

## ARTTALK

**KEPT IN THE DARK** Since being placed in an underground vault at the Oregon State Hospital in the mid-1970s, some 3,500 copper canisters have experienced surprising transformations. Because of corrosion, the canisters, which



**David Maisel's**  
*Library of Dust 1834,*  
2005–06.

hold the unclaimed remains of psychiatric patients, are now covered with delicate blue, pink, and white blooms.

David Maisel photographed nearly 110 of these canisters for his “Library of Dust” series. The images, on view through December 6 at the Portland Art Museum and through the 4th of this month at the Haines Gallery in San Francisco, suggest a metaphysical relationship between the canisters’ contents and their exteriors. In a monograph on the series (to be published this month by Chronicle Books), Maisel calls each container a “surface onto which is registered the ineffable life of the soul.”

Maisel read about the canisters when the hospital came forward with the story in 2005. Over the next three years he photographed them in a room near the building’s old crematorium. Exposure to water and the lead used to seal the lids are believed to have contributed to the mineral deposits that spread over the containers’ surfaces.

Since 2005 some 60 families have claimed their relatives’ remains. The rest have been stored in black plastic boxes, and cataloged. Maisel writes of examining the new containers: “I carefully look inside. Crystalline droplets of moisture have formed on the interior of the clear plastic bag, fogging the surface slightly, like the condensation of breath on a window.” He told *ARTnews*, “I don’t believe in life after death, but maybe there is something left. There was an electrical energy about the place.” —*Rebecca Robertson*