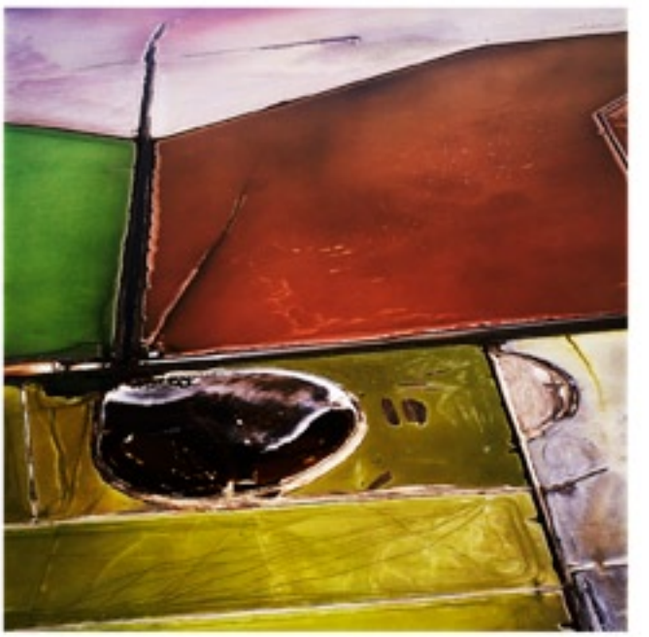
Return to the source

The Prix Pictet is a new global photography prize created to draw attention to the issue of sustainability. Its first year takes the theme of water, a precious commodity, too often polluted, too often out of reach. *Francis Hodgson*, chairman of the Pictet jury, discusses the importance of photography, and takes us through a selection of this year's shortlisted entrants

IT WAS MARK TWAIN WHO SAID: "IF YOU HAVE NOTHING TO SAY, SAY NOTHING." Photographers, as well as writers, would do well to heed this maxim. Indeed, the medium of photography has been so overwhelmingly successful that photographers sometimes struggle to find something we don't already know.

It sounds awful, but if the latest national disaster, flood or drought looks indistinguishable from the last, viewers will find it hard to summon a reaction. You can call that donor fatigue, but it's also a failure of photography. In this era of supersaturation, to move us with imagery is an astonishing achievement.

In choosing the shortlist of candidates for the Prix Pictet, we didn't want to favour journalism over art, and we didn't really mind whether the authors thought of themselves as documentary photographers, autobiographers, landscape artists or anything else. We wanted powerful messages with the ring of truth. >



David Maisel

American photographer David Maisel, 47, has been working since 2001 on a series entitled "Black Maps", creating abstract aerial photographs of environmentally damaged landscapes. This project took him to various locations, including the Great Salt Lake in north-western Utah (left and top right) and Owens Lake in south-eastern California (bottom right). Situated at the terminus of the Owens River, the lake held water continuously for at least 800,000 years. It is now, Maisel says, "an extreme example of the destabilising effect of surface-water extraction in desert regions".

We set some basic parameters for subject matter, but none for age, rank or nationality. And then we set about trying to find pictures that matter. We wanted to find photographers who addressed problems of importance in a compelling way. We wanted beauty in the result and coherence in the manner of arriving at it. We wanted originality but not at the price of content.

I have never been to the top of Mount Everest, but the image is now my own, as it is everybody else's. Reflective sunglasses. An anorak hood tightly pulled over the head. An odd expression composed of unequal parts oxygen shortage, snow-glare, triumph, self-consciousness and fear. I've seen variants of this picture dozens of times. We all have. So in the next picture I see of the top of Everest, I need something more. It might tell of dead bodies passed on the way up or hiking equipment littered in the wilderness. It might tell of antique legends or personal aspiration. But I already know the story of the cagoule and the reflective shades by heart. The photographer will have to trust that I know that much and move on.

In the early days of photography, the simple act of showing something was enough. Nineteenth-century travel photographers didn't need much of an argument. To show how Egypt or Japan looked was very powerful to an audience that had not seen them before. But as photography spread, we all acquired a vocabulary of things-known-by-seeing. And it was far greater than anything we might have seen ourselves.

Once we were used to how it could show us the world, photography began to be a means of persuasion. It used to be said that documentary was essentially a tool of the left. One thinks of the great classics of social photography, of John Thompson, for example, staring unblinkingly at the street life of London in the 1870s. He was certainly a campaigner, a counterpart to Mayhew or even Dickens. But he was also a professional, and his campaign was also his revenue.

The implication has always been that to show things as they really are is, by definition, to point out how they could be better. We're not used to photographers who go out into the world motivated by the determination to applaud. Countless camera-clubmen take pictures of roses for no better reason than to celebrate the rose, but we tend to look down our noses at them. In the stock-photography industry, an illusion of positivity is the norm, but the clients of stock photography are paying for appearance not analysis. The pity is that so few viewers can tell the difference. One of the oddities of photography is that we still confuse, with disturbing ease, the message with the manner. We see things photographed and think we've understood them. Is it the responsibility of the photographer to explain? Perhaps not. But a photographer with nothing to say is in the wrong line of work.

Documentary is not the only kind of photographic activity that sets out to change >

minds. Manifestly "non-realistic" photography in the form of montage has been a tool of public debate for at least 100 years. In the hands of John Heartfield (the great anti-Nazi photographic satirist), or much later, Peter Kennard (who lambasted the government of Margaret Thatcher), manipulation becomes as powerful in photography as it can be in film. The conception of documentary raises all sorts of questions. If it purports to document something in a neutral way, then the more skilful the photographer, the less likely he will be to achieve it, since it is precisely by exploiting his technical talents and his intellectual position that a photographer makes photographs his own. Those clubmen's roses might be thought documentary for one reason alone: nobody can tell by looking at one which photographer made it. Neutrality, achieved at the cost of content.

Great photographers can tell their truths even when they don't necessarily quite tell the truth. Photography is the most selective medium there is. The frame slices across the real world and excludes most of it, and the photographer slices across his contact-sheets or digital files, and > excludes most of them, too. Photographers can make truth out of almost anything. It doesn't have to be a set of what we'd think of as "facts" to produce a "factual" result. The great Josef Koudelka, now for some years the major talent in the Magnum photographic agency, made a searing set of images (published as *The Black Triangle*) out of extraordinarily beautifully made landscape pictures. Richard Misrach, with whom I served on the Prix Pictet jury, made just as phenomenal a series (collectively, his *Desert Cantos*) partly out of the simple idea that some people might not notice that there was a loud political and historical bass note in his quiet pictures of the deserts of the American west. Nobody, I suppose, would deny the strong "political" content of the recent work of Andreas Gursky, made (quite openly) by digital image manipulation and marketed exclusively as "art".

In all of this, there are boundaries waiting to be broken. Photography has never respected boundaries. There is a particularly photographic phenomenon whereby pictures slide easily from one context to another and subtly change their content as they do so. From magazine page to art museum is a strange journey. Some great photographic campaigns seem trite now; others missed their mark at the time and have to be recovered years later. Photographs will continue to move about within the vast domain called photography and into neighbouring domains. All we need to do is to be receptive and alert.

There is a word in all of this upon which I would like to rely more than I can. It is a word that hardly construes as a proper verb. It's also difficult to translate. The word is "matter". The vast majority of pictures just don't matter. The photographer had nothing to say, or has been unable to say something meaningful. Photography is demotic and vernacular, and much of it is of no great interest. Yet it is only within that deep mulch that the few major exceptions can be seen to flourish. At the same time photography remains a perfectly ordinary cultural activity in that it responds to analysis. A picture should be demonstrably good or bad for coherent reasons. But not everybody's mattering is the same. The pictures presented here are very different. But every one of them matters. ■

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