

# ARTFORUM

## Critics' Pick: David Maisel at Haines Gallery

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By Karen Rapp

Coinciding with the release of a new monograph of his work published by Steidl, David Maisel's latest exhibition, "Mining," consists of ten large-scale aerial photographs of mining sites in the American West. Unexpectedly alluring, these square segments of horizonless land are saturated with brilliantly unnatural colors—acidic greens, fluorescent reds, and bright aquas—that signal the toxicity of these transformed landscapes. Suggesting a disorienting world in perpetual flux, the painterly images undermine any sense of stable ground, depicting an unsettling portrait of human intervention in the landscape.

Though Maisel's interest in land excavation dates to the mid-1980s, the works on view are drawn from two later series ("The Mining Project," 1989, and the ongoing "American Mine," 2007–), which were sparked by his initial forays with color photography in 1989. Color allowed him to vividly document not only the open pits themselves

but the pools of chemical runoff that are their by-products. In some instances, sharp perpendicular lines delineate fields of black, white, and red in ways that recall Mondrian; in others, amorphous pools of liquid appear more like stills from abstract screen savers than conventional landscapes. Yet the digital world is only of limited relevance to our interpretation of these images. Unlike the scalable Google maps we so frequently use to locate ourselves on the planet, Maisel's aerial photographs conspicuously deprive the viewer of any certain sense of position: Without clear reference points, we could just as easily be looking at a specimen underneath a microscope as at a distant planet through a telescope. (This ambiguous play of scale is just one of the ways Maisel's project finds parallels with the work of Robert Smithson, whom he cites as a key influence.) Overall these are portraits of the industrial sublime surprisingly divorced from monumentality: Whether the human intervention we are observing was initiated by a massive gash in the earth or a chemical alteration in the groundwater, the outcome is as disquieting as it is seductive.



*American Mine (Carlin, Nevada 1)*, 2007, archival pigment print, 48 x 48".