

Halloran, Lori "David Maisel's Surreal Aerial Photos Reveal Scars on the American West"  
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## KQED Arts

Watch the documentary at:

<http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/2015/07/07/david-maisels-aerial-photos-reveal-scars-on-the-american-west/>

In 2001, during a flight in the tiny Cessna he'd chartered, photographer David Maisel felt his fingers grow so numb from the cold that he began to lose dexterity operating his medium-format camera. When Maisel told the pilot, the man laughed. It's not the cold, the pilot explained, it's your brain.

The pilot had soared up to 10,000 feet, circling and banking the plane for hours at a time, and Maisel's brain was indeed starved of oxygen. Loss of dexterity, extreme cold and heat, and cramped conditions are all challenges the photographer must endure as he uses altitude to compose his stunning images.

"Shooting from the air gives me a perspective that's not usual. It also allows for gathering information that you ordinarily wouldn't be able to see," Maisel said. "It also allows for a graphic intensity to the images. When you're removing the sky and most sense of scale from the frame, the images become abstract."

The results from that day's flight, titled *The Lake Project*, are a series of surreal and otherworldly pictures of salt flats that are all that remain of what was once California's biggest natural lake.

For more than three decades, David Maisel has been making aerial photographs of Western lands that have suffered "traumatic" interventions by human beings. These include open pit mines, large swaths of clear-cut forests and over-developed urban areas.

"I don't consider myself an environmental photographer," Maisel said. "I don't even consider myself a landscape photographer...the pictures are a starting point to seeing how traumatic these sites are and how natural resource collection is incredibly damaging."

In May, the KQED Arts crew hit the road to follow the Marin County-based photographer as he returned to Owens Lake, located on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada, about 200 miles north of Los Angeles. In 1913 the City of Los Angeles diverted the Owens River, the sole source of water to the lake, to flow into the newly constructed L.A. Aqueduct. Within ten years, the lake had completely dried up, exposing the soils and minerals to high winds, creating toxic dust storms.

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The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power has tried over the years to keep down the dust by irrigating the lake, covering it with gravel, and planting vegetation to recreate natural habitat. The massive engineering project has changed the way Owens Lake appears from outer space, providing incredible shapes, forms and colors that fascinate Maisel.

Maisel's next series is focused on Dugway Proving Ground in Utah, a military site larger than the state of Rhode Island, where the U.S. government tests and develops defense systems against chemical and biological weapons. It took him more than a decade to obtain permission from the U.S. military to photograph the site from both the ground and the air. Maisel plans to include the Dugway images, along with his latest Owens Lake photographs, in a new exhibition opening Jan. 7, 2016 at the Haines Gallery in San Francisco.