

Eliciting Anxiety in the Presence of the Sublime

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David Maisel's photographs of cyanide-leaching fields, tailing ponds, vast open pits—the results of a mining industry in the western United States that has permanently scarred and reshaped countless terrains—are simultaneously seductive, beautiful, repulsive, and terrifying. Strikingly vivid colors luminescing from the earth's surface in unconventional compositions combine to make immediately captivating pictures. The ambiguity of what is depicted, and the apparent toxicity suggested by the saturated colors pervading these colossal human-made sites, however, leave one with an overall sense of alarm. This effective duality of attraction and abhorrence characterizes Maisel's earlier work, too, but it intensifies with *The Mining Project*. In this work the artist negotiated a very considered shift from black-and-white film to color and started to produce large-scale photographs that make greater use of abstraction.

With *The Mining Project*, Maisel found a subject matter that carried forth his fascination with the “undoing” of the landscape and with the aesthetics and environmental politics of this process. Maisel was not trained as a geologist or mining engineer. Nor is he a fervent environmental activist. Rather, he approaches this subject foremost as an interrogating artist. When he first began photographing mining sites from the air, Maisel often did not know or understand exactly what he was seeing. After spending hours airborne and at the library reading government publications and aeronautical charts, he became determined to bring these unknown sites to light, to foster the recognition that, whatever our accomplishments, our society also creates these breathtakingly despoiled and depleted landscapes.¹

In Maisel's opinion, the environment received scant attention in the early 1980s as a serious subject for artistic consideration and debate; these issues were still usually viewed as a throwback to the 1960s ecology movement.² There were, however, politically engaged artists who strongly inspired Maisel at the time. He recalls seeing Jenny Holzer's granite benches and signs in the grand lobby of the Brooklyn Museum in 1988, works that displayed text with themes of sex, death, and war in response to the AIDS crisis. Their power resonated with him, and he saw in them something of an equivalent to his own picture-making strategies—artwork with political content that approached its politics through poetic means.³

Notwithstanding the politically potent subject of the work, Maisel presents his ideas more elliptically. His photographs derive their effectiveness through formal choices involving color, scale, perspective, and abstraction, which amplify their seductive nature and conjure the elusive sublime. Indeed, the work is sublime across the definitions of the word—the pictures draw from nature and possess a beauty whose power inspires

awe and anxiety,⁴ yet they operate through abstraction where the subject is concealed and evokes fear.⁵ Maisel also refers here to the technological sublime—awe inspired by colossal marvels of human engineering.⁶ *The Mining Project* photographs conjure these varied ideas of the sublime with particular deftness, offering up abstract compositions that only upon close study reveal environmental catastrophe as their subject. Maisel frames pictures to exclude details that could reveal the subject in a more didactic way. Fluvial contours meet unnaturally rigid lines, and geologic landforms join carefully engineered excavations. In some cases, as viewers, we have no way of understanding what we are looking at. In particular, vantage point and scale are obscured, and despite representing actual, existing mining sites, the subject is opaque. Yet they prompt an emotive response. The works' effectiveness, in fact, derives from these qualities, which together work to produce that same awe and anxiety that Edmund Burke identified as constitutive of the sublime.⁷

Maisel's 1989 photograph *The Mining Project (Butte, Montana 6)* (page 80), for example, appears like a Romantic landscape, with a horizon line and billowing purple storm clouds closing in on the break of sunlight—not unlike a mid-nineteenth-century Hudson River School painting depicting an awe-inspiring scene of uninhabited American wilderness. However, in this case, Maisel's photograph is a bird's-eye view of the base of an abandoned mine in Butte, Montana, where the purple-looking clouds are, in fact, a pool of thirty billion gallons of toxic water, polluted with heavy metals like copper, zinc, and iron. Scientists believe the site is so toxic that it can never be reclaimed.⁸ There are no visual clues that give away the scale of the pool and surrounding terrain, which makes the work abstract in a way Mark Rothko may have appreciated.

Rothko, with whom Maisel's work has formal compositional similarities, believed that his abstract paintings of nothing addressed human drama or tragedy and intimated mortality (see figure 1, left).⁹ Art historian Natalie Kosoi postulates in an essay on Rothko an inherent connection between nothingness and the sublime:

Nothingness evoked anxiety and sublime horror mixed with pleasure. The sublime, whether a quality of object (in Edmund Burke's sense) or a feeling (in Immanuel Kant's sense), is contingent on nothingness, as it is the apprehension of our finitude and fragility, of the fact that there are forces in nature that can destroy us. At the same time, the sublime is also a withdrawal from such a realization, because we know that there is no real or immediate threat to our existence, according to Burke, or because we discover our superiority over our finite nature according to Kant.¹⁰

The strong element of the technological sublime that runs through Maisel's work reflects a perverse awe, reorienting the common association of nature with the sublime to something supremely human, our ability to engineer nature.¹¹ We are astonished by human-made objects whose immensity and magnificence appear to rival that of the natural world.¹² Maisel's photographs of open-pit mines from thousands of feet above the earth go further, however: while viewers might be astounded by the human ability

to master the environment, awe turns to anxiety upon realization of the large-scale degradation involved. Visual communications professor Jennifer Peeples aptly defines this elicited response as the toxic sublime: “The toxic sublime acts to counter that marvel with alarm for the immensity of destruction witnessed. Furthermore, in contrast to the sublime in nature, which functions to improve moral character, the horror of the toxic sublime calls to question the personal, social and environmental ethics that allows these places of contamination to exist.”¹³ For Maisel, the artistic potential of these places is directly correlated with their noxious reality: “The baser the site, the more susceptible it seems to be for poetic contemplation, the more fascinating it becomes as subject matter.”¹⁴ Maisel’s photographs show the sublime effects of these great engineering feats layered on a landscape with its own history of the sublime. The color illuminated from the earth’s surface represents the toxicity of human intervention, but the seduction of the color remains.

The adoption of color and a larger scale in *The Mining Project* allowed Maisel to even more effectively bring out the sublime in his selected sites and in his photographs.¹⁵ Color and scale magnified the seductive nature of the photograph while at the same time imbuing it with a terrifying intensity. In 1989, when Maisel made a trial shift into Cibachrome printing materials, he despised it. The surface was slick and glossy and the colors hypersaturated, violating his sense of what made a photograph “beautiful.” The Cibachrome materials, however, forced him to rethink, as he put it, his “rather unconscious ideas about beauty.”¹⁶ Eventually unburdened by the idea of making a picture simply “beautiful,” Maisel started making pictures that were simultaneously beautiful and horrifying. Over twenty years later, with a nod to Peter Schjeldahl’s essay “Notes on Beauty,” he observed the following:

*Beauty is seen as problematic, for photography, because we no longer imagine beauty as a serious way of knowing or as a serious means of investigation. But it can be. Beauty wedges into artistic practice a structure for continuously imagining what we do not yet know or understand. For an image to possess beauty does not indicate that it is empty of meaning or shallow. Sometimes the object of beauty is not just expected, but bizarre—with a quality that could at first be experienced as strange or even ugly. Such experiences are insights into new or alien aesthetic territory.*¹⁷

This notion of beauty recalls a comment Walker Evans made during an interview in 1974: “A garbage can, occasionally, to me at least, can be beautiful. That’s because you’re seeing. Some people are able to see that—see it and feel it. I lean towards the enchantment, the visual power, of the aesthetically rejected subject.”¹⁸ Maisel is similarly attracted to the “aesthetically rejected” subject. Accepting multiple versions of beauty, Maisel’s pictures seduce the viewer with his aesthetic response to the mining sites. Ultimately his photographs reflect upon the civilization that contains these rejected subjects.

Land artists of the late 1960s and 1970s—such as Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, Richard Long, Robert Morris, and Robert Smithson—were concerned with the intricate relationship between landscape and art, and with the human ability to construct landscape, and they should also be regarded as influential on Maisel’s ideas and strategies when he conceived of *The Mining Project*. Robert Morris believed immense open-pit and strip mines, as well as quarries and deep-shaft mines, would permanently reshape the land they occupied and would ultimately qualify as significant monuments of the twentieth century. “All great monuments celebrate the leading faith of the age—or, in retrospect, the prevailing idiocy,”¹⁹ he noted wryly in 1979.

Maisel was heavily influenced by Smithson’s proposals to American mining companies in the 1970s to create viewing platforms and earth sculptures in closed or abandoned mines, and by Smithson’s earthwork sculptures, such as *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (1971) (see figure 3, above), built on the site of a quarry in Emmen, Holland. *Spiral Hill* is a conical mound with a spiral path running clockwise to an observation platform overlooking *Broken Circle*—two circular segments divided into water and earth. Somewhat removed from these earthworks is a large boulder deposited by Ice Age glaciation. Maisel was interested in Smithson’s ideas about vantage point, perception, and scale, including the wide divergence of scale between geologic and human time—the latter characterized by industry, western expansion in the United States, and natural resource extraction and depletion.²⁰

Similar to Smithson’s *Broken Circle*, which divides space into water and earth, nearly all of Maisel’s photographs in *The Mining Project* include land and water (albeit poisonous water), almost subtly invoking Taoist yin-yang philosophy—the idea that opposing forces are complementary opposites that interact as a greater whole. Maisel was directly influenced by Smithson’s 1973 proposal for the Bingham Canyon Mine in Utah (see figure 2, page 66), a copper mine Maisel has photographed repeatedly over the years. It is the deepest open-pit mine in the world, spanning three miles across, with fifty undulating tiers descending a mile down. Smithson proposed placing four circular jetties in the pool of poison that when viewed from above would appear like a whirlpool.²¹

Smithson’s land-reclamation proposals and built sites offer an opportunity to reflect on our civilization and our relationship to geologic time. *The Mining Project* invokes a similar strategy with extant mines to expand our notions of landscape and what landscape-based art of the future might look like. With color, scale, perspective, and abstraction, Maisel worked to create “contemplative gardens of our time.”²² Maisel has indicated that he was responding to the coolness of much of the New Topographics photographers’ work produced in the preceding decade, which depict in deadpan black-and-white photographs American landscapes marked by human intervention. Using intense color and large scale, Maisel hoped to push the pendulum in the other direction, toward something more visceral and more charged.²³

He also thought a great deal about the toxic aspects of his Cibachrome materials and the environmental impacts of the entire medium of photography. Returning in 1985 from his first major excursion photographing copper and gold mines from the air, he developed the film and then stopped to reflect on his process. "In using photography, let alone aerial photography, wasn't I as guilty as anyone else in contributing to environmental degradation?"²⁴ One can look at Maisel's entire *Black Maps* oeuvre, in fact, as a metaphor for the natural resources exploited in the production of photography: logging to produce paper; mining to produce minerals for film, paper, and processing; and water to enable the chemical reactions of the traditional photographic medium.²⁵ Maisel accepts his personal involvement and that of the medium, recognizing that as a society we are all implicated in extracting from the earth what we need or want with little regard for the consequences. Not merely critical of the mining industry, his work stands as a critique of photography, which reflects the desires of the society that produces it.

*I want my pictures to ask questions, not answer them. I want the aesthetic experience to be an essential component of these images. That being said, I cannot have spent the last several decades making these kinds of images without a sense of time running out, of the approach to a kind of tipping point, of a looming sense of disaster, where we human beings, with our incredible sense of privilege and our human-centric view of the universe, will be reduced to an extinguished flicker of light set against the span of history. But, I don't think it is the place of art in general, or my work in particular, to solve that problem. Perhaps to witness it, yes, but not to solve it.*²⁶

Maisel's photographs carry within them our varied notions of beauty, with a diverse sensibility for grandeur drawn from both our surroundings and our selves. Photographs from *The Mining Project* contain both oppositional and complementary notions of the sublime, and thus remove Maisel from the more easily defined categories of the socially active, environmental, or technologically oriented artist. For Maisel, aesthetics are in no way opposed to the forces that might compromise them. The visually complicated can be culled from all manner of sources—the human, the technological, the natural, and the evolving. Maisel's pictures seduce and unsettle us. We see beauty in toxicity and witness the sublime in the seditious treatment of nature. In this experience of the sublime, anxiety supplants rectitude. Consequences of our fascination exist, of course, but they cast neither guilt nor absolution.

Notes

1 David Maisel, email correspondence with the author, November 7, 2011.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, vol. 24, part 2, The Harvard Classics (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909–14); Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/24/2/.

5 Natalie Kosoi, "Nothingness Made Visible: The Case of Rothko's Paintings," *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (summer 2005): 20–31.

6 David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), xiv.

7 Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, vol. 24, part 2, The Harvard Classics (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14); Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/24/2/.

8 Alan Berger, *Reclaiming the American West* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), p. 89.

9 Kosoi, "Nothingness Made Visible," 20–31.

10 Ibid., 25.

11 Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, xiv.

12 Jennifer Peeples, "Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes," *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 4 (December 2011): 373–92.

13 Ibid., 379.

14 Excerpted from David Maisel's lecture for the Penny W. Stamps Distinguished Speaker Series at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, February 10, 2011.

15 David Maisel, email correspondence with the author, November 7, 2011.

16 Ibid.

17 Maisel, University of Michigan lecture, February 10, 2011.

18 Walker Evans interviewed in "Walker Evans—The Thing Itself Is Such a Secret and so Unapproachable," George Eastman House, *Image* 1, no. 4 (December 1974). Originally published in Yale Alumni Magazine, February 1974.

19 Robert Morris, keynote address on July 31, 1979, for the symposium "Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture," sponsored by the King County (Washington) Arts Commission.

Printed in Robert Morris, "Notes on Art as/and Land Reclamation," *October 12* (spring 1980): 87–102, 102.

20 Maisel, email correspondence with the author, November 7, 2011.

21 Thomas Dreher, "Robert Smithson: Land Reclamation and the Sublime," *Arte Factum 45* (October/November 1992): 26.

22 Maisel, University of Michigan lecture, February 10, 2011.

23 Maisel, email correspondence with the author, November 7, 2011.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.