

## The 'Apocalyptic Sublime' of Spain's Surreal Landscapes

Ashen borax fields, abandoned urban developments, and more from photographer David Maisel.

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The Fall (Borox 2), 2013

A couple years ago, [David Maisel](#) was flying above Spain's La Mancha region when he came upon a bizarre sight: a battleship-gray field that shimmered like metal, with squiggly pathways carved through it as if a huge, dirt-eating worm had just enjoyed dinner.

"I think what you're seeing there is some guy on a tractor had too much to drink at lunch or something," says the 54-year-old Bay Area photographer.

Maisel had come to Spain in 2013 to shoot around Madrid and Toledo, and he was not disappointed in the bounty of human-affected landscapes that were equally strange, beautiful, and sad. Strapped into a helicopter's harness—and aiming a camera with the same format as the one 1960s astronauts used on the moon—he documented vast patches of ashy, reflective [borax](#), sprawling plantations of neatly gridded olive trees, and an abandoned development on the edge of Madrid that looked like ghostly remnants of a Martian forward-operating base.

“It was an enormous urban-development project that after the economic collapse of 2007 basically ground to a halt and began to return to the earth,” he says. “You can see the beginning of roads and the sketching out of a new urban complex, but it feels like an archaeological site, like looking back on an ancient civilization.”

Maisel has a term for the appeal of such scenes—the “apocalyptic sublime”—imagery that conveys both beauty and terror. “These are portraits of society, pictures of who we are, and to me there is a sense of impending breakdown,” he says. Now, thanks to a new exhibit at San Francisco's [Haines Gallery](#), titled “The Fall,” people can get to experience his personal apocalypse in the full-sized glory his camera intended. The show runs from January 7 to March 12; folks who won't make it can get a taste with these selections.