

Quotes from recent exhibition reviews

‘Maisel’s new photographs come from a project titled *Desolation Desert*. The images were taken in 2018, just after Maisel was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, and with that support, he was able to travel to Chile to make aerial photographs over a series of open pit copper mines operating in the Atacama Desert, the highest and driest desert on Earth. Several of the most striking images in this project were made at the Minera Centinela copper mine, where the color palette of the rocky hillsides strikingly runs from blue to white, with a few sandy intermediate stops.

Maisel’s photographs from above flatten the landscape into expressive abstract washes of blue that drift and fall with gestural grace. Access roads and pathways divide the spaces, creating bold lines in the compositions, but mostly the views feel altogether painterly, like active brushstrokes have been pulled across the land. In many ways, they are among the most eloquently textural pictures of industrial mines that Maisel has ever made.’

— Excerpt from Loring Knaublauch, “David Maisel: The Expanded Field at Houk Gallery,” *Collector Daily*, November 2, 2021.

‘Over the past four decades, (Maisel) has photographed some of the world’s worst scenes of environmental degradation: toxic dust clouds produced by the drainage of Owens Lake, garishly colored pools of effluent left by mining operations, and the aftermath of manufactured deserts. These pictures are as beautiful as they are terrifying: beautiful for their beyond-belief colors and hyperreal abstract shapes; terrifying because of the suppurating wounds pictured, byproducts of resource extraction of various kinds...Absent any physically orienting markers apart from the lurid horrors depicted, Maisel’s photos paint a picture of capitalism run amok, brutalizing the Earth at a scale so vast it can only be seen from the sky: proof of what happens when humans acquire powers once possessed only by nature and gods.’

— Excerpt from David M. Roth, “David Maisel at Haines Gallery,” *SquareCylinder*, November 13, 2023.

Quotes about *Proving Ground*

‘The phrase “apocalyptic sublime” has been applied more than once to the work of David Maisel, who since the 1980s has made a career out of traveling to mines, military compounds, and other remote corners of the Southwest to photograph what he finds. It took a full decade of petitioning before the military allowed him to visit the Dugway Proving Ground—a military facility in Utah the size of Rhode Island, and once highly classified—and the resulting aerial views quiver with revulsion and excitement both, though maybe the excitement lingers longer.’

— Excerpt from Jackson Arn, “God’s Eye Views,” *Art in America*, November 2022.

‘The similarity between Maisel’s uniformly square images and military maps or satellite surveillance shots appears to be intentional. The landscape is shown as if it were a target; its natural contours have been subsumed by the geographic efficiency of grid lines bulldozed across the desert to help measure the dispersal of toxins and biological agents. The photos’ grainy texture is almost palpable, but their subject remains at a distant remove. As such, they feel utterly disconnected from an actual human locale, a reaction that again evokes the mindset of someone planning an attack. Among the volume’s bursts of color are stills from the Army’s drone footage of the chlorine-gas tests, dubbed “Jack Rabbit II.” Despite its sickening hue, the fluorescent green cloud roiling up from the desert floor is one of the only indications of life in these stark pages. Maisel is alert to this perverse irony as well as to the question his book’s title poses: What is being proved at the Proving Ground?’

— Excerpt from Albert Mobilio, Bookforum, *Proving Ground*, April/May 2020.

‘A complex examination from the artist about the choices we have made about how to use our Western lands and the implications of those decisions.... The experience is one of immersion and disorientation, a series of otherworldly landscapes.’

— Excerpt from Rebecca Senf, Photo Eye, *Proving Ground*, August 10, 2020.

Proving Ground is the latest chapter in *Black Maps*, Maisel’s long-form visual meditation on radically-modified environments worldwide. Rather than offering commentary or passing judgment on what he photographs, the artist leaves interpretation and the choice to act to those who see and absorb the information he provides. While all of the sites he has photographed rightly merit conversations about land use, resource conservation, and stewardship, *Proving Ground* activates something closer to fear.’

— Excerpt from Roula Seikaly, *Photographing Utah’s Closely-Guarded Military Installation*, Humble Arts Foundation, January 18, 2018.

‘Fear of a new global war — a war with nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons — has almost never been higher. The bellicosity and threats emanating from Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un have already created a noxious environment of dread and anxiety. What does that fear look like? And sound like? Like *KYDOIMOS: The Din of Battle*, a hypnotic and beautifully surreal 30-minute film that synchronizes aerial photographs of a U.S. military testing ground in Utah. Composer Chris Kallmyer created the music that accompanies David Maisel’s tsunami of curated images — all 50,000 of them, racing across the screen like microbiology slides or spotlight grids where military personnel detonate biological and chemical agents indoors (and simulated chemicals outdoors) on the earth below.’

— Excerpt from Jonathan Curiel, SF Weekly, *David Maisel and the Art of War*, January 10, 2018.

Quotes about *The Fall*

‘David Maisel’s aerial photographs of Toledo, Spain, and the surrounding La Mancha region...can make Earth’s surface look more alien than terrestrial...The silvery soil of plowed fields almost shimmers, like a ghostly memory of that long-vanished sea.’

— Marcia Bjornerud, “David Maisel’s Geometric Geographies, *The New Yorker*, January 13, 2016.

‘The allusion to early 20th century painting is palpable – some of these pictures are cubist compositions, or at least proto-cubist. The similarity to Cézanne in Provence at times is remarkable, given the difference in geography, perspective and medium...*The Fall (Borox 2)* is, essentially, a geometric abstraction, with rounded-off tan and white rectangles that read more like a Braque still life than a landscape. One hundred years ago, Kazimir Malevich noted the relationship between aerial landscapes and abstraction; Maisel hones this notion to a fine point, reorienting land to reliably convey an alien beauty.’

—Mikko Lautamo, “David Maisel at Haines Gallery,” *Square Cylinder*, February 3, 2016.

Quotes about *Black Maps – American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime*

‘The vital thread that runs through *Black Maps* is Maisel’s tireless search for new and ever shifting ways of conveying, photographically, the scope of mankind’s uneasy and conflicted relationship with nature. While the photographs are unstintingly particular in what they describe, Maisel has consistently avoided the narrow definition of his work in political terms. He has kept a polite distance from the agendas of politicians and environmental activists. Unsettling and even alarming at times, Maisel’s photographs do not assign any blame but they do take on a moral significance almost by default. Many factors have drawn the photographer to a specific landscape, among them potentially its vastness, its coloration or palette, its formal complexity, or its sense of paradox. Inspired by the writings and earthworks of Robert Smithson, Maisel’s bold ambition has been no less than to change our relationship to the landscape and our understanding of its “history” and in so doing provide a singularly aesthetic appreciation of the apocalyptic sublime.’

— Excerpt from Julian Cox (chief curator and deputy director, Art Gallery of Ontario), “An Exquisite Problem,” *Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime*, 2013.

‘Sliced from the face of the earth as if for dermatological biopsy, Maisel’s photographic portrait of the waters and surrounding lands of the Great Salt Lake are as much oncologic as ecologic, his camera lens, from thousands of feet above the land, seeming to corkscrew down impossibly upon it. Attaining a scale of seeing that is at times almost cellular—where the surface of the earth is examined like soft tissue—his subject area might just as easily be bounded within the circumference of a petri dish as the four thousand square miles of saline water, evaporation pools, and perimeter lands that actually comprise his field of view. Our vision thus compressed and contained (if viewing several square miles within a single image can be called contained), a marvelous thing transpires: the entire image-field tips up and forward, the great horizontal stretches of salt water and chemical flats vaulting to the vertical, suddenly inhabiting the space and conditions of a painted canvas, the world of Rothko, Diebenkorn, and Kiefer.’

— Excerpt from Joseph Thompson (director, MASS MoCA), “Unrecoverable Spin,” *Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime*, 2013.

‘We had dreamed of building cities, fields of glittering towers, urban fantasies meant to house our hopes of progress; now we seek out dismantled landscapes, abandoned, collapsing on themselves. Rather than creating the next utopia, we uncover the vestiges of failed attempts, the evidence of obliteration. Our photographs are a torrent of fragments meant to indicate the whole... Our own gaze upon this scene cannot be sustained. *It is a fiction*, and it vanishes. What is left, for certain is the City of Ash, the Artificial Flood Zone, the Potash Mine, the Plains of Toxic Dust. Much as we long to breathe life back into this corpse, resurrection is beyond our grasp.’

— Excerpt from David Maisel, “Report from the Lake,” *Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime*, Steidl, 2013.

‘The sublime can be capricious. As the photographer David Maisel shows us in his book *Black Maps*, a cyanide-leaching field can be just as breathtaking as a lake tucked into the Rockies. This eye-opening survey of the photographer David Maisel’s major aerial projects reveals the terrible beauty of the industrial age. Photo after photo unveils the common, human-created cancers forced upon our landscapes: open-pit mines, hazardous waste sites, nerve-gas depots, the desolation of Los Angeles. These photos tell tales the way scars tell the story of a body — and who knew that poisons could be so seductively iridescent? “Black Maps,” rather than focusing on the death of beauty, wrestles with the beauty of death.’

— Excerpt from Dana Jennings, “Beauty and Blight, Sharing Common Ground,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2013.

‘Unexpectedly alluring, these square segments of horizonless land are saturated with brilliantly unnatural colors—acidic greens, fluorescent reds, and bright aquas—that signal the toxicity of these transformed landscapes. Suggesting a disorienting world in perpetual flux, the painterly images undermine any sense of stable ground, depicting an unsettling portrait of human intervention in the landscape.’

— Excerpt from Karen Rapp, “Critic’s Pick: David Maisel at Haines Gallery,” *Artforum*, October 2013.

‘The astonishing palette of Maisel’s pigment prints, like the bursting of colors on the screen at the end of Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublev*, when the black-and-white of history is replaced by the timeless radiance of the icons, is the redeeming feature that makes these landscapes inhabitable, as they slowly recede into a distance that transfigures them. The afterglow, while blinding, is a source of comfort, even as reason cannot but wonder at the wound that has been inflicted on the land (most of the sites have been abandoned, leaving behind a miasma of pollutants) and is still bleeding, has not healed yet.’

— Excerpt from Davide Stimilli, *DOMUS Magazine*, March 28, 2013.

‘The aerial photographs of David Maisel are often deeply disorientating. His pictures are visions of the Earth as we have never seen it and they are scarcely believable at times in their beauty and terror. Can these colors be real? The pictures are emotionally disorientating, too. What is the appropriate response to depictions of brutalized but ravishing landscapes described in photography curator Julian Cox’s introduction as a “topography of open wounds”? For another contributor, these photographs of the “toxic sublime” — a useful new term — are “seductive, beautiful, repulsive, and terrifying.” *Black Maps* makes for spectacular and uneasy viewing.’

— Excerpt from Rick Poyner, “David Maisel and the Apocalyptic Sublime,” *Design Observer*, August 9, 2013.

‘Anthropologists say that if you want to learn about a civilization, look at what it leaves behind. David Maisel adheres to that credo. But unlike anthropologists who inspect physical evidence on the ground, Maisel makes photographs of the earth from airplanes, and the geochemical haloes he commits to film — residue of the industrial processes that fuel the human market economy — yield a strange, beguiling kind of forensic evidence. That evidence, assembled in this show and in a stunning new career-spanning book, *Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime*, forms a kind of planetary autopsy, a portrait of mankind’s ravenous appetites and their consequences.’

— Excerpt from David M. Roth, “David Maisel at Haines Gallery,” *Square Cylinder*, October 8, 2013.

Quotes about *History's Shadow*

‘In *History's Shadow*, it seems as if David Maisel is reviving the once-dormant souls of inanimate objects, if not those of their makers. To alchemize these beautiful but disturbing images...Maisel rephotographed and manipulated conservation X-rays of three dimensional objects from two California museums. In doing so he's conjured revenants – of masks, sculptures, bowls – that, he says, represent a confluence of art, time, and technology. These images “make the invisible visible” and express the “shape-shifting nature of time itself.”

— Excerpt from Dana Jennings, *The New York Times*, January 13, 2012.

‘A cache of X-rays of antique statuary from the archives of the Getty Museum provided Maisel with the ghostly imagery for his handsome new photographs. Isolated against pitch-black backgrounds, Buddha heads, a horse, a young warrior, and several classical maidens appear at once hollowed out and full of small surprises. Studs, nails, and other bits of metal support are bright accents in alternately opaque and transparent layers of stone or clay. Squiggles of wire wind around the spine of one female figure, suggesting coils of DNA. With all their inner workings revealed, the sculptures appear touchingly vulnerable – more fragile, and thus more lifelike.’

— Excerpt from Vince Aletti, *The New Yorker*, May 5, 2014.

‘These spectral renderings were like transmissions from the distant past, conveying messages across time, and connecting the contemporary viewer to the art impulse at the core of these ancient works. Through the x-ray process, the artworks of origin become de-familiarized and de-contextualized, yet acutely alive and renewed, revived. The shadow-worlds they occupy are informed by the black space surrounding the images, which in some instances becomes a vast nether world, and in others becomes the velvety ground of some kind of brain scan/portrait.’

— Excerpt from David Maisel, *Trace Elements and Core Samples*, 2012.

Quotes about *Library of Dust*

‘The subjects of Maisel’s enormous new color photographs appear to be corroded tin cans, shot against pitch-black backdrops and lit like precious objects. They are, in fact, copper canisters containing the cremated remains of patients from an Oregon mental hospital; stored for years in a vault that flooded repeatedly, they’ve been transformed into strangely alluring pieces of found sculpture. The corrosion manifests itself as a multicolored crust that resembles slathered paint, but one can recall views of the earth from outer space: swirls of turquoise and green under billowy white clouds. If Maisel wants us to be conscious of these objects as memorials, his dramatic treatment and grand scale push the works towards pure aesthetics and away from issues of life and death.’

— Excerpt from Vince Aletti, *The New Yorker*, February 15, 2010.

‘*Library of Dust*, from photographer David Maisel, may well be this year’s most haunting book of images. It is a collection of photographs of copper canisters, each containing the unclaimed remains of a patient from a psychiatric hospital in Oregon (the same one used for filming “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”). Rivulets of chemical corrosion, almost oceanic in their intense coloring, run down the sides. Mr. Maisel’s book is a fevered meditation on memory, loss, and the uncanny monuments we sometimes discover about what has come before.’

— Excerpt from Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*, November 28, 2008.

‘Each urn wears its own distinctive pattern of wear and decay. Seepage from within or moisture from outside have transformed the copper into an oscillating palette of mineral tones- malachite, jade, turquoise. A white crystalline crust branches across one can’s rim like coral or a salt deposit. An aqua scar draws down the seam of another. What looks like violent decay is also generative change; each canister is a formal, ethical, and mineralogical Rorschach....Maisel’s work over the past two decades has argued for an expanded definition of beauty, one that bypasses glamour to encompass the transmuted, the decomposed. Beauty that is generated at the cost of something precious or the result of flawed choices.’

— Excerpt from Leah Ollman, “Strange beauty, transformation, secrets and loss.” Los Angeles Times feature, January 4, 2009.

‘Oddly reminiscent of bullet casings, the canisters are literally gravesites. Reacting with their ash inhabitants, the canisters are now blooming with secondary minerals, articulating new metallic landscapes grown in miniature. Adding yet another level of resonance, these urns, set against a deep black background, subtly resemble the earliest images of earth taken from space, complete with apparent coastlines and island arcs... This canister-as-planet is a comparison Maisel himself explicitly makes: ‘*they are micro-terrains.*’

— Excerpt from Geoff Manaugh, “Human Ash Reactions,” *Contemporary Magazine*, v86, Fall 2006.

‘Maisel’s act of photographing these canned corpses reanimates the dead, allowing the observer to linger with them in a strange, extraterritorial place... In photographing these corroded vessels, Maisel acknowledges their evocation of the celestial, the aurora borealis. I would suggest they also have a Stygian, subterranean mood. In both directions, we are drawn to the very limits of the knowable universe. Perhaps they most closely resemble something which has thus far remained invisible to the human eye.’

— Excerpt from Max Houghton, “What Remains,” *British Journal of Photography*, October 29, 2008.

‘The contact of copper and water has transformed the surfaces of the canisters surfaces voluptuously. These surfaces conjure real and imaginative worlds—the dust of galaxies, being under a microscope, the dazzling colors of the wide-open mind. The canister’s surfaces appear so, and they appear under duress. Transformed by time and fate, one might say, philosophically. Yet to say so would be to veer away from the obdurate individuality of the canisters, from their stubborn insistence, from the way they greet me as present and abiding, despite their magnificent duress.’

— Excerpt from Karen Lang, “Voluptuous Unease: David Maisel’s Library of Dust”, *Getty Research Journal*, Number 1, Winter 2009.

Quotes about *Oblivion*

‘(Maisel’s) fine new work is on more familiar territory- the city of Los Angeles- but it still looks like another, much more forbidding planet. That’s partly the result of Maisel’s decision to print these black-and-white aerial pictures in negative, so skyscraper shadows read as erasures and trees as moldy excrescences on the grid. This is not the first time you’ve seen an overhead shot of L.A.’s looping freeway interchanges, but Maisel abstracts them and everything else here until the city appears depopulated, absolutely post-apocalyptic.’

— Excerpt from Vince Aletti, *The New Yorker*, December 11, 2006.

‘The photos, large-format black-and-white squares printed in negative so that much of the urban landscape is a snowy white- “It’s almost like everything’s made of dust” - are meant to convey the horror of the city’s relentless small scale march across the landscape. But at the same time the images are quite beautiful, and the endless expanse of insignificance takes on a monumental quality when viewed from high above. The freeways possess a grace from two miles up; and the high-contrast technique gives the city a crispness, a formal elegance, that it lacks at ground level.’

— Excerpt from Karrie Jacobs, *Metropolis*, January 2007.

‘The term “shadowland” that Maisel uses when discussing the *Oblivion* photographs is appropriate. When you cast a shadow on a fact, you create doubt. When you shadow someone, you follow them invisibly. Shadowland is what the military calls those blacked-out areas where they wish to operate unseen, whether they are testing an experimental aircraft or interrogating people beyond lawful means. It is a land of spies and spooks, a place where ghosts live, and what Los Angeles looks like in *Oblivion*. The city is almost recognizable in Maisel's negative prints and yet not quite, as if we are seeing both more of what we know and less.’

— Excerpt from William L. Fox, Excerpted from 'Shadowlands' essay in "*Oblivion*"

Quotes about *Terminal Mirage*

‘The series *Terminal Mirage*...is as visually mesmerizing as an abstract canvas, with its sharp geometries and green fluorescence. The end of the world surely never looked this good. So good, in fact, that it is often difficult to know what we are seeing...Extended without limit, the very things that hypnotize us with the aesthetic dimension of humankind’s presence- our architecture, our machines, our domestication of wilderness- contain the seeds of our destruction, modernity’s poisoned wish. Perhaps when all the warnings have become laments, the last photographer will record the singularly beautiful image of a worn-out world, terminal but no longer just a mirage.’

— Excerpt from Lyle Rexer, *Photograph*, May/June 2005.

‘As (Maisel) intends, we are first engaged by the beauty that dances across these large scale prints. Then myriad questions arise from curiosity. Who or what created what we see in these views? The answers are neither easily explained nor universally confirmed, and the answers are less interesting to Maisel than the questions and discussions the pictures might evoke.’

— Excerpt from Anne Wilkes Tucker, *When the Whole is Indecipherable*, catalogue for *Terminal Mirage*

‘Maisel’s aerial views of Utah’s Great Salt Lake give the viewer almost no visual foothold, no clue to the meaning of these jewel-like swatches, delicately veined basins, and patchwork quilts of bloody water. With the exception of a shot of Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty- a bleached curlicue breaking the surface of a wine dark sea- the photos are gorgeous abstractions whose beauty is tainted only by the knowledge that its otherworldly coloration is the result of toxic industrial pollution.’

— Excerpt from Vince Aletti, *The Village Voice*

‘Maisel’s work is so rich with visual information that at some point you have to stop trying to make sense of it and just succumb to its glassy loveliness.’

— Excerpt from Cate McQuaid, *The Boston Globe*.

Quotes about *The Lake Project*

‘As Mr. Maisel renders it, the lake, which has been drained over the last 90 years to green the lawns and ice the whiskies of Los Angeles, looks scourged and flayed...In Mr. Maisel’s photos, the vistas are majestic, terrifying, and weirdly beautiful. They seem more intimate than microscopic data, vaster than extraterrestrial space.’

— Excerpt from Amei Wallach, *The New York Times*, May 9, 2004.

‘David Maisel has for the last 20 years been photographing the locations of tailings ponds and former lakes, creating luminous abstractions noteworthy for their super-saturated color. These vertiginous pictures bring to mind Adam Fuss’ trippy photograms of rabbit entrails and cow liver, and they also possess a disturbing science-fiction quality, as if civilization were on the brink of extinction.’

— Excerpt from James Crump, *Art Review*, cover story, October 2004.

‘The topography of the lake in Maisel’s photographs is at times completely incomprehensible, devoid of any normative logic, a fervid landscape of the human psyche....Maisel has succeeded in mapping the fictive terrains of the unconscious, of nightmares and hallucinations. He has also used the camera’s objectifying optics to form cartographies of the irrational and the perverse, the preconscious and the primordial, the apocalyptic.’

— Excerpt from Robert Sobieszek, *Archaeopsychic Vistas: The Lake Project of David Maisel*

‘As engaged as he is in the surrounding issues, Maisel is not attempting to make literal records of environmental destruction. Rather, he seeks a distance that scrambles a conventional reading of the landscape. In this altered state, the laws of gravity are undone, solid ground gives way, and the photograph is experienced as a transcendent vision or tone poem, as much as a map of ecological disaster....Maisel’s images offer brief measures of time, suspending elements of grace within a continuum of failure and erasure.’

— Excerpt from Diana Gaston, *David Maisel: The Lake Project, Aperture*, volume 172, Fall 2003.

‘Following in the footsteps of Smithson, who photographed many of his sites from the air...Maisel takes aerial photographs that make us aware of both the beauty of the land and its human-inflicted wounds...Maisel’s large prints- measuring four feet by four feet- compel appreciation as dramatic works of sheer visual beauty. But they turn terrifying once the viewer becomes aware of the photographer’s subjects. Edmund Burke’s eighteenth century notions of the beautiful and the sublime seem to be combined in these camera productions.’

— Excerpt from Peter Selz, *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond*, University of California Press, 2006.

‘(Maisel’s) pictures of erosion, desiccation, and other forms of geologic mayhem that are only too photogenic have the force of abstract paintings. They give pleasure despite the horrendous facts that lie behind them.’

— Excerpt from Grace Glueck, *The New York Times*, June 27, 2003.

‘In 26 extraordinary aerial views, Maisel turns the alarming specificity of blood-red streams and scab-like erosions into sprawling, sci-fi abstractions, at once marvelous and appalling, that leave the viewer unmoored, lost in space. Against all odds, Maisel’s text is as compelling as his photos: He sees the lake as “a sacred text, in a language we cannot decipher... The lake as loss, the photographs as mourning.’

— Excerpt from Vince Aletti, *Photograph*, September/October 2004.

‘Unlike much contemporary color photography, Maisel’s matte C-prints earn every square inch of their large format. Satisfying abstract compositions are made out of the myriad blots and scratches of unidentified environmental wreckage...Visual ambiguity...is the real accomplishment of Maisel’s photography...His *Lake Project* offers an experience equivalent to his own mixture of attraction and repulsion upon first finding that pink swath of toxic lake.’

— Excerpt from Jonathon Keats, *Art in America*

‘Chromatically, these are very intense pictures. However, because they are so easily viewed as pure abstraction, their ecological force registers upon the viewer slowly. That their unnatural color has consequences to the land is the point, despite the images’ deceptive beauty. Maisel has photographed sites that do not seem of this world, and no matter how we are seduced by them we have to understand that they are of our own terrible making.’

— Excerpt from Alan Artner, *Chicago Tribune*

‘With virtually no landscape markers, Maisel’s chaotic, abstract, and weirdly beautiful images prompt us to meditate on the representation of nature- and the nature of representation.’

— Excerpt from Vince Aletti, *The Village Voice*