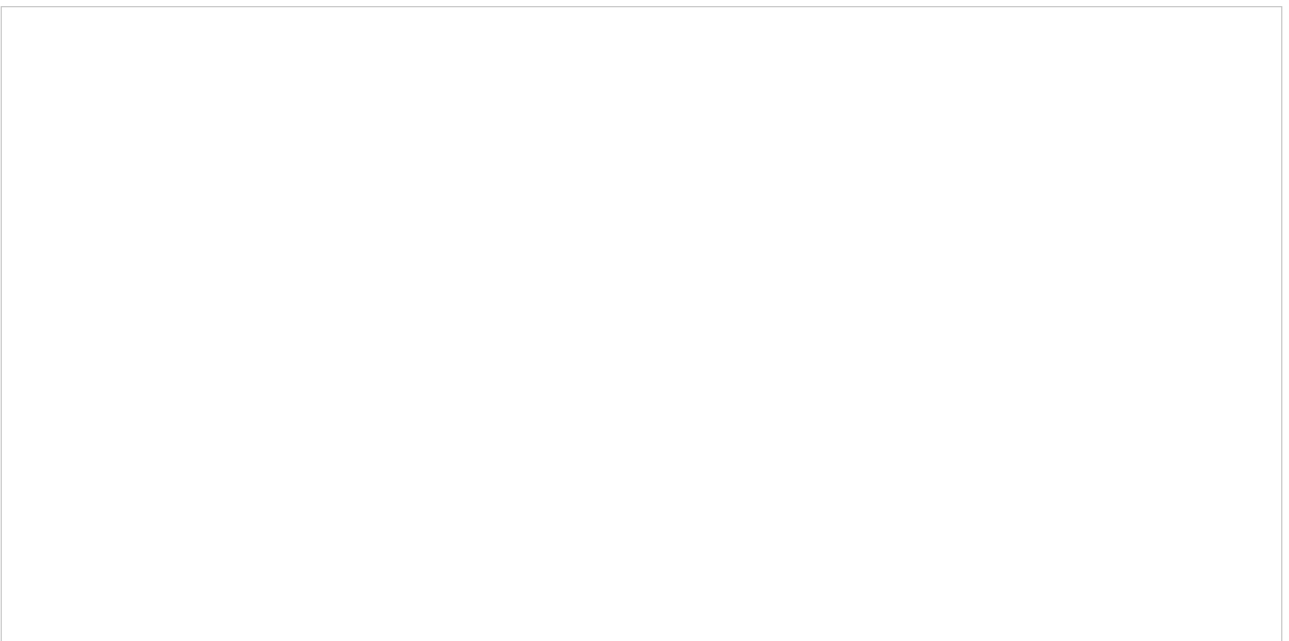
The lack of a conventional focal point or frame means there's a lot happening all over, which in other artwork might be distracting or even frustrating to a viewer yearning for compositional direction or grounding; "fragment of a roof I – 3.168 μSv (17.11.08 – 21.01.09)" looks like scattered stars in the night sky. My favorite of the pictures, "fragment of a field V – 9.120 μSv (07.05.09 – 21.07.09)," on the middle wall of the back room, includes what looks like cupped hands at the right edge of the frame.



Alice Miceli, "fragment of a field V – 9.120 μSv (07.05.09 – 21.07.09)," backlight, radiographic negative (courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler)

In "fragment of a wooden wall III – 2.236 μSv (21.01.09 – 07.04.09)," the rays look like the graffiti tags scratched into the windows of subway cars. The thick, truncated gray-and-white lines in "fragment of a field III – 9.120 μSv (07.05.09 – 21.07.09)" are almost fluffy, resembling the tousled fur of a dog after someone has pet it more than the field of grass or wheat that is likely depicted.

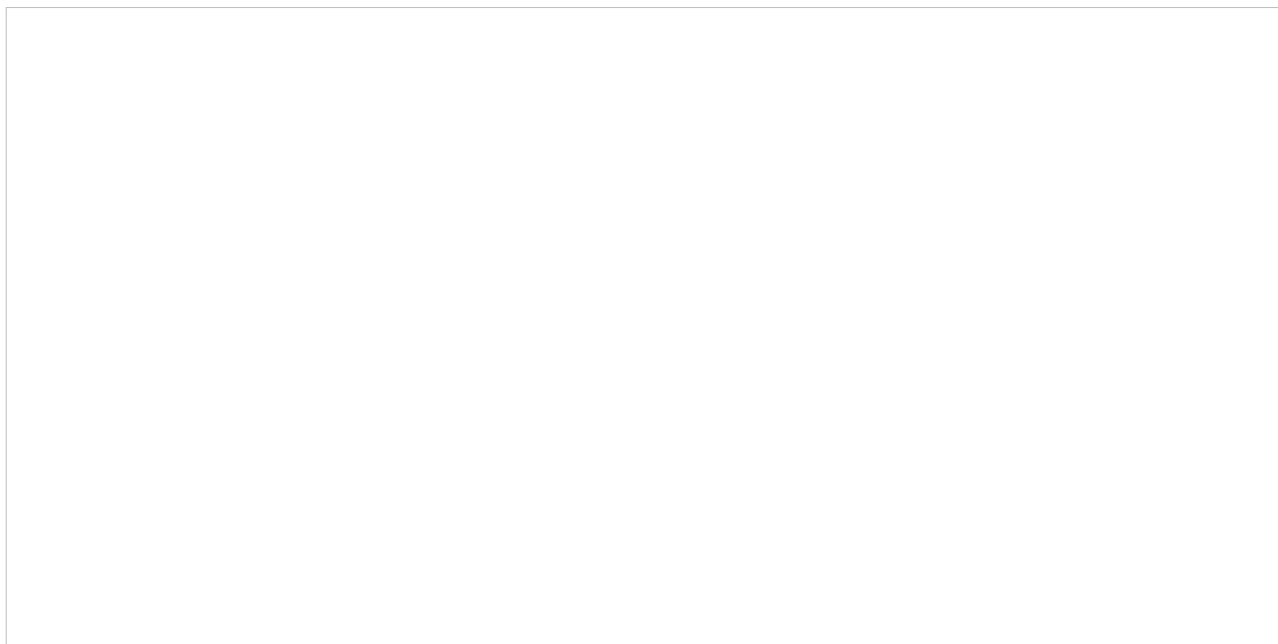
The marks in "fragment of a field I – 9.888 μSv (07.08.08 – 17.11.08)" resemble blood vessels — thin black lines are scratched into tree-like patterns against a gray field — while "fragment of a field VIII – 5.908 μSv (17.11.08 – 21.01.09)," stacked with blocks of gray and white, evokes Mark Rothko, if he had veered from his reds and oranges.



Alice Miceli, "fragment of a field III – 9.120 μ Sv (07.05.09 – 21.07.09)," backlight, radiographic negative (courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler)

Even when it's not being used for human X-rays, radiographic images can start to resemble body parts and bones. Much like an extended visit with Rorschach blocks, the more I looked at them, the more I could see objects or people in the abstraction. On the right wall of the first room, in "fragment of the trunk of a tree I – 6.920 μ Sv (17.11.08 – 21.01.09)," I thought I saw the circular outlines of ribs. Across the room, I decided "fragment of a field VI – 9.120 μ Sv (07.05.09 – 21.07.09)" was a cheetah or a leopard. I made out close-set eyes, a black, round nose, and whiskers.

In the best circumstances, X-rays offer clarity, a diagnosis, a path to action. In the worst cases, they reveal danger, or they are frustratingly inconclusive. However, Miceli isn't diagnosing our ailments. For anyone expecting this exhibition to reveal deeper truths about Chernobyl or nuclear explosions, *Projeto Chernobyl* might feel like a letdown. But if you're willing to view the radiographs on their own terms, to see radiography as both a practical tool and a potential art form, you'll be richly rewarded.



Alice Miceli, "fragment of a roof I – 3.168 μ Sv (17.11.08 – 21.01.09)" (courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler)

Alice Miceli: Projeto Chernobyl continues at the Americas Society (680 Park Avenue, Manhattan) through January 25, 2020. The exhibition was curated by Gabriela Rangel and Diana Flatto.

