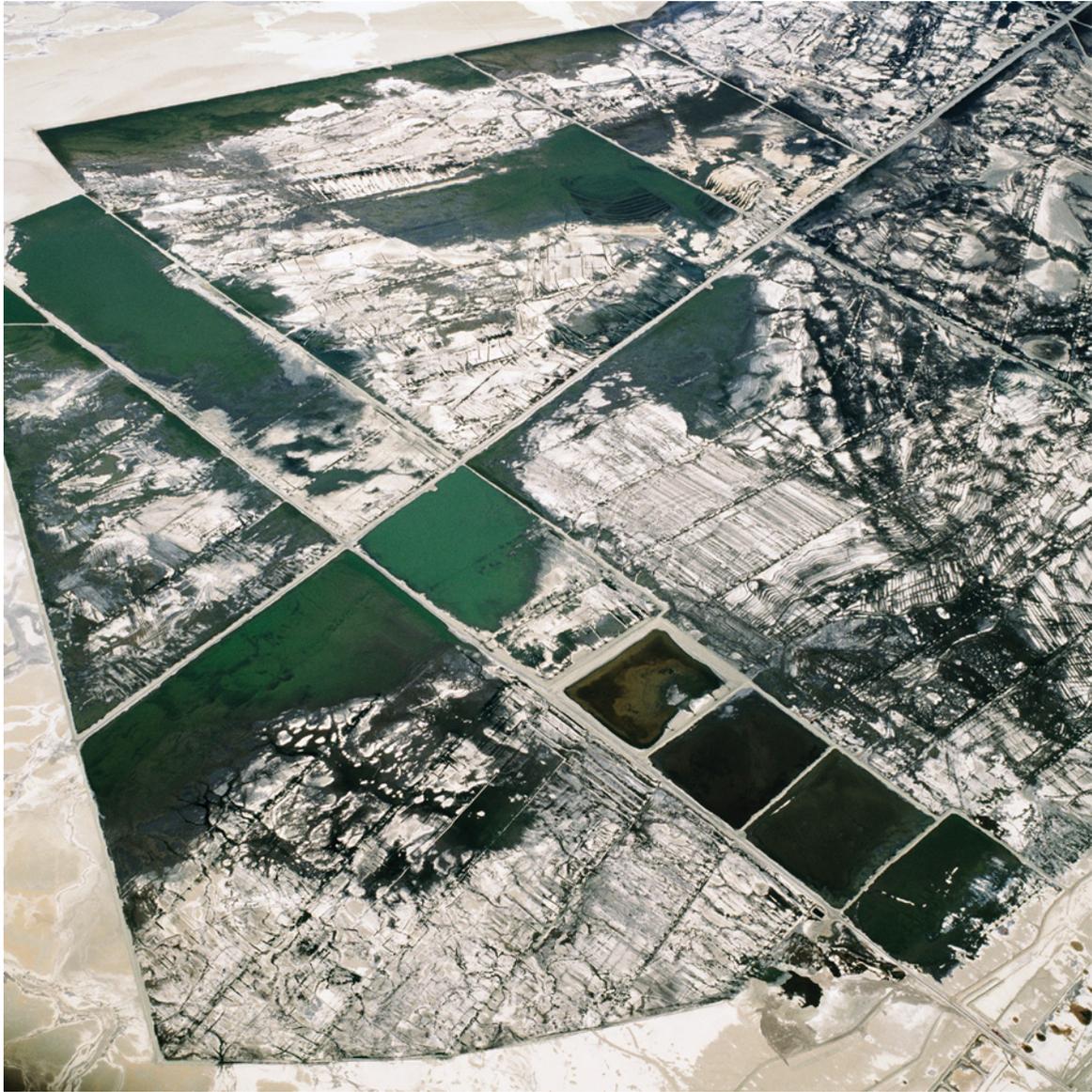


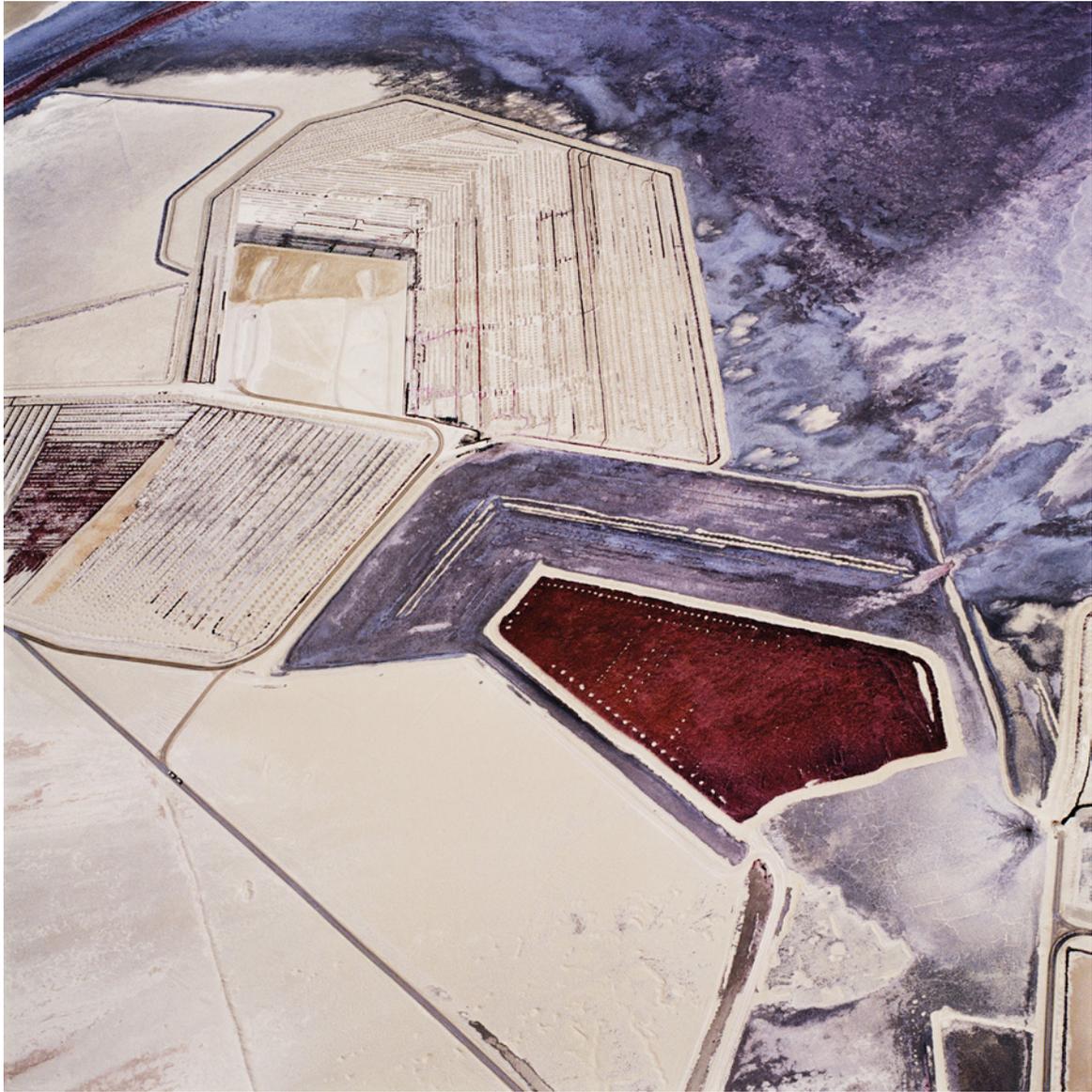
Black Maps





The Lake Project 53, 2002





The Lake Project 34, 2002





The Mining Project (Butte, Montana 7), 1989





Terminal Mirage 14, 2003



“I want to untether my pictures from reality, from easy readability ... Like a map that is black, these pictures are unknowable.”

For more than 25 years, David Maisel has looked down upon the American landscape and found shapes and forms that are hauntingly beautiful, yet which also speak to the devastating changes wrought by man's progress and pursuit of profit at the expense of nature. His images of clear-cut forests, desalination plants, drying lakes, coal mines and American cities have a distinct, scary quality to them that is beguiling. Trained in architecture at Princeton University and in photography at California College of the Arts, he first took to the skies in a small plane over the devastated landscape left by the explosion of Mount Saint Helens with renowned photographer Emmet Gowin in 1983, and since then his career has taken off.

In an earlier work, *Report from the Lake* (Nazraeli, 2004), Maisel writes words that could be both those of a photographer in a small plane flying over the dying, drying Owens Lake, a reservoir created to feed the giant thirst of the City of Angels, the sprawling megalopolis that is Los Angeles, or they could be the metaphorical lodestone, the primitive compass, that has guided Maisel and his vision throughout his career: “*To autopsy means to see for oneself*. The facts of the lake's destruction are irrefutable, and more potent than any of our imaginations can provide. The lake is real; its history is that of its ruin by human intervention. The eradication has yielded a stately magnificence, and this seems a terrible contradiction: beauty borne of environmental degradation.”

On the occasion of the publication of his most recent book, *Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime* (Steidl, 2013), Bill Kouwenhoven caught up with the high-flying photographer via Skype.

BK: Bill Kouwenhoven
DM: David Maisel

BK: How did you move from architecture, which is very ground-based, to aerial photography, which obviously began with balloons during the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War in the 1860s and 70s and later with airplanes?

DM: I think it was formed very early on. From age ten, I had really wanted to be an architect and would draw things in plan all the time. I was also fascinated by graphic patterns in the landscape. When you are working from the air where everything is moving, you are constantly composing and seeking patterns, it is a very exhilarating and ascendant way of working. It puts you in a kind of altered state.

BK: Oxygen deprivation can do that, too.

DM: Exactly.

BK: You are also very interested in Landart and Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in particular, which was explicitly meant to be seen from the air. Elsewhere you write, “I have been inspired by Smithson to examine the “dumps of the non-historical past” by making aerial images at sites that have undergone some intense cataclysmic transformation.” How did you get involved in the “politicized landscape”?

DM: Funny you should mention that. It does come out of the time, and I taught a course at the Santa Fe

Workshop on exactly that back in 1991. That was the first time I sought to communicate with other photographers. It made me realise I was working alongside others in the area.

The trigger was really that trip to Mt St Helens — not just seeing the natural devastation but also seeing the parallel devastation that the logging industry was enacting there. As in architecture, there is a permeable membrane between the man-made and the natural surroundings. The shapes of the clear-cutting resembled, in a way, the forms of an architectural plan like those of Ladeu or Olmstead who meticulously designed and build some of America's finest parks and communities.

BK: Olmstead meets Weyhrhauser...

DM: I'm going to use that one! My range is really Olmstead meets Smithsonian.

BK: ... meets J.G. Ballard with his dystopian stories set in bleak, even apocalyptic landscapes. You are also a science fiction fan or at least a Ballard fan, right?

DM: I would have loved to have worked with him. In a piece on Smithsonian I wrote, "My images of the Great Salt Lake serve to delineate these atavistic landscapes. In writing about JG Ballard, the critic Colin Greenland has written: "Whatever the exact nature of the catastrophe, it has disrupted the continuity of history and left a world of arbitrary fragments from which the survivors must piece together their own realities." The arbitrary fragments are my photographs of this terra incognita.

"What the artist seeks is coherence and order — not "truth", correct statements, or proofs. He seeks the fiction that reality will sooner or later imitate."

However, I am not saying "here are these industries that are changing the landscape and that they are therefore evil." That is too simplistic. Of course, in my undergraduate days we did have access to all of the classic Western photographers like O'Sullivan and Gardner, but we also had the New Topographics, and they very much grounded me in my ways of looking. My work began as a response to them. Richard Misrach's Bravo 20 project was also very important to me. You have to remember that we were working more in isolation than compared to now. Misrach did make me not afraid to present something that would challenge the viewer.

BK: Tell me about the notion of the "Black Maps" and the idea of an American Sublime.

DM: For me the sublime is timeless, beyond painters like Caspar David Friedrich, it was present in the earliest photographs from the West, but it was also present in the Earthrise picture from 1969. That was also a Cold War picture — it was beautiful, but we were so very close to Armageddon. It also had to do with Man's intervention in nature, on the Moon. What they embodied for me were the twinned aspects of beauty and terror as a system of aesthetics. It is a device to engage the audience through the

notion of seduction and betrayal. My work is about looking at a future past. All of it is about looking at the remnants of civilisations. Some of these civilisations happen to be current.

BK: But for how long?

DM: Yeah, but it is really like a Ballardian worldview where we are just glimpsing these for the brief moment when we humans occupy the planet through a flickering light.

BK: ... and about the Black Maps?

DM: It comes from a really beautiful and chilling poem by Mark Strand in which he says, "... It's not the attendance of stones or the applauding winds that shall let you know that you have arrived, nor the sea that celebrates only departures, nor the mountains nor the dying cities, nothing will tell you where you are, each moment is a place you have never been, ... the present is always dark. Its maps are dark, its horizons are nothing ..."

BK: Ah, when shooting down from a plane, there are no horizons.

DM: ... and only the black grass is holding up the black stars. The poem is a perfect coda to the work. The idea of a map that is black, what does that tell you?

BK: Unlike the white spaces of terra incognita that scream there be monsters, it is as though it is filled with too much information, too many layers that it is hard to see what was there and what will be.

DM: I want to untether my pictures from reality, from easy readability. That is the parallel to what I am doing here with this notion. Like a map that is black, these pictures are unknowable. I want to get back to the idea of the sublime, where we are very fragile, and that at some point, the present becomes the past. There will be a point where our civilisation will cease.

BK: Thank you very much for that apocalyptic thought and for this interview.

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