

Living in Oblivion

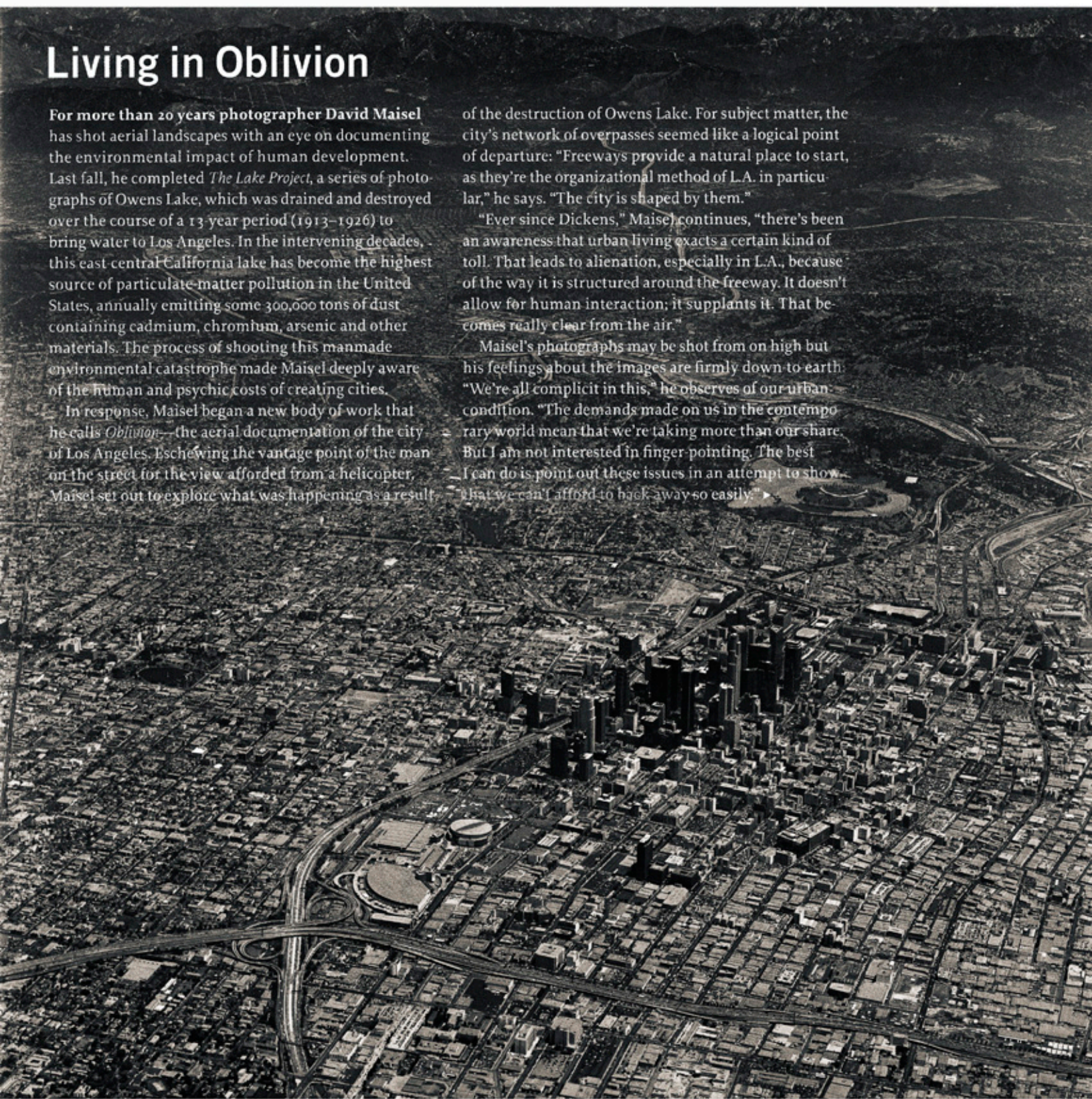
For more than 20 years photographer David Maisel has shot aerial landscapes with an eye on documenting the environmental impact of human development. Last fall, he completed *The Lake Project*, a series of photographs of Owens Lake, which was drained and destroyed over the course of a 13-year period (1913–1926) to bring water to Los Angeles. In the intervening decades, this east central California lake has become the highest source of particulate-matter pollution in the United States, annually emitting some 300,000 tons of dust containing cadmium, chromium, arsenic and other materials. The process of shooting this manmade environmental catastrophe made Maisel deeply aware of the human and psychic costs of creating cities.

In response, Maisel began a new body of work that he calls *Oblivion*—the aerial documentation of the city of Los Angeles. Eschewing the vantage point of the man on the street for the view afforded from a helicopter, Maisel set out to explore what was happening as a result

of the destruction of Owens Lake. For subject matter, the city's network of overpasses seemed like a logical point of departure: "Freeways provide a natural place to start, as they're the organizational method of L.A. in particular," he says. "The city is shaped by them."

"Ever since Dickens," Maisel continues, "there's been an awareness that urban living exacts a certain kind of toll. That leads to alienation, especially in L.A., because of the way it is structured around the freeway. It doesn't allow for human interaction; it supplants it. That becomes really clear from the air."

Maisel's photographs may be shot from on high but his feelings about the images are firmly down-to-earth. "We're all complicit in this," he observes of our urban condition. "The demands made on us in the contemporary world mean that we're taking more than our share. But I am not interested in finger-pointing. The best I can do is point out these issues in an attempt to show that we can't afford to back away so easily." ▶









“Neighborhoods seem to go on forever in L.A. There’s an infinite grid with no scale differentiation over this vast swath of domestic architecture.”





“L.A. wasn’t made through the most wonderful planning and it’s apparent. What’s resulted is really a wasteland, but it must have been a paradise at some point.”





“These images imply an incessant search for sanctuary that never ends.”