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David Maisel takes his photography to higher plane

By Kenneth Baker
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If David Maisel's photographs make him look like an activist, blame intensifying public awareness of the role of heavy industry in climate change. Among photographers who have sought aerial vantage points - Edward Burtynsky, Robert Hartman, the late William Garnett - Maisel counts as a formalist. But his pictures' visual power can make even incurious viewers ask themselves what has been happening on our planet.

Q: How did the aerial point of view originate? Are you a pilot?

A: I'm not a pilot.

First, I was studying architecture, so I was used to seeing things in plan. But the more substantial thing that brought it all together was that, as an undergraduate, I was working with Emmet Gowin at Princeton and he had taken several students with him while working on a project about Mount St. Helens. Mostly, we were working with view cameras on the ground, but we did do some aerial work.

I was more or less along for the ride, but that fascinated me.

When I came back east that fall - 1983 - I started working from the air, looking at quarries in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and moving further westward, looking at mining in Pennsylvania.

Q: Is it the forms that these industries generate? Were you motivated by industrial critique, or something else?

A: All of the above. The thing that struck me most about the Mount St. Helens project was not the devastation of the eruption, but the logging industry - the earth transformed on that scale by humans.

I was also interested in the work of [Robert Smithson](#). He had worked with mines in a conceptual way. He designed these viewing platforms for open-pit mines where the notion was that you'd see contemporary time and geologic time conflated.

It was only after a while, after photographing mines and clear-cutting of forests in Maine that I realized I was looking at the components of photography itself. Photography uses paper made from trees, water, metals and chemistry. In a way, I was looking at all these things that feed into photography.

Q: What prompted your shift from black and white to color?

A: I started as a black and white photographer but the colors I was seeing were just so lurid and compelling and awful at the same time. They got me looking at other contemporary art. I was gravitating more and more toward work that had visceral power, that wasn't necessarily about being beautiful but had some kind of horror in the palette.

Q: What kind of altitude are we seeing in these pictures?

A: It's all over the map. Altitude becomes a kind of compositional device. So depending on the scale of the thing, I'll direct the pilot.

I work at all different elevations. Everything is full frame, nothing is cropped, so I'm really pushing the pilot very specifically as to how I want this thing to appear.

Q: What kind of camera do you use?

A: I work with a Hasselblad.

I still shoot film. I like what film does, how it renders things, Also, when I'm shooting from the air, I want to have as large a negative as I can.

Q: And the picture's consistent square shape?

A: It's the shape of the negative.

Q: That raises the question of their orientation.

A: They all do have a definite orientation. I decide that as I'm shooting.

If you go

David Maisel: Mining: Photographs. Through Oct. 26. 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, until 5 p.m. Saturday. [Haines Gallery](#), 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 397-8114.
www.hainesgallery.com.