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Strange beauty, transformation, secrets and loss

David Maisel's portraits of canisters holding cremated remains create an unusual memorial to lives set on a shelf and forgotten.

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The first photograph in David Maisel's new book presents a view into a storeroom that clearly doesn't get a lot of foot traffic. An old wooden desk with no chair is parked in the corner. Bits of debris have gathered on the stained linoleum floor. The walls are what give this room, and Maisel's book, its name: "Library of Dust."

Shelves packed with corroded copper cans stretch from floor to ceiling, like the backroom of a post-apocalyptic grocery store. The room is actually a warehouse of sorts. It's part of an abandoned ward at the Oregon State Hospital, and the canisters contain the unclaimed cremated remains of former psychiatric patients.

The final image in Maisel's book, released in October by Chronicle Books, shows the same archive two years later, given higher priority. The new shelves hold orderly rows of clean black boxes, each with a numbered metal tag.

In the pages between the 2005 and 2007 photographs, words and images trace the artist's fascination with secrets, transformation and loss, his confrontation with the sublime and his unexpected political advocacy.

Maisel, 47, lives in Mill Valley and maintains a studio in neighboring Sausalito. By phone recently, he confessed to a predilection for "things that aren't intended to be seen." For the past 20 years, that has meant aerial views of copper and coal mines, clear-cut forests, the ecological disaster that was once Owens Lake, the mutating expanse of Los Angeles and the shifting chemistry of the Great Salt Lake.

With their emphasis on structure, texture and tonality, his photographs (color and black-and-white) verge on abstraction, while mapping the impact of time and human action on the landscape.

When Maisel heard about the canisters of remains in the Salem, Ore., institution, he knew immediately that he wanted to photograph them. "I was very interested in the notion that they were previously hidden away. Even without seeing them, their story was so charged. These were individuals who had been, for all intents and purposes, abandoned by their families, written out of their families' own histories."

Before Maisel was born, his grandfather had undergone electroshock therapy to treat severe depression, but the photographer didn't learn of it until he was an adult. "So I glimpsed the way these kind of histories disappear, not through any malicious intent but because we want to forget."

The 3,500 canisters are what's left of men and women who came to the hospital — called the Oregon State Insane Asylum when it opened in 1883 — and never left. Judging from early photographs, Maisel says, the place was an asylum in the best sense of the word, a safe haven, with the comfortable layout of a college campus.

Over the decades, attitudes toward treating mental illness changed and the facility changed with them. Airy open wards were chopped up into small separate spaces. In 1975, the institution served as the set for the film "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," and the following year, as the backdrop of Mary Ellen Mark's wrenching photographic series of women in a maximum security psychiatric ward.

The hospital began cremating the unclaimed bodies of deceased patients in 1913, when its burial grounds were displaced. The practice continued until 1971, with the "cremains," as the institution calls them, being placed in copper canisters and labeled using a succession of impermanent methods. They sat in a basement, then were moved to an underground vault, which flooded continuously.

In 2000, the vessels were moved back aboveground, to a storeroom near the old crematory. Maisel made six visits to the facility, photographing its trauma-steeped spaces, but mostly the canisters, positioning them individually against black cloth, in a manner midway between still life and studio portrait.

Each urn wears its own distinctive pattern of wear and decay. Seepage from within or moisture from outside have transformed the copper into an oscillating palette of mineral tones — malachite, jade, turquoise. A white crystalline crust branches across one can's rim like coral or a salt deposit. An aqua scar draws down the seam of another. What looks like violent decay is also generative change; each canister is a formal, ethical and mineralogical Rorschach.

"The images are haunting and beautiful in a way that underscores how photography works as a reminder of the passage of time, as a witness to history," says Michael Roth, who was president of the California College of the Arts when Maisel attended graduate school there and now heads Wesleyan University. A scholar of psychoanalysis and the construction of history, Roth contributed one of the essays in "Library of Dust."

One of the prints hangs in his house on campus, and visitors, he says, "are immediately taken by the surface. When I explain what it's about, I see their faces change. The image isn't any less compelling, but they're more ambivalent about it. That's a successful work of art. [Maisel's] not sacrificing the conceptual or the visual. He's found an extraordinary balance between beauty and the historical lessons."

When exhibiting the photographs — they appeared recently at the Portland Art Museum — Maisel has displayed them in a grid but also printed the images human height, so there would be, he says, an equivalence between the subject and the viewer. "I also think that the scale lets the difficulty of the subject matter come through. You can't escape it at that scale."

And difficult the pictures are, infused with poignancy and sorrow. They mine the same aesthetic territory as the rest of Maisel's work, what he calls "the apocalyptic sublime. It's about human intervention and the ripple effect of decisions over time. There are moral quandaries involved. The objects contain life and death, the human body that's been incinerated, but they also have this amazing alchemical afterlife, these blooms that express a kind of continuity of matter and spirit."

Karen Lang, professor of art history at USC and a scholar-in-residence at the Getty alongside Maisel in 2007, prefers the term "voluptuous unease" to describe the work but recognizes that it fits the standard definition of the sublime.

"They are images that take one aback. It's hard initially to resolve their beauty and content, and that's what the sublime does initially, it takes one aback with feelings of awe or terror or fear because what you're seeing exceeds your grasp, your comprehension. The entwining of beauty and pain is very unsettling."

Maisel's work over the past two decades has argued for an expanded definition of beauty, one that bypasses glamour to encompass the damaged, the transmuted, the decomposed. Beauty that is generated at the cost of something precious or the result of flawed choices.

"I can't let myself ever make pictures that are beautiful unless there's some price that's been paid," he says, laughing. "I can't do it!" But, he adds, "You don't need to know the back stories to make the pictures work. I'm careful with the way I title things so they don't refer back to the subject. I want the pictures to exist distinct from their place of origin. . . .

"The pictures aren't facts. There's nothing factual about them. They're mental space. That's what abstraction is about, making a kind of psychological space."

Maisel doesn't think or act the part of the photojournalist and yet his photographs have served as advocates for change. He hoped the pictures might, in a subtle, implicit way, help lessen the stigma of mental illness, but they had an even more tangible effect.

The president of Oregon's state Senate — housed just a mile down the road from the hospital — used the photographs as evidence of the need for a new facility. The campaign succeeded and funding was secured. The hospital is scheduled for demolition soon and a new institution will take its place, complete with a memorial setting for the canisters.

"I didn't expect any kind of advocacy role for the pictures," Maisel says, "but it was incredibly gratifying that they took on that function. The images had a kind of power that could be leveraged. They became part of the argument for the living."

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Maisel will participate in a conversation about "Library of Dust" with Charlotte Cotton, LACMA photography curator, at Photo LA on Jan. 10. For more information, *www.artfairsinc.com/photola/2009*.

DAVID MAISEL Chronicle Books

NOT CHECKED OUT: Maisel's photographs of copper canisters at Oregon State Hospital are collected in the book "Library of Dust."