

David Maisel: Artist Statement

April 2025

For more than thirty-five years, I have been making aerial photographs of environmentally impacted sites, throughout the American West and in Chile's remote Atacama Desert, in a multi-chaptered endeavor titled *Black Maps*. I have focused on zones where human intervention has radically changed the land – natural resource extraction, the clear cutting of forests, massive water reclamation projects in the desert, and military weapons testing sites. My images consider both the politics and aesthetics of such sites in equal measure. They document hidden zones of human induced trauma, sacrificial landscapes that have been damaged, poisoned, or wholly eradicated to enable our contemporary existence. The dystopian world that such sites will bequeath to the future has been a crucial focal point for my endeavors.

In summer 2020, as wildfires burned in my home of northern California and the skies filled with smoke and ash, I responded by making large-scaled abstract paintings based on these conflagrations. Pure abstraction holds the power to affect us dynamically, on an imaginative level. More recent paintings have considered atmospheric rivers and flood. With their brushstrokes, pours, erasures, and stains, they offer poetic expression of the catastrophic climate change events we are collectively experiencing.

I work on the paintings from above, the linen stretched onto a low platform on my studio floor. I circle around them as I work, and there is no correct orientation – they are meant to work from all perspectives. There are echoes of my aerial photography work, looking down from above and circling the image as I create it. With their brushstrokes, pours, erasures, and stains, these paintings reference my own aerial photographs of the scarred surface of the Earth as well as the work of painters such as Helen Frankenthaler, Frank Bowling, and Sam Francis.

A recent series of four six-by-twelve-foot paintings reference 2021's massive River Complex Fire, which comprised over twenty wildfires ignited by lightning strikes. The titles of these immersive paintings refer to the stages of wildfire combustion and growth: *Ignition, Flashover, Transition, and Smolder*. Research into wildfire, and expression of it through abstraction and scale, are essential to this work. The research, however, exists to serve the emotional content of these paintings and the somatic experience offered the viewer.

Two recent aerial photography projects consider ways that fragile desert environments are being impacted by human intervention. With funding from a Guggenheim Fellowship in the Creative Arts, I made *Desolation Desert*, a body of work that depicts the rapid growth of lithium mining in

Chile's remote Atacama Desert. Buried beneath the surface of the Atacama lies nearly fifty percent of our planet's reserves of lithium, an element that is used to power our technological lives —our silent electric cars, our glowing laptops, our seductive iPhones. The fragile Atacama, the highest and driest desert on Earth, is being destroyed by our lust for lithium.

In 2024 I returned to the Great Salt Lake, an area I've worked in for decades, to chart the changes wrought to this environment in a series called *Spiraling*. Few lakes rival the Great Salt Lake in size and significance — it is the largest saline lake in the United States and the eighth largest in the world. However, drought conditions caused by regional climate change and industrial development have caused the Lake to decrease in scale by more than two-thirds in the past forty years. The surface area of the Lake has declined from 3,330 square miles in 1980 to a record-low 950 square miles in 2021. Climate scientists from Brigham Young University recently warned that if emergency measures are not enacted immediately, Utah's Great Salt Lake could disappear by 2028.

As we face escalating environmental crises, I want both my paintings and my photographs to consider all the possibilities of landscape – as zones of safety or peril, as metaphor, or as harsh reality.