



"Terminal Mirage", 2005. All images courtesy: Von Intell Gallery, New York

# HUMAN ASH REACTIONS

GEOFF MANAUGH ON DAVID MAISEL

contemporary  
ISSUE 84



A friend of mine once pointed out that an imaginative reader can trace the rudiments of William Blake's literary cosmology back to his acidic and physical printmaking process. In other words, the reverse-engraved, anti-metallic incisions that Blake literally burned into copper plates lent a great deal of their intensity to his elemental writings on heaven and hell. The process of engraving, in this view, served both to influence and to enact, on a chemical level, the fiery theology that Blake described.

I was reminded of this while looking at the photographs of David Maisel. Several images in his recent photographic series have focused on the wounded remains of landscapes quarried almost to oblivion by the extraction industries: we gaze upon edges of gold mines and their pharaonic cyanide-leaching heaps, across stumps of clear-cut forests, over zinc pits and lagoons filled with the excavated waste of tungsten ore. Other images depict the grids of Utah's Great Salt Lake periphery, where prismatic matters of a half-drowned world evaporate in geometric holding ponds, their residue pure colour.

These are 'landscapes undone', Maisel writes, an earth estranged, made unearthly. At first glance these even appear to be abstract paintings – or perhaps a photographic homage to Mark Rothko or Richard Diebenkorn. In fact, these colour fields are less important for their final aesthetic effect than for what they reveal about the process of photography: it is the chemistry of the photographs that brings us back to Blake.

In what seems almost deliberate irony, the means of developing and printing these images has everything in common with the pollution that Maisel's imagery illustrates. The printed surface of the photograph not only represents these damaged landscapes, it also chemically reproduces their fractal topographies. In both cases, metals mix and precipitate out of carefully prepared solutions, leaving visible abstract imagery behind; these spills, of chemicals into chemicals across surfaces, are both the subject matter and technical means of Maisel's photography.

Another series, 'Library of Dust' (2005), albeit non-aerial, finds visual power through similar themes. Maisel has photographed hundreds of individual copper canisters, each of them framed as if a portrait – for these canisters hold the cremated remains of patients from an American psychiatric hospital. Oddly reminiscent of bullet casings, the canisters are literal gravesites. Reacting with their ash inhabitants, the canisters are now 'blooming with secondary minerals', as Maisel describes it, articulating new metallic landscapes grown in miniature. Adding yet another level of resonance, these urns, set against a deep black background, subtly resemble the earliest images of earth taken from space, complete with apparent coastlines and island arcs. That planetary self-portrait, now all but mundane, was briefly stunning for its swirls of blue, white and green, fixed lonely in space. This canister-as-planet is a comparison Maisel himself explicitly makes: 'they are micro-terrains'.

Of course the acidic reactivity of copper is already well known – it was used by Blake to articulate his mythic visions, and copper even formed the earliest photographic plates used by Daguerre – but here the metallic interactions between human ash and canister form something altogether unexpected: a kind of posthumous, representational land art. It is extraordinary that these funerary urns exhibit visual effects so like the polluted surfaces of Maisel's lakes and tailings fields. It is as if Maisel has taken photographs of photographs. In the copper surface of an urn, and the Euclidean grids of a commodified planet, Maisel's work shows that the boundaries don't hold, the parts interact and new accidental images are born of reaction. His own elemental cosmology, made of photographic metals and mineral blooms, is a chemical continuation of the subjects it represents.

GEOFF MANAUGH IS THE AUTHOR OF BLDGBLOG ([HTTP://BLDGBLOG.BLOGSPOT.COM/](http://BLDGBLOG.BLOGSPOT.COM/)), AS WELL AS AN EDITOR OF ARCHINECT ([HTTP://WWW.ARCHINECT.COM/](http://WWW.ARCHINECT.COM/)). HE HAS WRITTEN A NOVEL, CALLED FILM NIGHT, ABOUT ARCHITECTURE AND SURVEILLANCE IN LONDON



Above and below: 'Library of Dust', 2005

