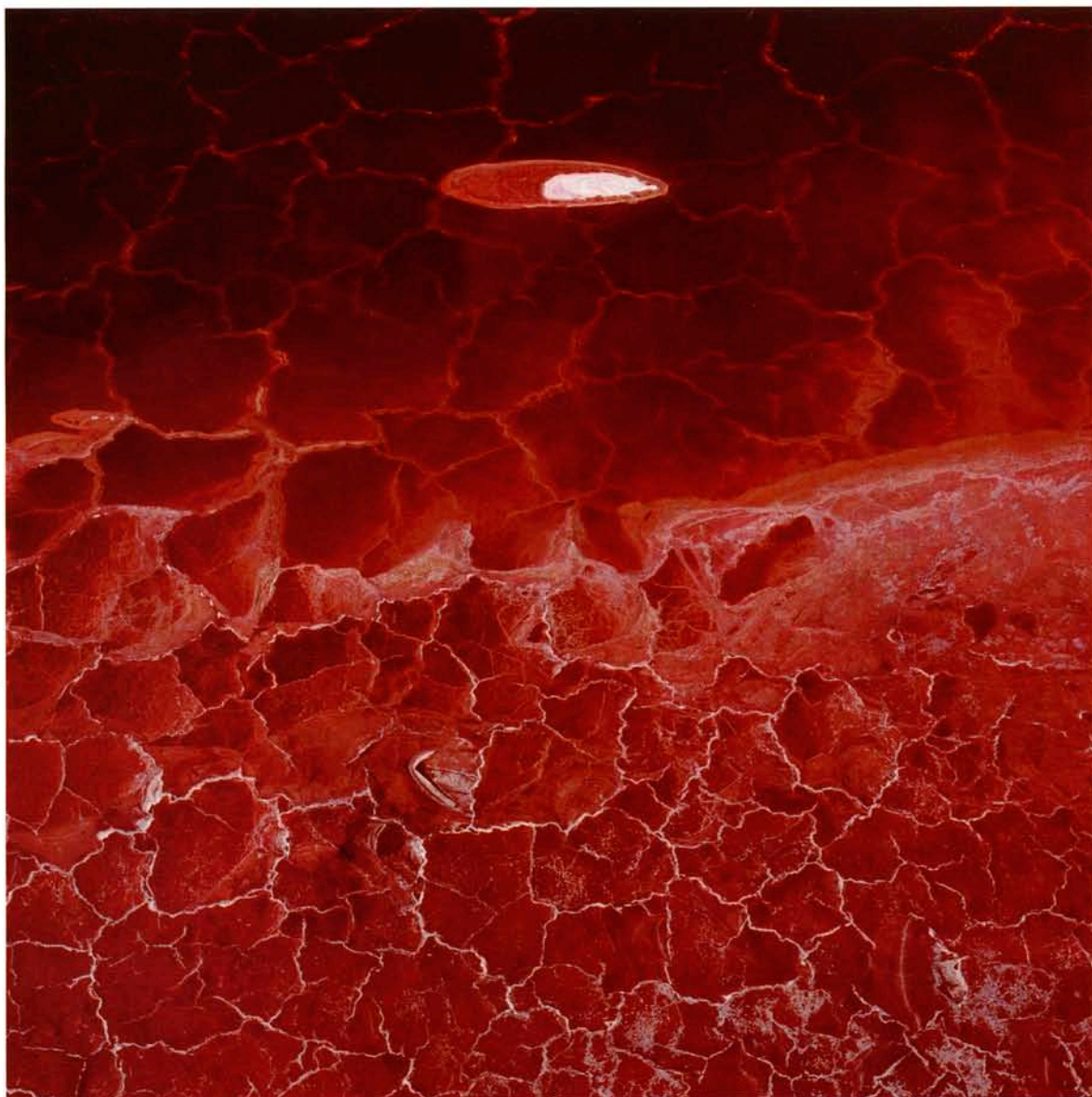


# G H O S T | L A K E

*Even when nature disappears, its story sometimes remains etched in the landscape.*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID MAISEL

[ *Text by Hillary Rosner* ]



IMAGINE YOU ARE LOOKING AT A BIOLOGICAL AUTOPSY—CONDUCTED AT 7,500 FEET. “With camera lens trained on the dead lake,” the photographer David Maisel writes, “its skin was peeled back, the exquisite corpse revealed.” Thus a towering island of salt appears as an eye watching from the dried crust. A briny, blood-red creek snakes across the salty, tundralike surface. Variations in the salt content stain the earth different hues, producing light and dark bands of ocher across the landscape. Such are the surreal images in Maisel’s *The Lake Project* (Nazraeli Press, \$65), an aerial documentation of California’s Owens Lake, sans its life force: water. ¶ For tens of thousands of years the highly saline lake supported large populations of shrimp, enticing millions of ducks to feast in its waters. Then in 1913 Los Angeles began diverting water from the Owens River 250 miles to the northeast; just 13 years later Owens Lake was gone. Today the mostly dry lakebed is the source of dust storms that pollute the region—in south-central California, between the Sierra



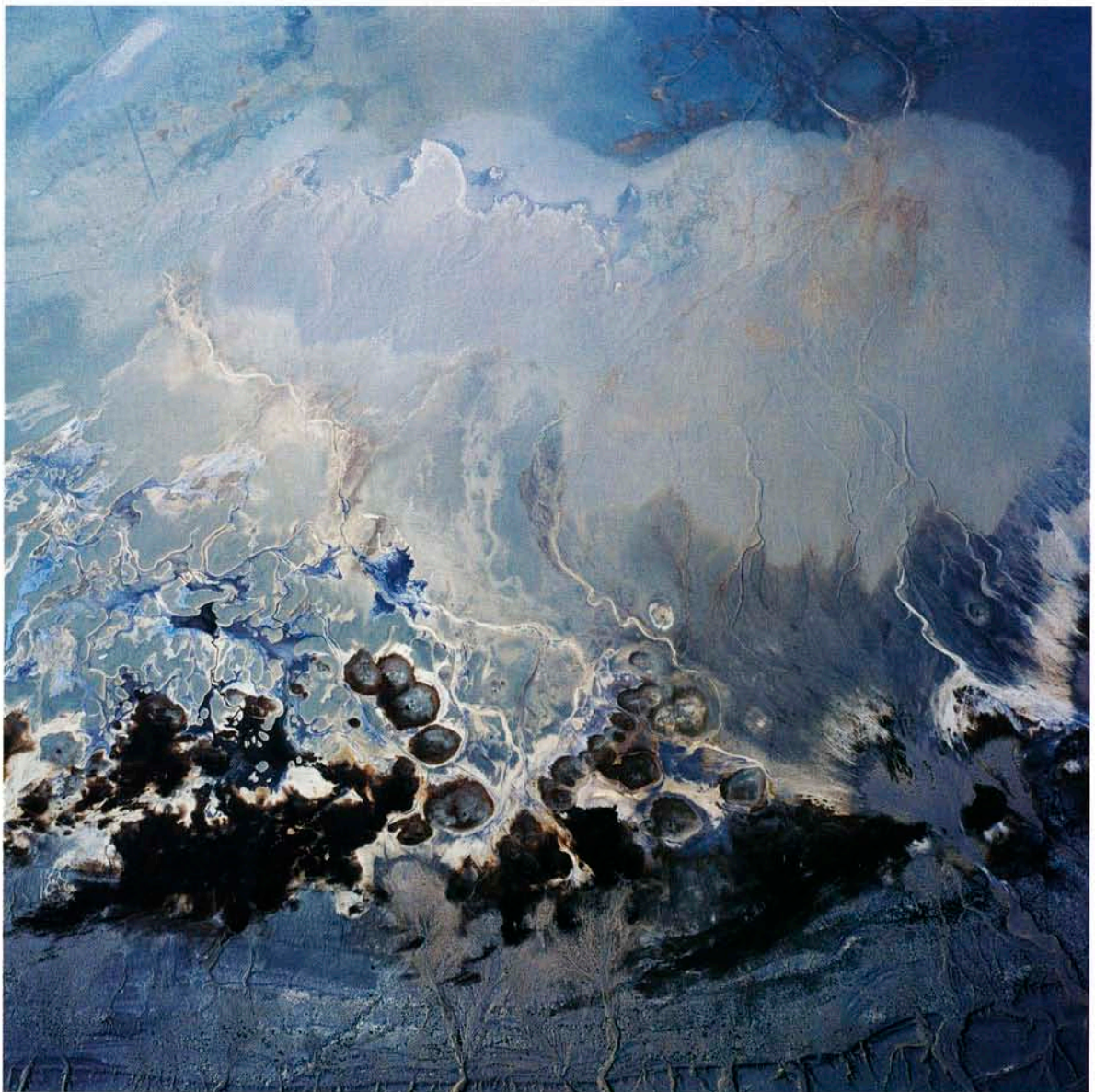
**IN THESE PICTURES** *a lakebed becomes a disorienting map of shapes and textures and saturated colors that seem at once both natural and abominable.*



Nevada on the west and the Inyo and Coso ranges on the east—for hundreds of miles. The lake, whose dust contains high concentrations of carcinogenic trace metals, is thought to be the single largest natural source of small-particle aerosol dust in the United States. Its toxic elements are naturally occurring but unnaturally exposed; strong winds slice through the valley, scouring the salty crust of the lakebed to release the mineral dust below. ¶ In what remains of Owens Lake, Maisel has captured something entirely unrecognizable. In these pictures a lakebed becomes a disorienting map of shapes and textures and saturated colors that seem at once both natural and abominable. The effect is a landscape abstracted—disconnected—from its place in geography, history, and biology. ¶ Maisel has spent more than two decades leaning out of airplane windows to document the aftermath of environmental destruction in the United States, including forest clearcuts and open-pit mines. He became mesmerized by Owens Lake on a drive home to the San Francisco



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Bay Area from southern California's Salton Sea. "I noticed this glittering pink lakebed," Maisel said in a recent interview, referring to the lake's disconcerting crimson hue, the result of microorganisms that feed on its briny bottom. "It was rivetingly complex and frightening and beautiful—all of those conflicting emotions." ¶ Then there is the lake's symbolic place in California's history, as immortalized in the classic 1974 film *Chinatown*, starring Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway. Los Angeles would never have sprung into a desert megalopolis if not for its control and access to water from far-away places, like the Owens River. Maisel's images are testament to the environmental trade-offs. In the text accompanying the photographs, he writes of Owens Lake "as a sacred text, in a language we cannot decipher. The lake as emblem of the unknowable, the lake as a project that yields only more questions. The lake as loss; the photographs as mourning, an elegy for a lost landscape." 🌱