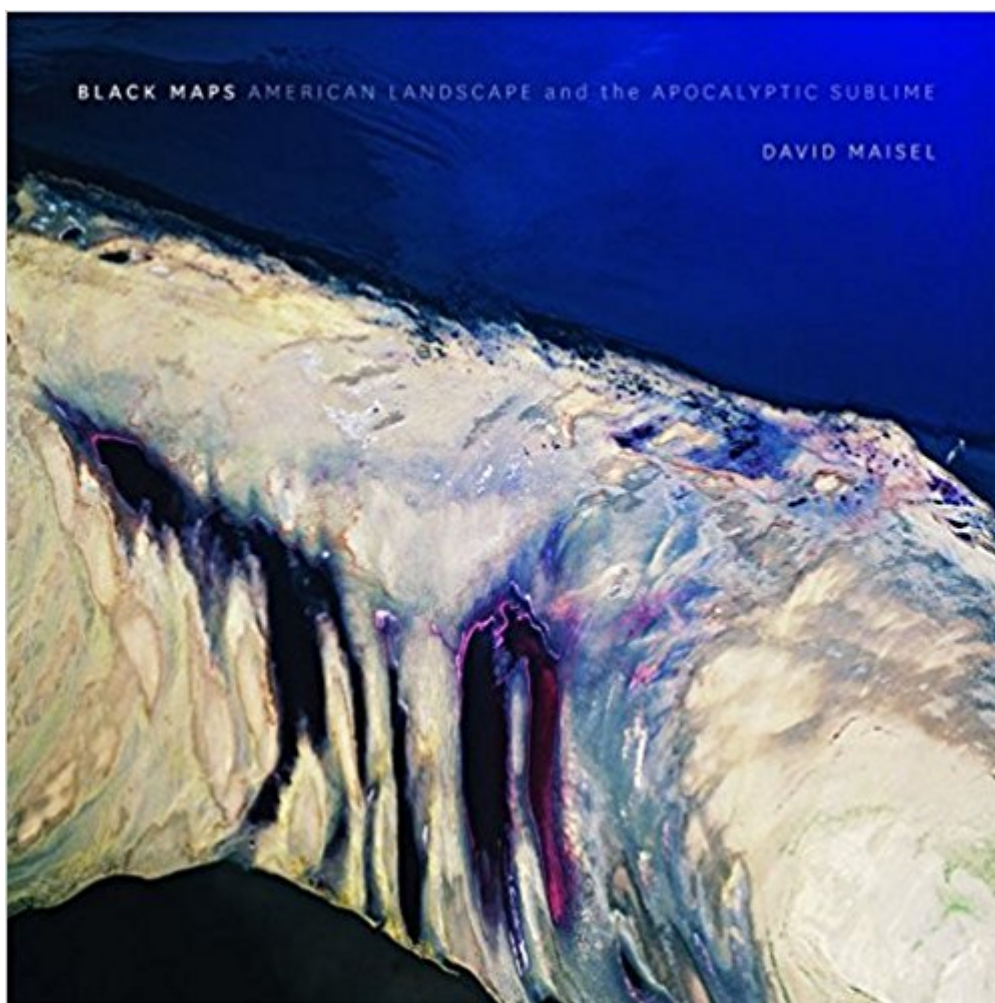


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# David Maisel: Black Maps



## Synopsis

Black Maps is the first in-depth survey of the major aerial projects by David Maisel, whose images of radically altered terrain have transformed the practice of contemporary landscape photography. In more than 100 photos that span Maisel's career, Black Maps presents a hallucinatory worldview encompassing both stark documentary and tragic metaphor, and exploring the relationship between nature and humanity today. Maisel's images of environmentally impacted sites consider the aesthetics of open pit mines, clear-cut forests, rampant urbanization and sprawl, and zones of water reclamation. These surreal and disquieting photos take us towards the margins of the unknown and as the Los Angeles Times has stated, argue for an expanded definition of beauty, one that bypasses glamour to encompass the damaged, the transmuted, the decomposed.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime Grotesquely Polluted Landscapes ... or Beautiful Art? In an ideal world, there would be no burned-up lakes or horrifically denuded strip mines and David Maisel would be out of a job. Environmental damage on the epic scale has become Maisel's bread and butter ever since the photographer started chronicling blighted mining sites in the 1980s. Typically working from inside a Cessna airplane, he's shot brilliantly colored but cyanide-stricken "leaching fields" in Southwest mines, the befouled lands around a Utah magnesium company that the EPA sued for hazardous waste and a huge lake that's been sucked into a dry, toxic dust-spewing desert by the people of Los Angeles. His oeuvre is full of these depressing odes

to human progress and industrialization, although they don't much appear like photos of mass contamination. With their curious juxtapositions of oil-paintlike shapes and hues, funnily enough, they almost look like what a CEO of a polluting chemical company might hang on the office walls as "abstract art." Museums across the country have hoarded Maisel's work, and now the photographer is hitting another artistic milestone with the first comprehensive survey dealing with his cursed landscapes. *Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime*, published by Steidl, is filled with photos that Maisel handpicked for their uneasy meshing of allure and destruction. "It's almost like beauty and horror are two sides of the same coin in this work," the photographer says from his Bay Area studio. Maisel recently took the time to chat about his lifework, as well as whatever else popped into his head, beginning with the surprisingly grotesque territory around Utah's Great Salt Lake. The Great Salt Lake is a surreal obstacle course of industrial evaporation ponds, dioxin-contaminated dirt patches and storage facilities for mouldering chemical weapons. The striking colors around the lake are created by sodium, potassium, chloride, perhaps molybdenum, algae, bacteria and other fun stuff. "For me, it's interesting that the lake has essentially become a mine because it's a terminal lake," Maisel says, who first came there to see Robert Smithson's seminal spiral landwork. "That means there's no natural outlet, and mineral content has been building up in the lake for millennia. There are all these ways that various minerals are mined from the lake - it's for a large part industrialized." Some of the more popular commercial extracts include sodium chloride for water-softening systems, roadway ice melters and livestock salt licks, and brine shrimp embryos to feed Asia and South America's pet fish. Much of Owens Lake was diverted into the Los Angeles Aqueduct in the early 20th century to slake the growing city's extraordinary thirst. That turned out not to be a great idea, because the dried-up lake bed started pluming off huge alkali-dust storms, some of it containing carcinogens like arsenic and cadmium. What little water is left is stained blood red by salt-loving bacteria. The governments of California and L.A. occasionally clash now over the costs of maintaining a mitigation program for the lake's flying particulate matter, which the city in a lawsuit has called the "most expensive dust control program in the entire nation, and likely the world." Maisel noticed the barren waterway while driving when its alien-world appearance tore his eyeballs off the road. "It was this glittering, pink lake bed that went on for miles and miles and miles," he says. "That piqued my curiosity." These eerie photos of Los Angeles marked a departure for the photographer in a couple ways: They were black and white, obviously, and he shot them from a helicopter rather than a plane. "That's because there's a lot of air traffic over the urban environment," he says, recalling the copter's radio chirping, "There's a 747 coming in, and you need to go down to 9,000 feet and park there for a while." Maisel chose to

shoot in monochrome to strengthen the "graphic qualities of a city that goes on and on and on." He says this series doesn't so much deal with environmental destruction as criticisms of "urban planning, or lack thereof." Maisel's done extensive work above decrepit and active mines in Nevada, Arizona and elsewhere, shooting treeless wastelands dotted with pools of cyanide-tinged water (the poison is used to recover tiny bits of gold from waste tailings). Because he started in the days before the Internet, his hunt for pestilent holes like the one you see above in Carlin, Nevada, often would begin at the public library, where he'd peruse the federal government's annual publications on the mining industry. "It was done state by state. I'd just read through, and there were no pictures at all," he says. "I liked it - you don't know until you get there what you'll see." The cost of cleaning up some of these sites can be extraordinarily high, rivaling the value of the metals extracted from them. (You're looking above at a mine in Butte, Montana.) "Sometimes mining companies go out of business, or a mine gets mothballed because it's cheaper to mine in South America," the photographer says. "The environmental problems might not be evident right away, but tend to come out decades later when the mines are no longer active." And yet somehow his mine series is not designed to be an overt critique of mine companies. Maisel would rather they simply serve as a visual conduit to contemplating humanity's gradual but stunning alteration of the environment. "They're not really meant to be pointing a finger at any specific industry," he says. "In fact, photography uses minerals and metals and papers and water. I'm embedded in the subject matter of this work as much as anyone." The Atlantic Cities [www.theatlanticcities.com](http://www.theatlanticcities.com) April 8, 2013, reviewed by John Metcalfe Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime, by David Maisel "[In nature] we may even glimpse the means with which to accept ourselves. Before nature, what I see does not truly belong to anyone; I know that I cannot have it, in fact, I'm not sure what I'm seeing." --Emmet Gowin The allure of the American West has captivated photographers since the earliest days of the medium. Photography was used as a tool to decipher the vastness of the new and unknown frontier. One can see a rich photographic form of manifest destiny stemming from pioneering documentarians like Timothy O'Sullivan in the 1800s to preservationists like Ansel Adams in the 1960's. Although the intentions of these photographers have shifted over time, the landscape has provided consistent inspiration for our deepest desires. In more recent history, our concerns about our footprint on the environment have led photographers to investigate deeper than what's easily accessible. David Maisel is a photographer of the current wave of contemporary artists concerned with hidden land -- remote sites of industrial waste, mining, and military testing that are not yet indexed on Google Maps. His latest book, Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime (Steidl), observes the land from a god-like perspective of the sky and with

an obsession with environmental destruction."The original impetus for the work was informed by looking really closely at 19th-century exploratory photography," explains Maisel, "and then, an arc through the New Topographics work of the 70s." He cites the work of iconic black-and-white image makers like Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams -- photographers who focused on man-altered landscapes -- but felt inspired to "push it further."This epic project began almost thirty years ago in a plane over Mount St. Helens. Maisel, a 22-year-old photography student, was accompanying his college professor, Emmet Gowin, with his work. "That experience of being at Mt. St. Helen's was really formative," says Maisel. "I don't even know if I'd be a photographer. It was an essential moment for me."Flying in to view the crater of the volcano formed by the extreme force of Mother Nature, he photographed a large swath of deforestation, something the young photographer had never seen growing up in the suburbs of Long Island, N.Y."As a kid at that point who had grown up in the suburbs of New York, I just never had seen a landscape put to work in that way by industry. Especially on that scale," says Maisel. The phenomenal destruction revealed a conflict in modern life that he's been fixated on since.In the 1980's, talking about the environment through art seemed out of step with the dialogue that was happening around Maisel as a young art student. Looking back, his formative work now stands somewhere between classic documentary and abstract expressionism. "Just bringing up Robert Smithson (the pioneering land artist) makes me remember. When I first got interested in him in the early 80's, that's not where the art world was at all. And it's not where this society was at all. This idea of looking at the environment and changes to the environment, was like, 'oh, that's ecology, that died in the 60s, we're done with that.'"In no way did that attitude derail his fascination in the environment -- instead, he began creating an artistic dialogue in nature as the inspiration. But it's Maisel's distinct intentions and conceptualization that separates the photographer from your average eco-activist, who's motivation to shoot may be based in a desire to preserve natural spaces or reveal the evils of industry.The work in Black Maps, unlike more polemic natural disaster photography, relies on abstraction. He creates full-frame surrealist visions of toxic lakes and captures the maddening designs of man-altered landscapes. In the abstract series The Lake Project (slide 15), viewers are overwhelmed by alien colors, allured by frame after frame of man-made destruction. The repetitive nature of viewing this destruction from a distance creates a sublime beauty in a classical sense. In less abstract work such as Oblivion (slide 7), which looks at the cityscapes of Los Angeles, the images become scorched black and white metaphors for the complete obliteration of a natural state.Over the years, Maisel published a few of these projects as separate volumes, but in Black Maps, the intention is to see their power as part of a dialogue with each other. "I think the feeling of being kind of overwhelmed is almost part of the

aesthetic of the work," he says. "There are just certain real conundrums on how we are developing the planet and changing the planet, and I think that's what I still want to pursue," says the photographer. But where Maisel could accuse, he instead becomes reflective on these issues, providing evidence of what he's seeing and crafting in his printing process. "I was also really conscious that these sites were American," says Maisel. I was making a book about the country that I live in and that I know the best." TIME Lightbox March 27, 2013, by Paul Moakley, Paul Moakley is the Deputy Photo Editor at TIME. You can follow him on Twitter at @paulmoakleySteidl recently published a book compiling three years of research by Artur Walther into African photography. The conversation joins the representation inherited from an ethnographic tradition with local contributions, combining 19th century anthropological studies with older and contemporary social reporting. The portrait plays a major role. One of the central pieces of this historical selection is Santu Mofokeng's The Black Photo Album, along with a large sampling of contemporary photographers, Samuel Fosso's portraits with ironic captions, Pieter Hugo's digitally colored faces, Guy Tillim's portraits of the Mai Mai militia in the DRC, Zanele Muholi's portraits of the South African gay community, and David Goldblatt's involuntarily ethnographic gallery. Supplemented with historical and aesthetic essays by thirteen professors and curators, the photographs in the book and exhibition reveal the complexity of the question of representation in African photography. Read the full article on the French version of Le Journal. Laurence Cornet June 27, 2013 Exhibition : Distance and Desire: "Encounters with the African Archive June 8, 2013 - May 17, 2015 Reichenauerstr. 21 89233 Neu-Ulm/Burlafingen Germany T +49 731 176 9143

Another amazing book from probably the only published artist that can record Earth's environmental degradation with such poignant beauty.

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Stunning, beautiful ... disturbing and sad.

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