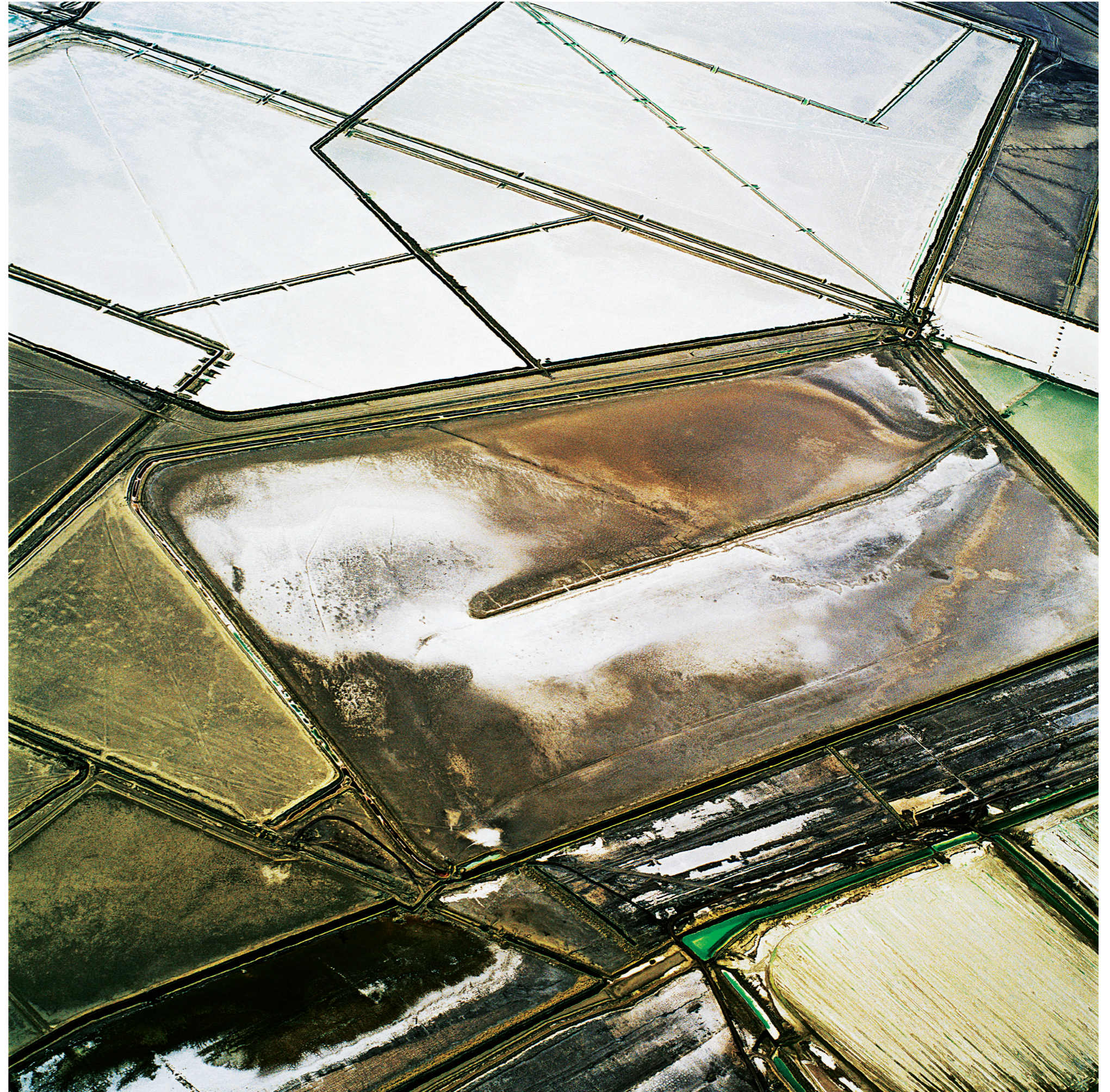
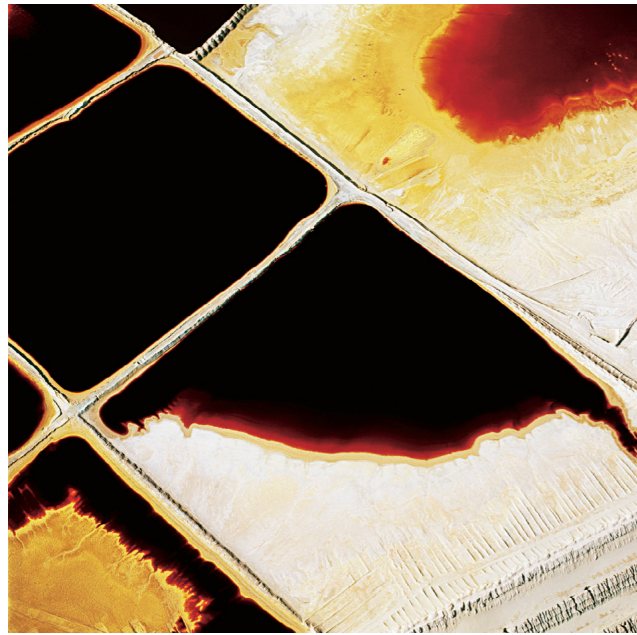


The face of the earth

For the past 25 years the aerial photographs of **David Maisel** have portrayed sites in America where man has left an indelible footprint on the landscape



Above The Lake Project 2, 2001.
Right Terminal Mirage 6, 2003



Flying several thousand feet up in tiny aircraft, David Maisel photographs open-pit mines, power plants, rampant urbanisation, cleared forests and zones of water reclamation. His quest, he says, is 'to unveil a world that most of us have not seen before'.

Maisel works with a pilot to position the plane so that he is happy with a composition he sees below. 'I couldn't do this without really good pilots,' he says. 'I am directing the process, but they are collaborators. Sometimes we circle around something for a while before I see exactly what I want.' Typically, he will shoot 20 to 40 rolls of film on an expedition, using a Hasselblad camera (he likes its square format because it is an unconventional way of shooting landscape).

Maisel, 51, says his interest in environmental issues began early. 'When I was in sixth grade [aged 11] I started an ecology club,' he says. 'I'd seen photographs in *National Geographic* of Lake Erie, which in 1969 had caught fire because it was so polluted. So I have a curiosity about what is happening to the places I am photographing. Environmentalism is an essential part of the pictures, but I am not a documentarian per se. My intentions are more open-ended.'

Maisel studied architecture at Princeton University for four years until 1983, where he met Emmet Gowin, a photography professor involved in a long-term project documenting Mount St Helens, 100 miles from Seattle, which erupted in 1980. Maisel went along on one of his expeditions, which he cites as his formative experience.

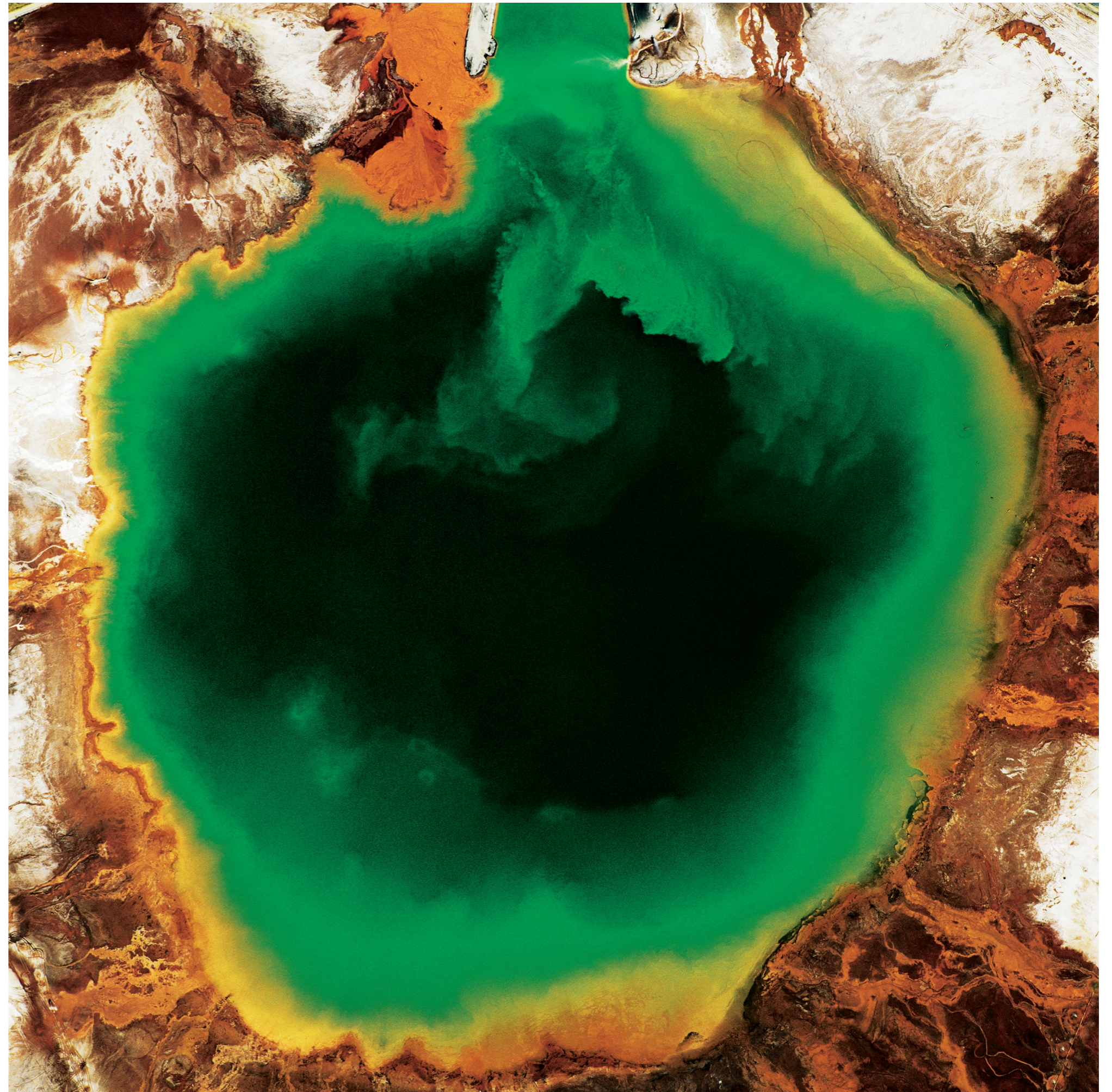
'At St Helens I saw the scale of natural destruction, which was biblical,' he says. 'The force of the blast was 27,000 times that of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. We did some work from the air, and I knew then that this was a way I wanted to work. I started thinking about other zones in the landscape affected on a large scale.'

Deciding that he 'didn't have the patience for architecture as a profession', Maisel turned to photography full-time. 'Photography forced me out into the world, to encounter the unknown,' he says. Most of his projects focus on man's effect on the landscape, and many depict areas where 'they're mining sodium, magnesium, potassium, chloride and sulphate – all elements that come into traditional photographic chemistry,' he says. His work not only makes us think about our environment, he says, but 'think about dissecting photography as well'.

Areas of intense colour draw you in to examine

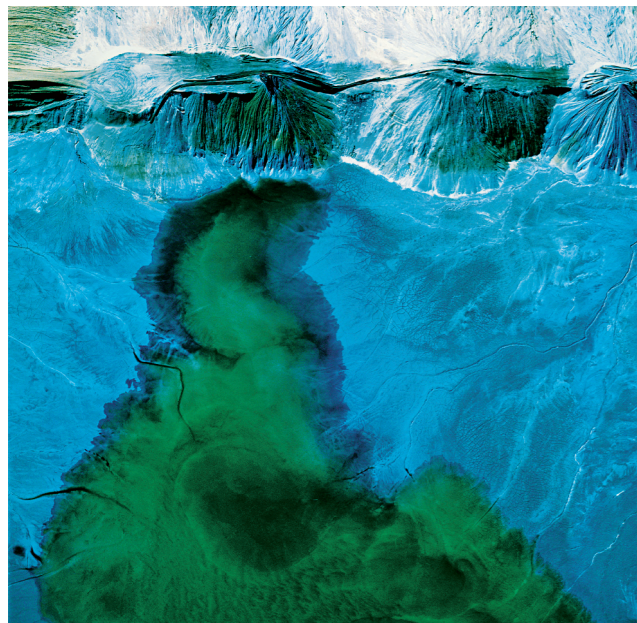
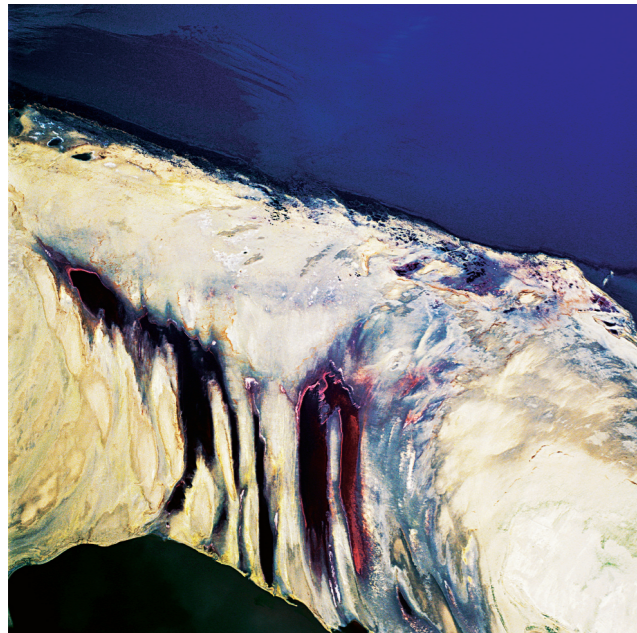
Maisel's quest is, he says, 'to unveil a world that most of us have not seen before'

Top left American Mine (Carlin, Nevada 18), 2007.
Centre left The Mining Project (Inspiration, Arizona 9), 1989.
Left The Mining Project (Butte, Montana 6), 1989.
Right American Mine (Carlin, Nevada 1), 2007





Left The Lake Project 15, 2002.
Left below Terminal Mirage 2, 2003



Maisel's works, which he prints at 48in square, yet it is often not clear exactly what is depicted. 'I'm interested in making the most compelling prints I can,' he says. 'When you're shooting across vast expanses, there's all kinds of stuff that the camera records atmospherically that you may or may not want. But the colours you see are absolutely all there. I am certainly not going in with Photoshop afterwards saying, "Hey, it would be so much more interesting if it were really bloody red."' Yet his images do not portray a reality that most people are familiar with. 'Photography has an almost perverse burden on it of being reality,' he says. 'Actually it is not. It is a translation of reality at every level, down to how you frame a picture and what lenses you use. It's based on reality, let's put it that way.' **Georgia Dehn** *Black Maps* by David Maisel (Steidl, £45) is available from Telegraph Books for £40 plus £1.35 p&p (0844-871 1514; books.telegraph.co.uk); Maisel's work is in *Landmark: The Fields of Photography*, at Somerset House, London WC2, until April 28 (somersethouse.org.uk)

'I have a curiosity about what is happening to the places I am photographing, but I am not a documentarian'

Left The Mining Project (Butte, Montana 9), 1989.
Right The Lake Project 17, 2002

