



**DAVID MAISEL**

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When Wilhelm Conrad Rontgen took the first-ever x-ray image in 1895, he used his wife's hand as a subject. "I have seen my death!" she exclaimed when she saw the ghostly results, face-to-face with what usually stays hidden until our bodies decompose.

David Maisel is also alert to the deathly looking possibilities of x-ray imagery. His latest series, *History's Shadow*, shows x-rays of ancient sculptures and vessels, captured in delicate two-dimensional swirls. "I was stunned by how different they look," he says.

Many of those artworks are so old and so familiar that we've almost stopped noticing them, he adds, so x-rays help us look as if for the first time. "It's easy to forget that these ancient objects were once contemporary," says Maisel. "By defamiliarising them we can regain something of that sense. The x-rays are like transmissions from the distant past conveying messages across time."

The x-rays come from the archives of two US institutions, the Getty Research Institute and the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, where they're used to help understand and restore artefacts. Maisel discovered them while on an artist's residence at the Getty, almost completely by accident. "I was interested in the way that photography can combine science and art, and was originally researching microscopy," he says. "Then one day I went into a room where they had taped an x-ray up to a window. To me the x-ray was more interesting than the object, a muddy 19th century landscape painting, and I found that absolutely exhilarating."

He spent the rest of the residency going through the institute's archives, opening dusty envelopes looking for interesting examples. Many were uninspiring, but he pulled out around 150 to work with, photographing them on a lightbox then working on the colour and heightening or softening the details

in Photoshop. He then approached the Asian Art Museum to do the same again, keen to expand beyond icons of Western art history. He's now got around 50 images he's happy with, but hopes to add further x-rays from other museums too.

An archive project, it seems very different to Maisel's previous series, which include canisters of cremated remains and aerial shots of LA. But to him, it feels exactly the same. "If I'm taking the photograph I'm framing the shot, but it's still a process of finding pictures," he says. "It's governed by exactly the same elements of chance and intuition." *BJP*

**History's Shadow** is on show alongside Maisel's last series, **Library of Dust**, at the California Museum of Photography until 01 January. He will give a talk there on 09 October. A book of the same title will be published by Nazraeli Press, due this autumn. [www.cmp.ucr.edu](http://www.cmp.ucr.edu) [www.nazraeli.com](http://www.nazraeli.com)