



David Maisel

“The Lake Project,” images of Owens Valley, Calif.

--*Chronicle*

If the striking colors of David Maisel's "The Lake Project" aerial landscapes seem unnaturally brilliant, that's because they are. The pools of purple, swaths of red and sudden streaks of orange Maisel has captured from high above eastern California's Owens Valley are the remaining mineral traces of an originally 200-square-mile lake, drained long ago to slake the thirst Los Angeles worked up as it huffed, puffed, sweated and sprawled into existence. The relatively benign term desertification doesn't begin to describe the undoing of entire ecosystems that transpired in the valley between 1913 and 1926, but Maisel's visceral photographs do the job just beautifully. In one image, deep orange strikes like lightning across a sullied white ground, probably the effect of iron oxidization on a salinated landscape. Take a few steps back, and this indelible aerial view could be mistaken for a flourish of sienna-colored Conté crayon on wrinkled paper, or perhaps an extreme close-up photograph of rusted farm equipment -- an eerie echo of the agricultural promise this valley once held. Then there's his astonishing cracked red landscape with the pool of scorched white at its center, which looks more like the mouth of hell or the barren flats of Mars than the swath of the Golden State east of the Sierra Nevada probably should. Violet has never seemed so ultra as in Maisel's glowing purple puddles hemmed into square ponds, giving the overall effect of a polluted patchwork quilt. Some of Maisel's images are not so extreme in their palettes, but they are no less seductive and confounding. From a distance, his white-and-gray landscapes, criss-crossed with black tire tracks and smudged with black silt, might appear to be abstract charcoal drawings, or vistas of a Siberian wasteland. But, on closer inspection, the devastating truth and beauty of Maisel's photographs hit home: These stark landscapes are part of our state, and those dark traces are the unmistakable signature we've left on it. -- Alison Bing

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