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The Museum of Modern Art

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MOUNT ST. HELENS: WORK IN PROGRESS Photographs by Frank Gohlke

An exhibition of fifteen photographs by Frank Gohlke of the aftermath of the volcanic eruption of Mount St. Helens--one of the largest natural disasters in this country's history--will open in the ground floor lobby of The Museum of Modern Art on October 13. The exhibition has been organized by Susan Kismaric, Associate Curator of the Museum's Department of Photography.

On May 18, 1980, Mount St. Helens erupted, devastating an area of 140 square miles. Gohlke spent several weeks in the summers of 1981, 1982 and 1983 making hundreds of photographs of the radically altered landscape in the region of the volcano. In these exquisitely realized pictures, Gohlke continues his preoccupation with the epic subject in photography and his concern with the effects of natural disaster. For example, in his project Aftermath, a series of 40 photographs made in 1979 and 1980, Gohlke photographed the destruction by tornado of Wichita Falls, his home town, and then returned a year later to the same sites and photographed them again.

"The Mount St. Helens project is absolutely central to my work in photography", says Gohlke. "All of the strands of work to this point are woven together in this attempt to picture the consequences of an unimaginably powerful event. The interactions and often collisions between the natural and human orders are starker and clearer at Mount St. Helens than anywhere I have been. The logging industry has altered this landscape profoundly and dramatically over the course of a century and continues to do so; except in the areas closest to the mountain, the 1980 eruptions did not erase the many traces of this activity from the landscape: they can still be read through the effects of the volcano. And in moving rapidly to salvage the downed timber, the loggers have now superimposed the marks of their activity on

the volcano's devastations. This complex layering of cause and effect puts the informational capabilities of the photographic image to severe tests. Mount St. Helens is in part a marvelous laboratory in which to examine the limits of photographic information. It is also, perhaps more importantly a place which lends itself to epic treatment, and the idea of epic scale in photographs has been a preoccupation of mine for years. Mount St. Helens provides a theater in which the sublime can be experienced without embarrassment or irony. I feel that I encounter at Mount St. Helens, in a concentrated form, all of the issues that inform my work. The magnitude of the phenomena I am attempting to describe forces me continually to respond to what I cannot grasp, to abandon certainties and to try to describe what I cannot yet understand."

Mount St. Helens, Frank Gohlke's second exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, will remain on view through November 29, 1983.

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