

NATIONAL REVIEWS

David Maisel

BOLINAS MUSEUM

Bolinas, California

Passing through southern California several years ago, photographer David Maisel noticed that the Owens Lake bed was a stunning shade of pink. Having already documented the remains of mines in places ranging from Butte, Montana, to Bisbee, Arizona, Maisel recognized something peculiar about the beauty. A little research confirmed what the artist suspected. The lake had been drained by the Los Angeles Aqueduct in the first decades of the last century and had lost its soft floor of silt. It had been blown away, exposing the minerals that poisoned all but a certain species of bright red bacteria. This lent the shallow pools of rainwater a striking color.

Vast and varied catastrophes of this sort have proven to be Maisel's territory. The seven aerial photographs from "The Lake Project" recently exhibited at the Bolinas Museum offer a small but solid sampling of the dozens to be published by Nazraeli Press next year in Maisel's first catalogue.

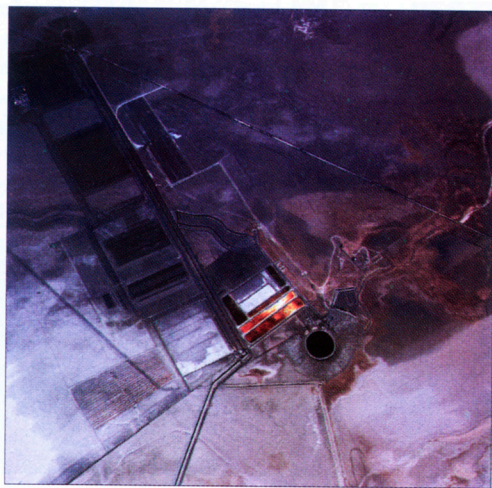
Unlike much contemporary color photography, Maisel's matte C-prints earn every square inch of their large format. Satisfying abstract compositions are made out of the myriad blots and scratches of unidentified environmental wreckage. Maisel uses his rented plane and pilot as effectively as his Hasselblad, flattening the terrain while sizing and shaping his pictures with his altitude and angle of flight.

While recent recovery measures by the EPA gave the elaborate gridding of *Owens Lake, California, #9803-7* (2002) a disquieting, otherworldly quality, Maisel's technique works most persuasively when he photographs unmitigated destruction. The red gash through the middle of *Owens Lake, California, #9283-3* (2002), for example, is upsetting but visually appealing, in the way an open wound may look dazzlingly bejeweled.

Visual ambiguity, in fact, is the real accomplishment of Maisel's photography. Presented to us flat on the wall, without defining labels or even descriptive titles, his "Lake Project" offers an experience equivalent to his own mixture of attraction and repulsion upon first finding that pink swath of toxic lake. —*Jonathon Keats*

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David Maisel,
Owens Lake,
California, #9803-7,
2002, C-print,
29" x 29".
Bolinas Museum.