COLOR FOR COLLECTORS OF FINE PHOTOGRAPHY JANUARY 2011

PANORAMA

# DAVID MAISEL

## *Mining territories of the apocalyptic sublime*

BY DAVID BEST

On May 18, 1980, Mt. St. Helens erupted with apocalyptic power. It's almost impossible to picture complete devastation on this scale. It was also impossible for California photographer David Maisel, then a college undergraduate, to resist the temptation to visit a few years later to survey the uncountable fallen trees and hear the impossible silence of the post-eruption panoramas. He photographed the aftermath with his mentor, Emmet Gowin, documenting this Dantean scene of destruction.

"The volcano was mesmerizing…fantastic and fantastical," Maisel recalls. "We hiked up into the crater, even though it was still a red zone and off-limits, and found these other-worldly landscapes. It was an amazing experience because it brought together a lot of my interests about landscape, land use, and a sense of scale that I couldn't have anticipated. The cleanup of the downed trees by the logging industry really fascinated me; it was a transformation of the landscape on an equally potent scale. The way that human activity alters the landscape gave me a lot of material to work with and a lot to think about."

Maisel wasn't necessarily headed towards a photographic career in his early student days. He studied architecture at Princeton, then worked for an architectural firm in New York City in the early 1980s. He wanted to design buildings and orchestrate space, to impose order on a relatively large scale. He was also an impatient young man who realized soon enough that architecture was too slow a medium for his taste. "I knew I didn't have the patience that architecture requires," he admits. "I was drawing plans and making models of buildings, and found that incredibly limiting. Photography was a different way of arranging space that I could do on my own; I could have instant gratification because, compared to architecture, I could work much more quickly. With photography, the image is the end product."

So, while still an undergraduate student, Maisel began hiring local pilots in suburban New Jersey to fly him on shooting sessions over Delaware's sand quarries and the coalmines in eastern Pennsylvania. He now says that he lacked the technical skills to produce enduring photographs, but these early forays whetted his appetite to explore man's impact on the earth, particularly in areas that are normally cordoned off from curious eyes. Just as he tried to encompass the enormity of Mt. St. Helen's destruction after the volcano erupted, he now turned his interest to the affront by the mining industry upon the land. "My aerial work from Mt. St. Helens forward has been concerned with mining the aesthetic territory of the apocalyptic sublime, and with addressing themes of loss, elegy, and memorialization."

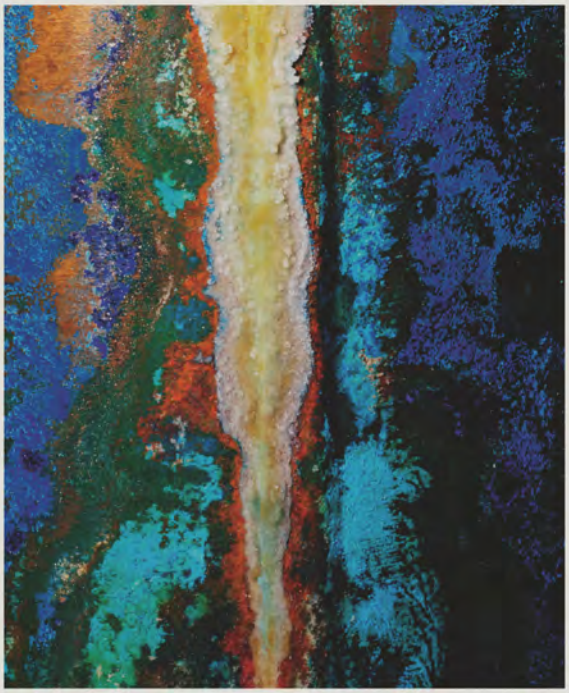
He returned to school focusing on art history, with a special interest in the historical development of photography. In 1989 he attended the Maine Photographic Congress in Rockport. There, young photographers could show their work to art dealers and curators, and Maisel had the good fortune to meet Robert Sobieszek, curator at the George Eastman House in Rochester. Maisel showed his aerial photographs of clear-cut logging and mining sites, and they were chosen to be included in a show that Sobieszek mounted, called *The New American Pastoral: Landscape Photography in the Age of Questioning*. In the tradition of the George Eastman House's seminal 1975 *New Topographics* show, it was another pioneering exhibition that took an early critical look at environmental and land-use issues.

"It took me a long time to figure out exactly what I wanted to say and do with these images," Maisel says. "I didn't necessarily want to tell people what to think. It was more that I wanted people to look at these photographs closely. We know what it looks like to drive to the mall, and we know what it looks like to walk on the beach, and those are the two poles of most of our experiences. These mining sites are generally unknown to the public. We don't usually get to look at cyanide leaching fields and things like that. We don't want to know they exist, and we don't want to know that we are complicit with the mining companies just by the way we live our lives."

By this time Maisel was working his way westward, following in the footsteps of the 19th-century exploratory photographers. He flew over the Rocky Mountain States seeking large, open-pit copper mines for his black and white photographs. He chose this lofty perspective so that he could photograph whatever he wished without worrying about needing permission for access to these sites. He didn't want his work to be influenced or censored by the mining industry. What he found during these preliminary expeditions was a horrific abuse of the Western landscape on a scale he found startling and untenable.

Maisel took his mining negatives back to his little cabin in Maine for processing and to make contact sheets of the work.

PORTRAIT BY LYNN FONTANA



LIBRARY OF DUST, CANISTER 416 DETAIL—2005/6

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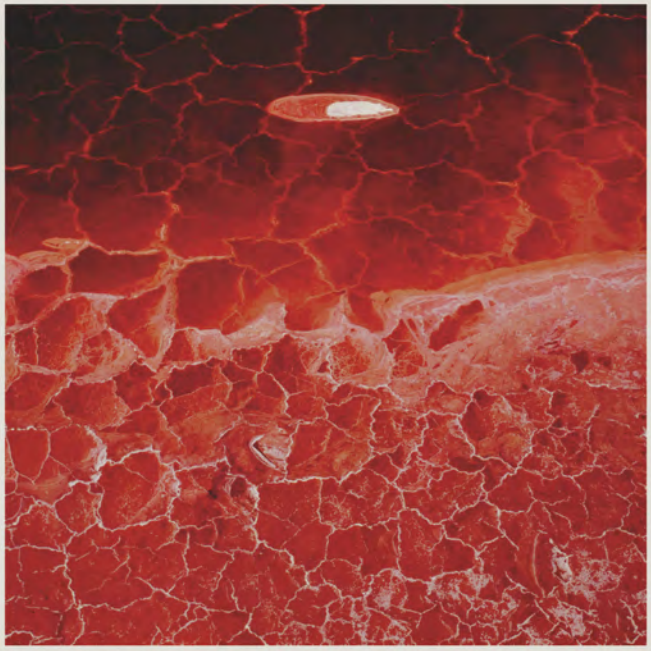
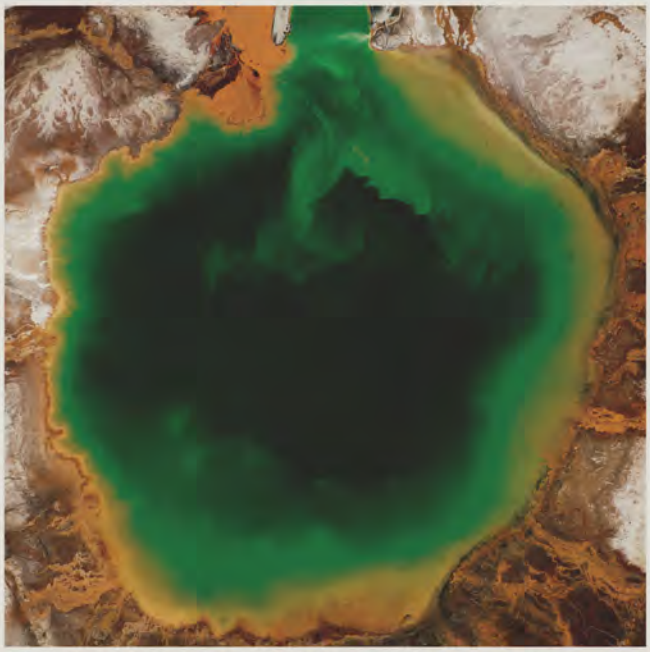


THE LAKE PROJECT 3—2001

THE LAKE PROJECT 16—2003

THE LAKE PROJECT 23—2003

THE MINING PROJECT, BUTTE, MONTANA 9—1990



AMERICAN MINE, CARLIN, NEVADA 1—2007

He was living a fairly simple life in Seal Harbor, and began reflecting on his role in the scheme of things. He realized he needed chemicals to develop film, and lots of water to wash them. Plus he used photographic paper to make his large-scale prints. It started him thinking about his complicity in the circle of life that he saw reflected in his photographs.

"Even though I was developing an increasing awareness of environmental issues, I wasn't really interested in condemning an entire industry," Maisel says. "I thought that was a very simplistic view, and I didn't want any part of it. I was seeing how my photography was made possible by the environmental destruction I was documenting. It's an ironic cycle. So in a way my aerial work became a dissection of the photographic process. I realized that I was most interested in seeing what price gets exacted on the land because of the ways we live. I wanted to show other people the consequences of our consumer culture."

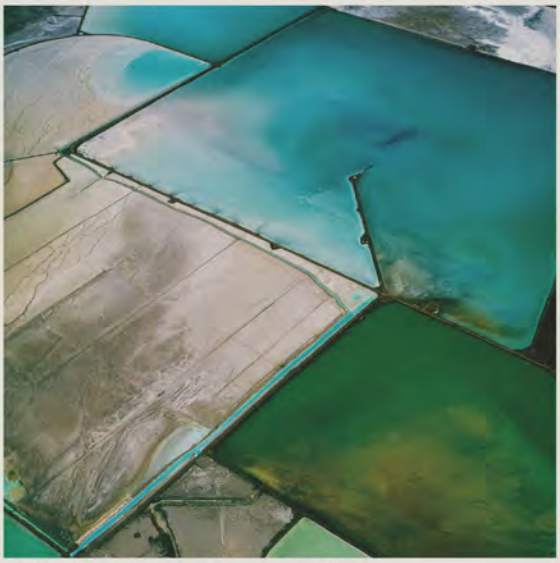
The resulting photographs from this project, called *Black Maps*, show, in a startlingly beautiful way, the horrific wrongs we have wrought upon our world. "Am I political?" Maisel asks. "Absolutely! Where you direct people's eyes is a political action. So yes, these are political images. Do I think that mining practices in the United Sates have become completely outdated and are essentially poisoning large swaths of land and water? Absolutely! I think the mining industry is out of hand, and our laws are antiquated. But I think if you just tell people that, no one is going to care. I come at this issue as a visual artist, so I express myself visually. What I want to do is get people thinking about the issues by being drawn into these images. I want to be very careful not to tell them what to think. These are very thorny issues and frankly, I don't have any absolute answers."

New projects are continually added to Maisel's oeuvre; they are seldom discontinued. Work he did a decade ago on the destruction of California's Owens Lake formed the seeds of his *Lake Project*. Owens Lake was drained in the early 1900s to supply water for Los Angeles' burgeoning population, until finally this ancient desert sea was reduced to an alkaline dust bowl. Recent enforcement by the Environmental Protection Agency has forced restoration of the lake, and Maisel is eager to follow the fate of this fragile ecosystem. He plans to return over the summer to re-photograph scenes he first shot ten years ago. This project could well last the rest of his life.

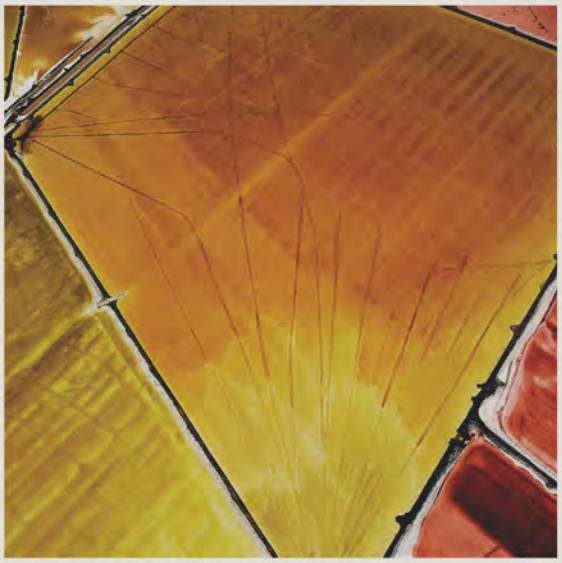
TERMINAL MIRAGE 16—2003

TERMINAL MIRAGE 27—2003

TERMINAL MIRAGE 10—2003



TERMINAL MIRAGE 24—2005



TERMINAL MIRAGE 13—2003

There have been other projects that have caught Maisel's eye, which seem to digress in radically new directions. One day in 2004 a friend mentioned a blog he liked to follow, and about six weeks later, Maisel remembered to check it out. On that very day the blogger mentioned an old psychiatric hospital that was revealing, for the first time, the existence of 3500 copper canisters containing the cremated remains of deceased mental patients. Copper is a metal that ages in striking and surprising ways. It is the focus of many of Maisel's mining pictures. The canisters had been stored in secrecy and kept from public awareness, just as copper mines are generally hidden from view of most of us. We are not supposed to know about or think about either. He knew before even seeing the canisters that he wanted to photograph these melancholy objects. They presented to him a physical answer to the mystery of what happens to our own bodies and souls when we die.

On his first visit to the hospital, Maisel was escorted by the head of security to an out-building. Inside, in a dusty room lined with pine shelves, were thousands of decaying copper canisters. The ashes of the cremated remains had reacted with their copper housing over time, giving each a distinct color and hue and unique mineralogical fusion. While he was there, some convicts were called in from the nearby penitentiary to clean the hallways of the building, which were quite a mess. As Maisel was beginning to photograph, he looked up to see one of the prisoners standing in the doorway of the room containing the canisters. He surveyed the shelves and whispered, "The library of dust." This became the title and thematic structure for the project.

"What do these canisters contain?" asks Maisel. "They contain the remains of human beings. What happens when we die? This is something I'd been thinking about a lot, having lost a parent unexpectedly. And then the destruction of New York's Twin Towers brought the subject of death further into my thoughts. I was left with the eternal questions: where do you go when you

LIBRARY OF DUST, CANISTER 2257—2005/6

LIBRARY OF DUST, CANISTER 242—2005/6


LIBRARY OF DUST, CANISTER 85-589—2005/6

LIBRARY OF DUST, CANISTER 4895—2005/6

HISTORY'S SHADOW, GM5—2007-PRESENT

HISTORY'S SHADOW, AB7—2007-PRESENT

die? What do you become? What's left? I felt these canisters were a way of thinking about those issues because here were the ashes of deceased people. You could hold them in your hands. And the ashes are interacting with the copper and mineralizing on the exterior surfaces, so they are like mineralogical portraits. Life is continuing in a different way than we might normally think about. I was fascinated by that."

*History's Shadow* is the latest concept to draw Maisel's interest. During a recent residency at the Getty Museum, he became fascinated with the x-rays that the conservation department was taking. Some of the ghostly images of art objects seemed to him to transcend the power of the original sculptures and art pieces. He began sorting through thousands of x-ray images that had been taken solely for conservation purposes, and expropriated them for his own artistic purposes.

"It's hard to actually verbalize my thoughts about these x-ray photographs," Maisel says. "So I'm thinking out loud here. But everything vanishes in time. All of our works vanish. The human body vanishes. I think this has been a thread through my last several projects. The x-rays serve as a means to explore mythological themes expressed through ancient art. I see these antique vessels and sculptures as very spiritual objects. And the images of them are transcendent to me.

"Re-photographing these x-rays brings me right back to my architectural roots. In school we drew cross-sections of a building. You can't actually cut up a building like that. But it is a tool for seeing and comprehending how a building works and how a building is put together. I guess you could say that all of my photographs are like those cross-sections. They are analytical. It is almost as if I'm cutting something away to look inside. Hopefully there is poetical and metaphorical content in my work as well. And something to give viewers a moment to think a little deeper about the world, and the consequences of our footprints here."

## ■ CONTACT INFORMATION

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