

David Maisel  
*Black Maps: American Landscape  
and the Apocalyptic Sublime*

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography  
August 26 through October 11, 2013

On discovering photography ...

Until I was in college, I didn't really have an interest in photography. From a very early age, I was captivated by architecture and design. In high school, I spent a summer at Cornell University in an architecture program. By the time I was ready to attend college, I felt certain that architecture was going to be my professional path. But as much as I loved my study of architecture, as I continued along that path I felt something was missing. I wanted to be making things, real things---not drawings and models of buildings, but something actual, where I could manipulate space and light and form.

With photography, I discovered a medium where I could do just that. I felt that my interests in architecture-- how the built form fit into the landscape, how the human-made world met and interacted with the natural world -- could be expressed better, or at least more immediately, through photography.

As an undergraduate, I was in a small university environment where the study of art (including photography) was a sub-set of the art history department. This was fortuitous for me, as I found that through the study of art history, I understood my own motivations and interests much more thoroughly. I could place my own interests and endeavors on a continuum that included, for example, El Lissitzky, the Bauhaus, deStijl, Le Corbusier, Walker Evans, Frederick Sommer, and the so-called New Topographic photographers.

My first experience photographing from the air came when I accompanied my photography professor Emmet Gowin on a photographic excursion to the volcano Mount St Helens, which had erupted several years earlier. The aerial view seemed immediately familiar to me; it somehow reminded me of the birds' eye perspective that architects adopt when considering buildings and landscape in plan, as if seen from above.

What captivated me at Saint Helens was not only the echoes of the volcanic eruption as seen in the landscape, but also the evidence of the logging industry, which had clear-cut the surrounding area with a magnitude and force that echoed that of the volcanic blast. This notion of the earth as being transformed by human intervention was one that I was drawn to. When I returned to the east coast after that trip, I soon began to photograph from the air, first focusing on sand quarries along the banks of the Delaware River, and then moving westward to look at coal mines in Pennsylvania.

I felt that I was considering subject matter that was, in a way, previously secret or unseen, or somehow not considered in the domain of art. That made it all the more interesting for me. I was stumbling around, not quite ready for the technical challenges that working from the air demanded. But, through my studies in art history I was also encountering work of so-called Land Artists of the 1970's, Robert Smithson in particular. Smithson provided a kind of road map for me; his work and his writings showed me that art could be made of sites that might otherwise be considered useless or a kind of wasteland.

Through much of my 20's, I shifted back and forth between photography and architecture. I interned at an architecture firm in New York, compiling slide lectures for the three partners from their vast library of architectural photographs. In another job, I assisted an architectural photographer in photographing buildings by architects as varied as HH Richardson and Steven Holl. I received an individual artist's grant from the National Endowment for the Arts that allowed me to complete my first major aerial project, of open-pit mines throughout the Rocky Mountain States. I lived for a year on the coast of Maine, and made an aerial project of clear-cut forests there. Eventually, in my late twenties, I attended a graduate program in architecture, but I left after a year; by that juncture, I felt that I was more of a photographer than I would ever be an architect.

The point of this synopsis is that my career path wasn't a clear trajectory. My studies in architecture ultimately meant as much in formulating my artistic vision as my studies in photography or art history. They all built on each other. At the time, shifting back and forth between architecture and photography felt somewhat confusing; in retrospect, it seems to me now the best possible thing I could have done.

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In the intervening years, I've made a number of aerial projects of sites that have undergone cataclysmic environmental transformations. The photographs of environmentally impacted sites consider the aesthetics and politics of open pit mines, clear-cut forests, rampant urbanization and sprawl, and zones of water reclamation. Seven of these different projects are united in my recent publication, *Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime*. The images in this book present a hallucinatory worldview encompassing both stark documentary and tragic metaphor, and explore the relationship between nature and humanity today.

-David Maisel  
August, 2013

About Mr. Maisel...

David Maisel's aerial photographs of environmentally impacted sites explore the aesthetics and politics of radically human-altered environments, framing the issues of contemporary landscape with equal measures of documentation and metaphor. Renowned curator Robert Sobieszek has written: "Maisel has succeeded in mapping the fictive terrains of the unconscious, of nightmares and hallucinations. He has used the camera's objectifying optics to form cartographies of the irrational and the perverse, the preconscious and the primordial, the apocalyptic."

Maisel's work is the subject of a major new monograph from Steidl, titled, *Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime*. His previous monographs include *The Lake Project* (2004); *Oblivion* (2006); *Library of Dust* (2008); and *History's Shadow* (2011). Maisel's photographs are held in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; LACMA; the Victoria & Albert; the National Gallery of Art; the Getty Museum; the Brooklyn Museum of Art; the Yale University Art Gallery; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and some thirty other institutions.

A solo museum exhibition *David Maisel – Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime*, organized by the CU Boulder Art Museum, is on tour through 2015, and will be seen at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, the University of New Mexico Art Museum, and other venues. Maisel's work has been exhibited internationally, including these exhibitions, among others: *Infinite Balance: Artists and the Environment* (Museum of Photographic Arts, 2011); *Imagination Earth* (Seoul Arts Center, 2011); *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate* (Museum Of Contemporary Art, Toronto, and National Gallery of Art, Ottawa, 2008); *Dark Matters: Artists See the Impossible* (Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2007), and *Ecotopia; the Photography Triennial* (International Center of Photography, 2006).

David Maisel received his BA from Princeton University and his MFA from California College of the Arts, in addition to study at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Maisel studied under the photographer Emmet Gowin at Princeton, accompanying him on a formative photographic expedition to Mount St. Helens. Maisel was a Scholar in Residence at the Getty Research Institute in 2007, and an Artist in Residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts in 2008. He was appointed a Trustee of the Headlands Center for the Arts in 2011. Maisel has been awarded an Individual Artist's Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and an Investing in Artists Grant from the Center for Cultural Innovation. He has been shortlisted for the Prix Pictet Award and the Alpert Award in the Visual Arts.

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Reflections on the Exhibition  
Christine Broussard, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology

As I walked down the gallery absorbing Maisel's work, I was struck by how wonderful and horrible the images were. I was mesmerized by the birds-eye view of the landscape, the colors, the varied terrain, and reminded of how insignificant we are compared to the scope of the planet. Humans seem to have a fascination with objects of scale, either incredibly small or gigantic. I am no different. I imagined myself the ant just out of view or beyond the resolution of the photos.

Observing Maisel's work evoked a visceral sense of the connection between the human body and the landscape in his images. A blood red river and its tributaries become a vein with capillaries. Unmelted snow forms axons reaching out to propagate a signal. A mining scene becomes a gaping wound. And I become the surgeon who must debride the wound and sew it up. I wanted to just enjoy the beauty and file it away, but the starkness of the damage shook me up. How can toxic waste be beautiful? I wondered how an image of the planet would appear if we could identify all the wounds we inflict upon the earth. Would I want my friend/mother/lover to be that riddled with bed sores? Is this the planet we want to leave our children? What can I do to make it better?

I hope Maisel's work helps us appreciate the beauty of the world from that bird's eye view, but also to examine what we can do to prevent the wounds, so beautifully presented and yet so catastrophic to our well-being.

-Christine Broussard  
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Reflections on the Exhibition  
Roy Kwon, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Sociology

David Maisel's work provides a visual depiction of the most difficult challenge that lies ahead for the survival of the human species. But contrary to popular belief, the problem of environmental degradation—from global warming to deforestation, among other issues—isn't something that will be solved by a simple change in what and how we consume. Rather, the problem of the environment is ultimately a problem of our societal values and ideology.

Ultimately, the major cause of environmental degradation is an ideology of consumerism that has penetrated virtually all societies. Since the birth of assembly line production and the concurrent rise of mass consumption, members of society increasingly come to define themselves not by who they are and what they stand for, but by what they own. Even more problematic is the way in which we tend to judge others precisely in this very manner: the size of one's home is now a substitute for integrity, the number of shoes one owns takes precedence over humility, and the number of expensive suits in one's closet is considered a viable replacement for compassion.

This isn't to say that consumers are the sole culprit. The incessant corporate drive to maximize profits resulted in a constant assault against the public psyche. We are told time-and-time again that just being yourself is just not quite "cool" enough and that the only remedy for our plethora of inadequacies is to envelop ourselves in their expensive brands. From magazine advertisements in Cosmo to Abercrombie and Fitch commercials on television, we as a society are constantly reminded of how insufficient we are and that our shortfalls can be remedied by purchasing their products.

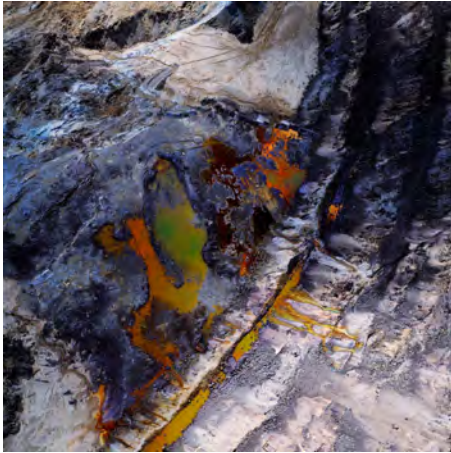
I used to think that my family was poor growing up. As a young child, since I wasn't able to play with the "cool" toys and latest gizmos that my classmates had, I thought I was poor. One day I was so sad about not having these "cool" things that I came home from school, crying. Amidst the embarrassment of being made fun of at school for not having these "cool" things, I remember asking my father why he decided to immigrate to the United States. His reply to me—with very few thoughtful words, as was his style—was simply that he wanted to provide a better life for our family. "Roy, be a good person first," my father said, "and everything else will fall into place."

It wasn't until more than twenty years later that I would realize what my father meant. Living a better life doesn't mean having a closet full of clothes or a garage full of cars. Living a better life simply means being in a position to be happy with yourself; to be at a place where you measure your own self-worth not by the toys or trinkets that you have, but by your values, sense of morality, and compassion for others. In the end, the only solution to the problems of the environment isn't just changing our habits, i.e., driving a Prius or buying eco-friendly products, it's about changing our values.

-Roy Kwon  
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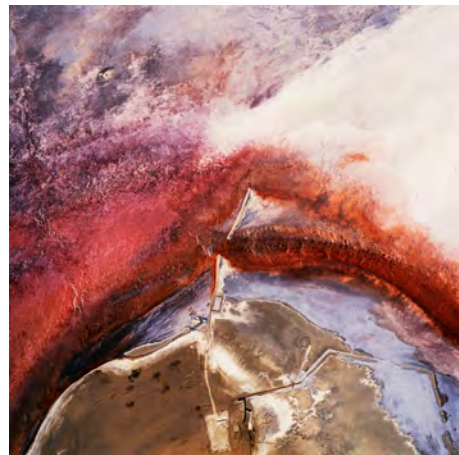
The Mining Project, Butte, MT 3



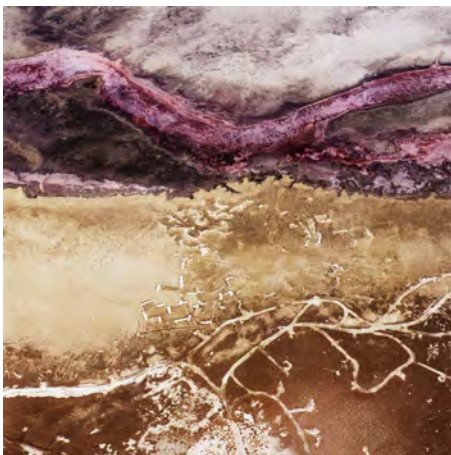
The Mining Project, Inspiration, AZ 1



American Mine, Carlin, NV 22



The Lake Project 19



The Lake Project 10



The Lake Project 11



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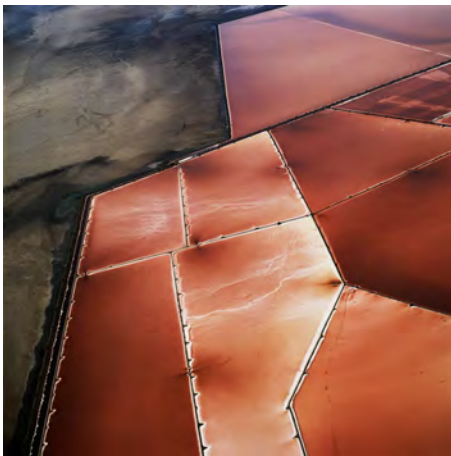
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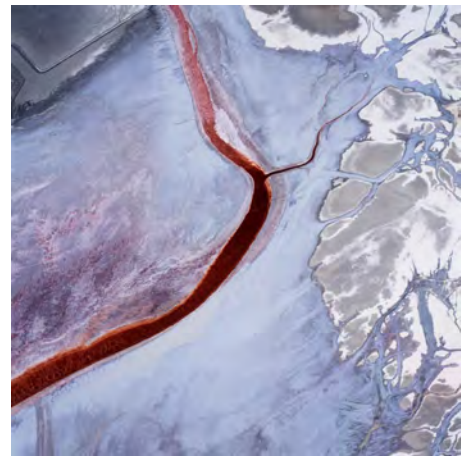
The Lake Project 18



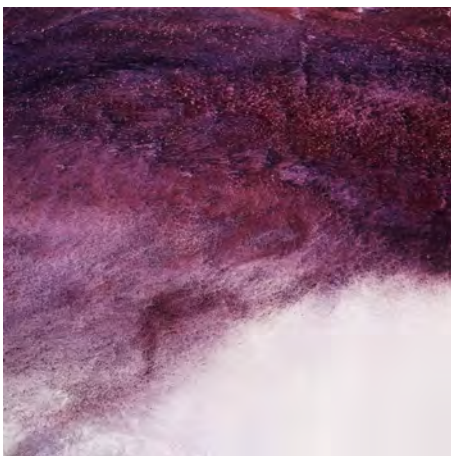
Terminal Mirage 24



Terminal Mirage 45



The Lake Project 20



The Lake Project 23



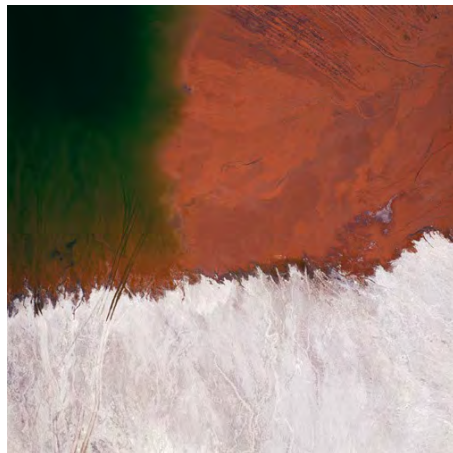
The Mining Project, Butte, MT 9

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American Mine, Carlin, NV 1



American Mine, Carlin, NV 18

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Black Maps

Not the attendance of stones,  
nor the applauding wind,  
shall let you know you have arrived,

nor the sea that celebrates  
only departures,  
nor the mountains,  
nor the dying cities.

Nothing will tell you  
where you are.  
Each moment is a place  
you've never been.

You can walk  
believing you cast  
a light around you.  
But how will you know?

The present is always dark  
Its maps are black,  
rising from nothing,  
describing,

in their slow ascent  
into themselves,  
their own voyage,  
its emptiness,  
the bleak temperate  
necessity of its completion.  
As they rise into being  
they are like breath.

And if they are studied at all  
it is only to find,  
too late, what you thought  
were concerns of yours

do not exist.  
Your house is not marked  
on any of them,  
nor are your friends,

waiting for you to appear,  
nor are your enemies,  
listing your faults.  
Only you are there,

saying hello  
to what you will be,  
and the black grass  
is holding up the black stars.

Mark Strand  
New Selected Poems  
From *Darker* (1970)  
Alfred A. Knopf, 2007, 267 pages  
p. 53