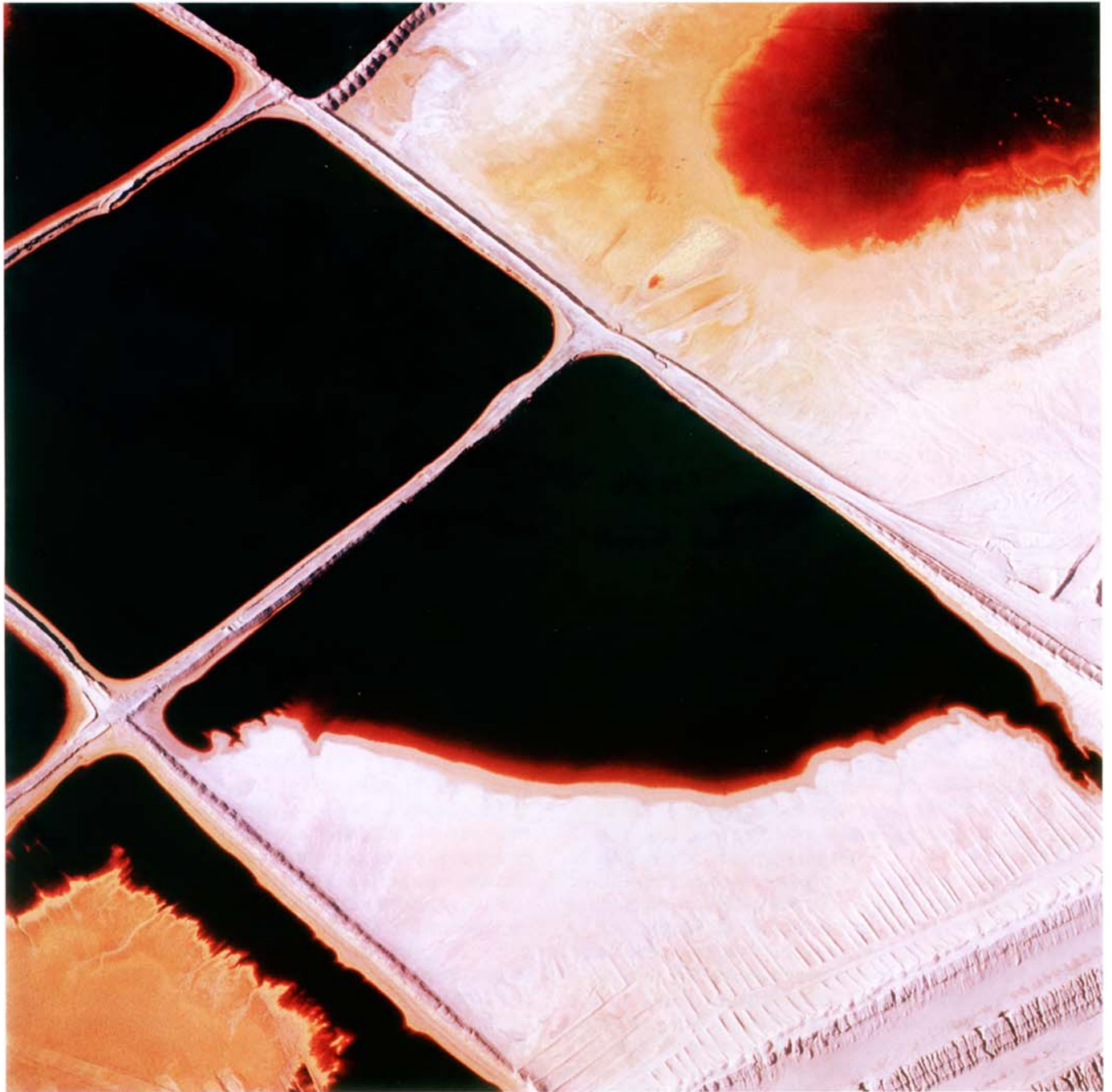
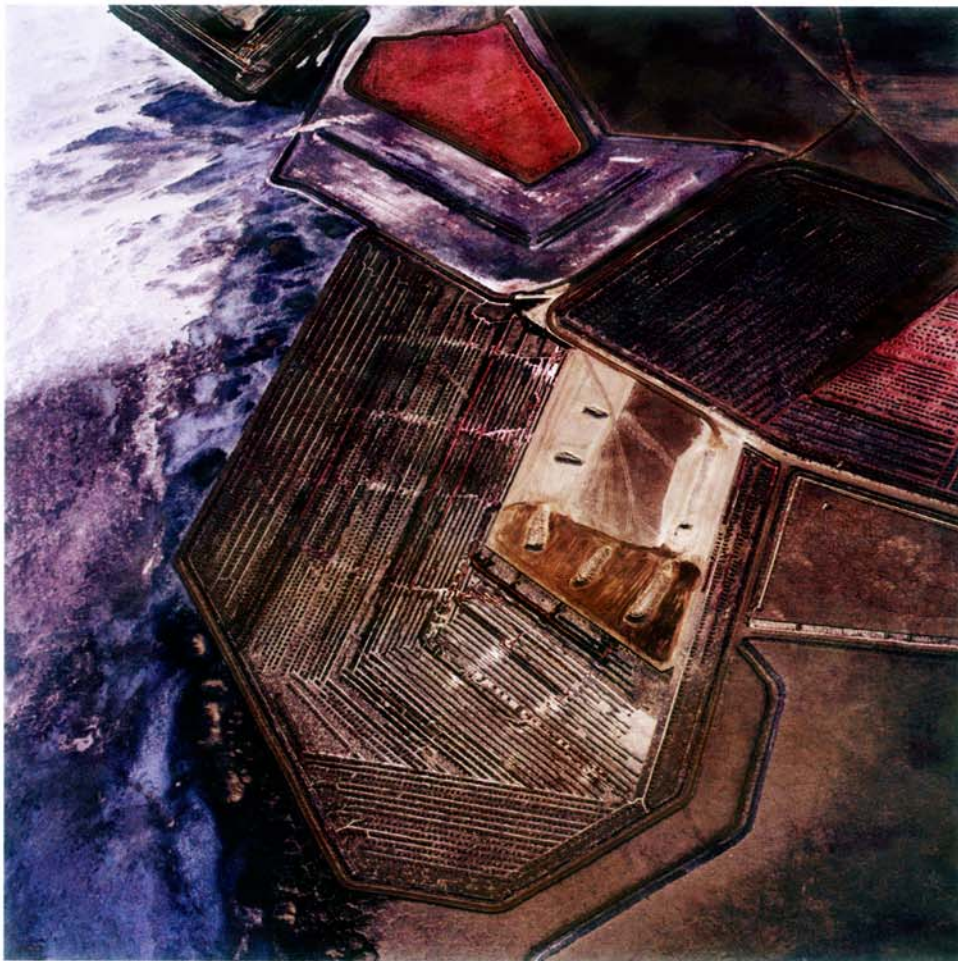


The Abstract Aerial Landscape Photography of David Maisel

By Marisa S. Olson • Captions by David Maisel



Globe, Arizona, Pond #14, 1990. One of a series of images from *The Mining Project*, which focuses on the miasma of tailings ponds, cyanide leaching fields and other detritus from the mining industry that surround the vast open pits. With this series, I am not attempting to make literal records of environmental degradation so much as I am seeking to reveal the landscape as an archetypal space of destruction and ruin that mirrors the darker corners of our consciousness. C-print, 30"x30" and 48"x48" 2001.



The Lake Project #9824-3, 2002. The drained lakebed reveals planes of poison, arranged in a prismatic structure that could be an enormous diode, a microchip, an enemy encampment, its gridded streets dotted with tent cities or funeral pyres, the mind of the torturer displayed. The lakebed has become the source for further mining activity, further human intervention, and further disquietude. C-print, 30"x30" and 48"x48" 2002.

There is something very particular about the beauty of the Dutch still life paintings. The objects in them, each plucked from nature and arranged by human hands, rest at a hyperreal state of perfection, yet seem to teeter gluttonously on the verge of decay. In this sense, David Maisel's photos have much in common with the Flemish spreads that occupy so many of our museum walls. For more than two decades, Maisel has been making aerial photographs of landscapes lusciously ravaged by environmental damage and the impacts of human activity. For many viewers, it is hard to know whether to appreciate these painterly images as documents of "natural" beauty or to take them as reason to protest. Maisel sides somewhere in between, neither celebrating the tools or effects of degradation, nor taking for granted the bittersweet beauty they've conveyed. "The views through my camera are both spectacular and horrifying," he says.

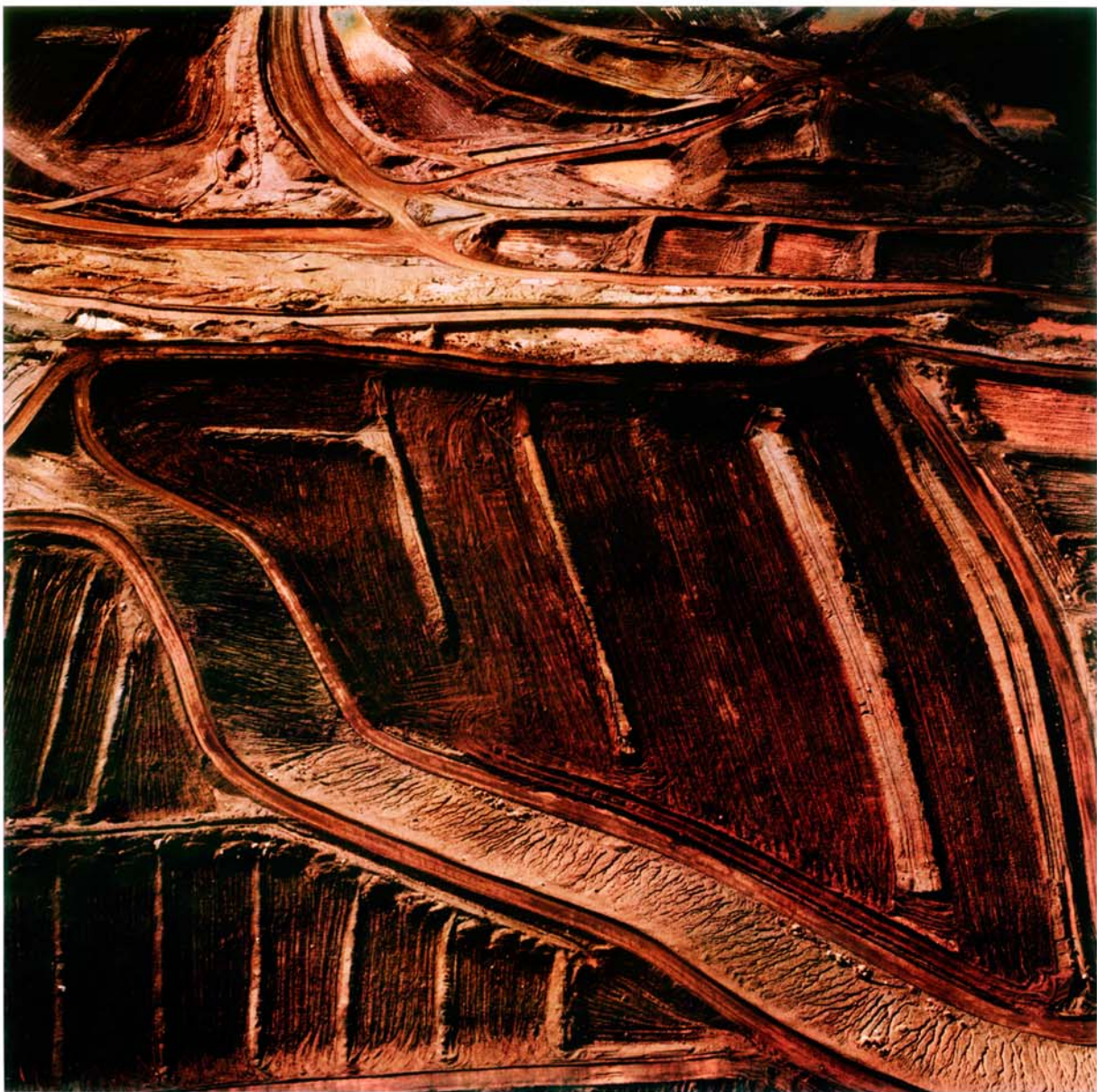
While chemically-burnt flatlands, whitewashed plains, and neon-green rivulets-cum-toxic sludge sit silent on Maisel's prints, the artists' work asks loud questions about the shape of human interventions. Although these photographs evidence the devastation before him, they also

transcribe an interior psychic landscape that is profoundly disturbing. Freudian psychoanalysts believe in a "phantasmatic," a psychic map of our fantasies. Some say that our efforts in waking life are really endeavors to make this world look like the one of our dreams. It is hard to believe that even the most "heartless" corporate polluter would dream of a biosphere in which life is untenable, but the concept does give weight to a more intriguing notion—the one that the ways in which we have crafted, or polluted, the earth bear a structural resemblance to our psychic activity. It is this fuzzy borderland between psychology and topography that Maisel so well documents.

Shot with a Hasselblad ELX and Kodak E100 VS film, and printed at a large scale (30 x 30 or 48 x 48 inches), Maisel's C-Prints index sites on which the earth's resources have been co-opted by human desires.

"This work has unfolded in chapters," he said, "focusing on such subjects as strip-mines, clear-cuts, leaching fields, tailings ponds, firestorms, and other manipulations of the natural world."

The artist flies over these areas, taking aerial photos, the perspective of which, he says "enables one to experi-

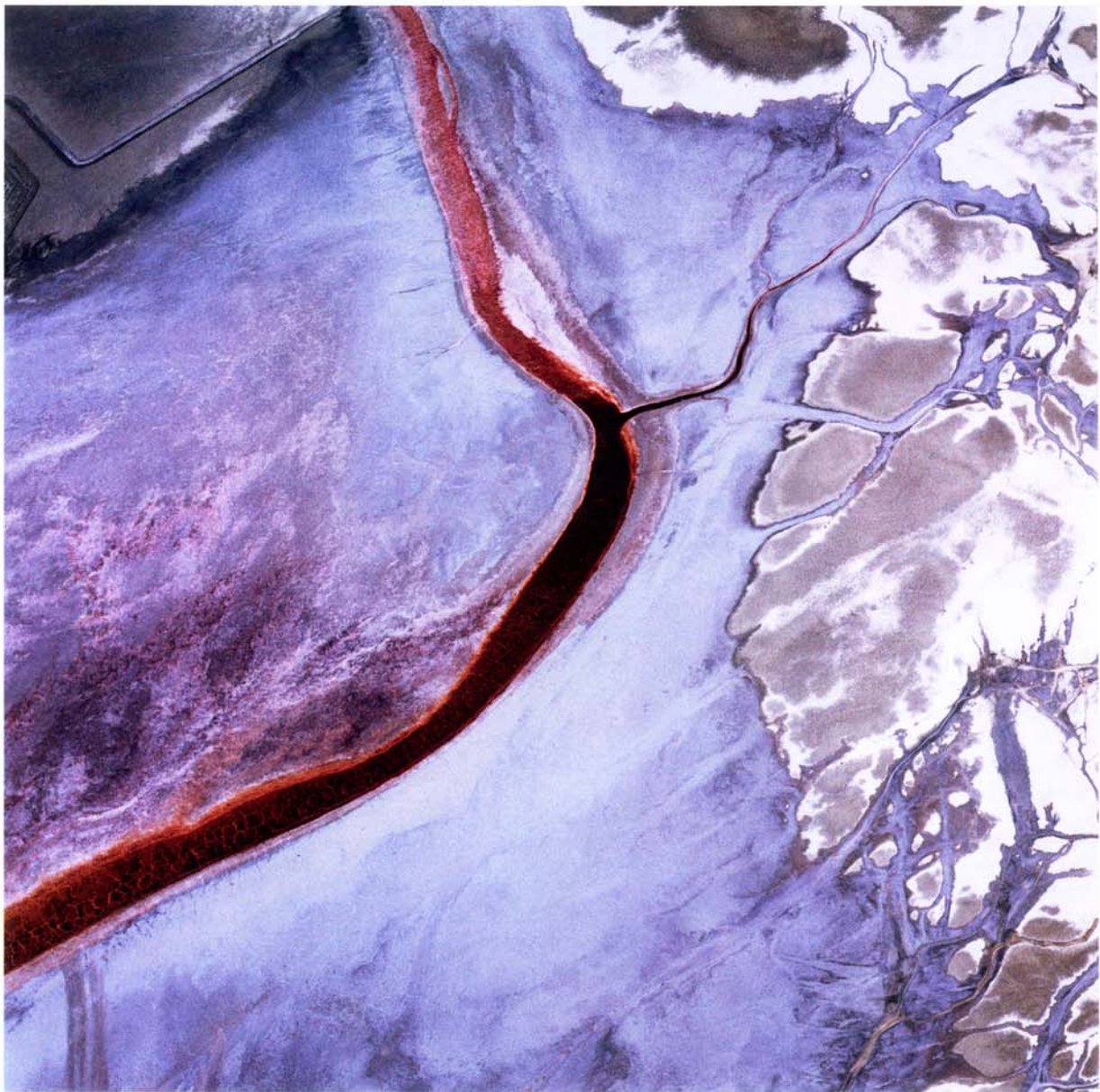


Ray, Arizona, #33, 1990. Photograph of cyanide leaching fields, a mere fragment of the monumentally impacted mining landscape surrounding Ray. The images of these sites are meant neither to vilify nor glorify their content, but rather to expand our notions of what constitutes landscape and landscape art. These photographs intentionally reflect back the visceral nature of their subject matter; the colors and forms are surreal, and the scale confounding. Encompassing the viewer's peripheral vision, these prints become something one can enter into and feel, rather than simply observe. C-print, 30"x30" and 48"x48" 2001.

ence the landscape like a vast map of its undoing." These "Black Maps," as he calls them, are more metaphorically noir, tracking devastation in the beauty of full color. In fact, the prints would likely be unsuccessful in black and white, the land stripped of the shades of the sublime contradictions of beauty and horror. Of course, it is for this reason that the project defies categorization as "documentary," just as these are not your typical "rock and tree" photo-landscapes. While Maisel may be exposing a certain view of the world, his anonymously-numbered titles and restraint in environmentalist evangelizing lead to a more organic experience of the spaces captured, viewers synthesizing their own interpretations, rather than a strict

autopsy of the poisoned grounds.

His most recent project, under the Black Maps umbrella, is the Owens Lake series. In 1913, a group of politicians and land owners pushed through a mistake of gargantuan proportions. In an effort to bolster agriculture and drinking water supplies, in the desert that is Los Angeles, the group diverted or "reclaimed" water from the Owens River and Lake to the Los Angeles Aqueduct, depleting both bodies of their water within 13 years. Perhaps it was the "Keeler fog" that caught Maisel's eye, as he was driving through this stretch of Southern California highway. It would be hard to miss the romantically-named cloud of carcinogenic dust the winds blow over this salt-encrusted



The Lake Project #9823-4, 2002. *The Lake Project* is comprised of aerial images made at the site of Owens Lake, on the eastern edge of the Sierra Mountains in southeastern California. Decades ago, the water from Owens Lake was permanently diverted into the Los Angeles aqueduct. In this image, what little water remains in this shallow remnant of the lake has been stained red from bacterial blooms that result from the artificially high concentration of minerals. From the air, it seems I am seeing a river of blood. If death is mother to beauty, as the poet Robert Haas wrote, then these images may serve as the lake's autopsy. C-print, 30"x30" and 48"x48" 2002.

valley. Or maybe it was the pink glow of red oxidized earth, the bright-shining scab of the Owens' wounds. In any case, it did not take long to get Maisel in the air.

The Owens valley is ripe with 200 square miles of prime photographic views—scenes begging to be caught in the space of the view finder. Maisel's challenge was not only that of photographer but also that of editor. How does one put limits on a boundless curiosity? As the landscape undulates with constructed artifices of diversion and writhes with the dry "flow" of toxic crust, how does one trap one view in isolation of another? Maisel does it as a composer, arranging images that read as both scores for the creation of a print (in the more painterly sense of an

intaglio) and a tally of damage done. As the veiny arteries of this desolate body weave among its copper pool and dead pump-organs, we are ultimately reminded of the interdependency of this spent body and its environment, of our innate biological connection to the subject of Maisel's images, and of the symbiosis between a patch of land and a gifted photographer. ■

Marisa S. Olson is an artist, critic and curator. Her essays on contemporary art have been featured in such magazines as *Wired*, *Afterimage*, *Art on Paper*, *Artweek*, and others. Olson serves on several international boards including the San Francisco Arts Council. She can be reached at: marisa@sfcamerawork.org.