

Artweek

David Maisel at the Bolinas Museum

Reviews

April 2003 23

W e all know what it means to “put things into perspective” by gaining “an overview of the big picture.” It almost goes without saying that the confusions of our current sociopolitical situation renew our search for the clear vista provided by high Olympian ground. Almost from the moment of its invention, photography has been implicated in this quest. Think for example of the military reconnaissance pictures taken from hot air balloons during the American Civil War and in the Franco-Prussian War soon thereafter. Even our own Secretary of State produced a thick sheaf of satellite recon photos at the United Nations, alleging that they “proved” the existence of Iraqi violations of U.N. weapons sanctions. The problem was that they needed “expert analysis” to make their case, and that analysis has been subjected to “expert contestation,” proving only that the photos themselves have proven nothing at all. Therein lies the problem of the big picture: when it gets too big, it loses track of the descriptive particulars that engender empathic confidence. We are left free reign to selectively manage disconnected information as if it were reality itself. This managerial selectivity is the ruling psychosis of our times, its presiding ethos having been aptly summarized by Harry Lime’s famous Vienn Ferris wheel speech in Graham Greene novel *The Third Man*. Quoth Lime: “Look at those specks down there. Do you really care if some of them live and some of them die?”

David Maisel’s suite of large C-print *The Lake Project*, answers Lime’s question with a vigorous and satisfying affirmation. Each of these seven works is an aerial photograph of California’s Owens Valley, pictured at a severe non-oblique angle from an altitude that would be called “low” if it was from the window of a commercial aircraft. But at the same time it is also on the higher end of the flight paths of smaller planes of the type from which Maisel took these pictures. The resulting prints perfectly amalgamate those considerations of the earth that are routinely separated into the categories of “geology,” “geography” and “cartography” and they even give us a

little taste of archaeology as well. Like computer-generated fractals, they are all eerily beautiful in terms of color and complex formal undulation. Their colors are so rich and stunning that one might suppose that Maisel has employed some kind of special thermographic film to capture the radiance of temperatures and light. But, that supposition would be wrong.

The reason for this is that the Owens Valley actually looks the way that Maisel pictures it. For most of the twentieth century, this southeastern California valley has literally been sucked dry of water by the growing urban sprawl called Los Angeles. The results are a spectacular ecological disaster that is currently being attended to by the EPA. Thus, when we see the valley as pictured by the photos, we see baroque convolutions of geology that are the result of the disappearance of ground water, looking to the camera’s eye like badly infected wounds. Swaths of oxidized minerals appear like colossal stigmata, reminding us of Rachel Carson’s 1962 eco-prophecy, *Silent Spring*, which,

in turn, inspired Bob Dylan’s lyric “a hard rain’s gonna fall.” Such is the apocalyptic tenor of Maisel’s photographs, at once an Emersonian ode to nature, an embrace of Edmund Burke’s “terror at the heart of the sublime” and also a worthy contribution to the twenty-first century’s aesthetics of anxiety.

—Mark Van Proyen

David Maisel: *The Lake Project* closed March 2 at the Bolinas Museum.



David Maisel, *Owens Lake, California*, 2001, photograph, at the Bolinas Museum.