

NEW ANGLES ON LANDSCAPE

Building on a rich legacy, numerous California photographers are examining humanity's complex physical and psychological relationship to the built and natural environment.

By George Melrod

The romance between California and photography is as old as the state itself: the first great photographic chronicler of the region, Carleton Watkins, arrived in 1850, the year California attained statehood. During the 1860s and '70s, Watkins' images of Yosemite lent striking poetic documentation to the vistas of sublime natural splendor that Hudson River School painters like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Hill were celebrating. But Watkins' first images of the state were in fact quite different. From the early 1850s, he began taking daguerreotypes of miners working the earth in the years following the Gold Rush: rather than sublime Arcadian vistas, we see laborers with tents and crude machinery gathered over upchurned soil. In subsequent scenes, Watkins photographed images of mines and other structures nestled in the built landscape amid cleared hills and mud, images of trains winding through hillside passes and canals cutting starkly through the central flatlands. In other words: from its inception, photography of the Californian and Western landscape has been as much or more about land use—and humanity's complex, often fraught relationship with the sustaining landscape—as the land itself.

Since then, that relationship has grown only more dynamic and complex. Robert Adams, the esteemed photographer of the American West who was featured in the 1975 landmark exhibition "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape," later described the vigorous push-pull of optimism and pessimism that examination of the worldly environment can evoke. In a text for his 2010-2014 traveling museum retrospective "The Place We Live," he explained, "I began making pictures because I wanted to record what supports hope: the untranslatable mystery and beauty of the world. Along the way the camera also caught evidence against, and I eventually concluded that this, too, belonged in pictures if they were to be truthful and useful."

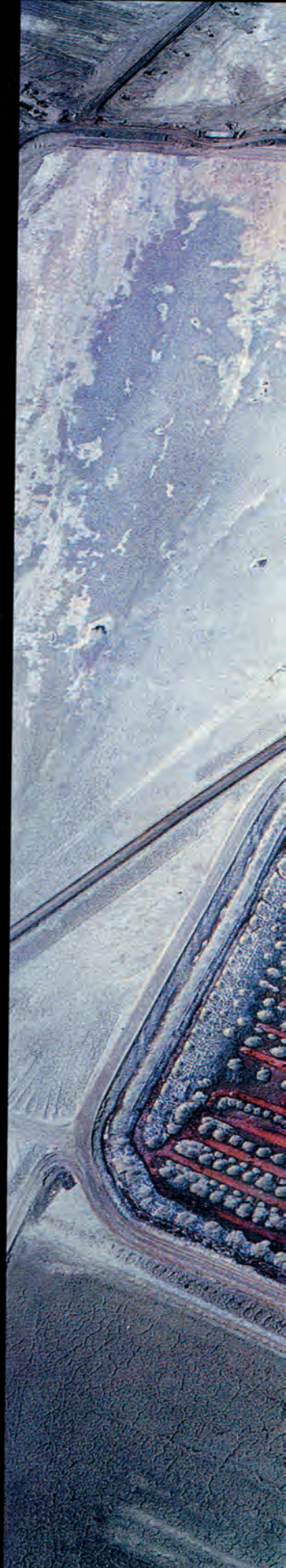
In recent years, Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky has raised the bar for chronicling humanity's impact on the face of the earth. Yet somehow, California, with its Arcadian symbolism, cultural eclecticism, and Hollywood "dream machine" artifice, seems to put its own spin on the notion of landscape. Engaging both the built and natural environment, and the nuanced terrain inbetween, the five California-based photographers featured in this piece seek out new angles into our complex relationship to the world around us.

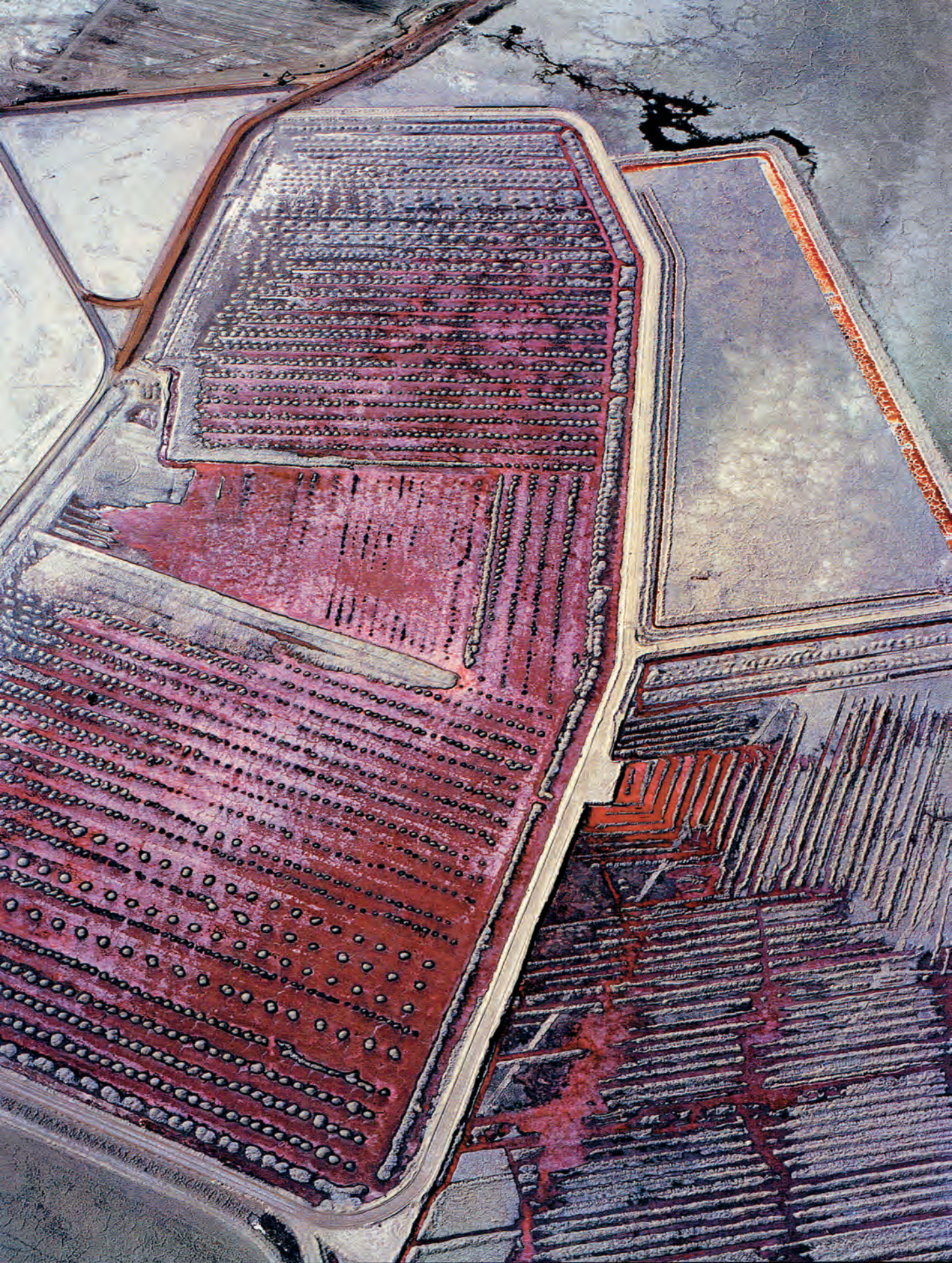
Photographer David Maisel presents his human-altered landscapes as mysterious, haunting abstractions. The scarred, richly complicated terrain they reveal appears at once "repulsive and attractive," as he observes, "at the same time, really seductive but also terrifying." The subject of a recent exhibition titled "Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime," that was seen at the University of Colorado Art Museum and Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, among other venues, Maisel photographs the earth from the air, removing any horizon line or obvious landmarks to ground the viewer's gaze. Instead, the eye teeters over strange, disrupted, seemingly alien landscapes, gazing down at them in both wonder and alarm, like Dave Bowman, the fateful astronaut, toward the end of Kubrick's "2001." Only we know these are not science fiction; as one's initial perplexity fades, and the documentary aspect emerges through the abstraction, we struggle to recognize these surfaces as the planet we inhabit.

If the Sausalito-based photographer's works vaguely evoke 20th-century modernism—the flowing hues of Helen Frankenthaler or the vertiginous landscapes of Bay Area painter Richard Diebenkorn—that's not entirely coincidence. Maisel cites his early exposure to art history at Princeton as significant, and notes that Diebenkorn was a cartographer in WWII; in fact, it was Diebenkorn's first commercial flights between Albuquerque to California in 1951-52 that helped inspired his aesthetic. But, he was also inspired by "New Topographics" photographers, such as Adams. Maisel's first foray into aerial photography came while he was still an undergraduate, when he accompanied photographer Emmet Gowin on a trip to document the volcano-sheered landscape around Mt. St. Helens in 1983. After an early series chronicling the effects of logging, he moved on to examine mining and other, even more invasive processes, and their startling

"UNTITLED 08-06," 2015, **David Maisel**, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 48" x 48"

PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY; HAINES GALLERY; AND MARK MOORE GALLERY







impact on the land. Since then, he's traversed the West, capturing images of all sorts of anxious, febrile landscapes; in his recent 2015 show at LA's Mark Moore Gallery, he presented views of eerie Borox fields from around Toledo, Spain, in which shimmering traces of mining and agriculture have become inextricably entwined to form stark, curvaceous abstractions.

As a rule, the viewer does not understand what is specifically going on in Maisel's depicted terrains, though the implications of violent upheavals to the earth seep through in the forms he uncovers, and the presence of toxic chemicals are implied by the startling bright colors—from battery acid greens to virulent oranges. "Do I expect the viewer to know what purposes the forms and colors represent?" he asks. "It doesn't matter. I often don't know what I'm seeing myself; it necessitates research afterward. I want to be as informed as possible about the history of a place. But I'm not a geologist, I'm not an engineer. These are complex sites and complex issues," he adds. "I think the most essential component to it is a visual experience; then perhaps a detonation goes off. How could something potentially so problematic be so gorgeous? There's a kind of disconnect between those two things. I want the viewer to realize that there's more to know."

Maisel's newest body of work returns to a site that he first examined over a dozen years ago: California's troubled Owens Lake, site of the century-old water controversy documented famously in the movie "Chinatown." Originally, the artist stumbled on the site on the way back from studying the Salton Sea. His first trips, in 2001-2002, came just as the site was reaching a crisis point, from exposed toxic metals in the lakebed such as nickel, cadmium, selenium and arsenic, seeping out into giant dust storms. Some of the water had been stained an eerie bloodlike red, a result of the mineral content breeding high levels of bacteria. When he returned in May 2015, he found that while the options for containing the dust storms had been narrowed down, the landscape remained "infinitely complicated visually. There's still this blood red water, still these zones that are wildly incomprehensible." Despite their harsh geometric beauty, these views are the

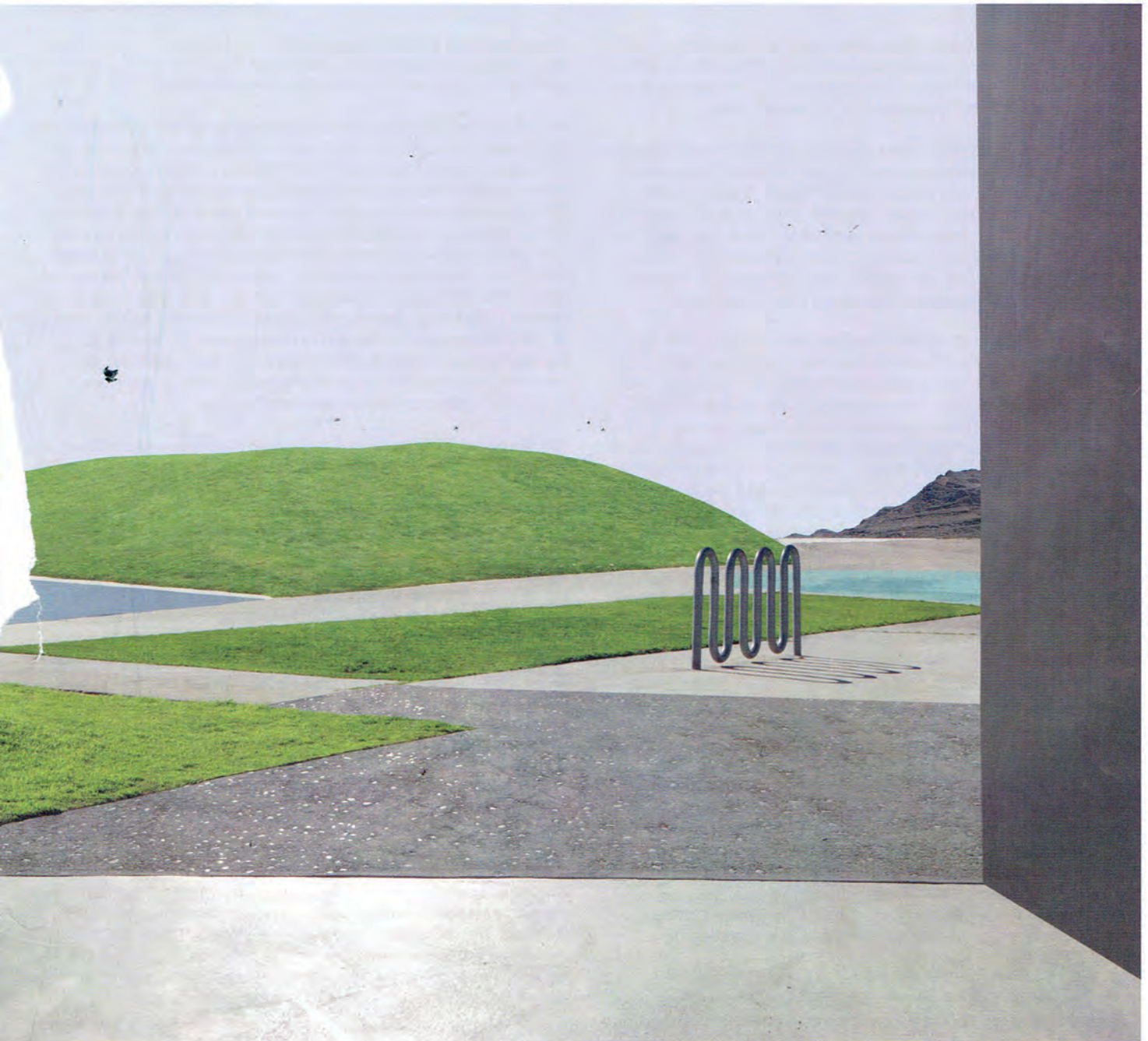


TOP LEFT:
 "ALUMNI CENTER," 2013, Miles Coolidge
 PIGMENT INKJET PRINT, FRAMED, 46½" X 58"
 PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ACME, LOS ANGELES

TOP RIGHT:
 "EYE INSTITUTE," 2013, Miles Coolidge
 PIGMENT INKJET PRINT, FRAMED, 50" X 64"
 PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ACME, LOS ANGELES

RIGHT:
 "LANDSCAPE WITH LAWN," 2015, Lauren Marsolier
 ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 40" X 22½" OR 30" X 17"
 PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ROBERT KOCH GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

The works exist in a limbo-like, in-between state, between fiction and document, between virtual and physical reality, like scenes from a 21st-century Twilight Zone: “I like to combine things in a paradoxical way, so it causes disbelief, confusion,” says Marsolier. “You don’t know whether to trust the picture.”





farthest thing from Arcadia; rather, they depict an unconscious work of collective land art—an ongoing scarification process left by human depredation. As Maisel notes, it is a document of “successive layers of human intervention. There’s nothing natural left at all.”

LA artist Miles Coolidge addresses the theme of landscape photography through a rigorous, analytical stance that often plays with elements of architecture to disorienting effect. “Most of it operates at the intersection of landscape and architecture,” he says, of his work. “I’m looking at them in terms of their relationship to each other... The word landscape literally means ‘shaped land’. It’s kind of odd that the word brings to mind Nature with a capital ‘N’—if you think of it necessarily as human-altered, almost immediately you’re seeing it on a critical footing.”

Influenced early on by the work that was coming out of New York’s East Village, from artists like Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, and James Welling, to European artists like Thomas Ruff, Coolidge was also interested in the “New Topographics,” after getting his MFA from CalArts in 1992, he went to Germany for a year to study with Bernd Becher in Düsseldorf. His early series called *Safetyville*, started in 1994, took as its subject an actual, semi-public theme park of the everyday sited outside Sacramento, which offered a model city of 12 blocks, constructed at roughly one-third scale (for groups of kids to learn about society). Although the images document an actual place, the strange generic nature of the site and Coolidge’s dryly tongue-in-cheek presentation, infuse the work with a sense of the uncanny, a homegrown Surrealism infused with a kind of consumerist banality. That disjunction is par for the course for Coolidge, who says he is looking more for “truthiness ... the semblance of truth,” than to invent anything himself. “I’ve always found the adage ‘truth is stranger than fiction’... still has legs,” he says.

Allowing his subjects to dictate the format of his representation, in the late 1990s he made a series of images of California’s Central Valley, with emphatically horizontal works spanning 10 ½ inches tall by 11 feet long. In his winter 2014 show at LA’s ACME Gallery, titled “Frances Gate,” he portrayed large images of coal seams from Germany’s Ruhr Valley, and a monumental (92 x 22 foot) image of floating detritus around the sluice gate of an 1850s hydro-power source near Lowell, Massachusetts. Evincing the impact of humanity’s shaping the earth for energy at the start of the Industrial Age, the works proudly defy conventional expectations of scale. Notes Coolidge wryly: “I’ve never accepted the dimensions that Kodak or Fuji dictates. Why?”

In his *Street Furniture* series from 2007 (the year Becher died), Coolidge offered topological portraits of discarded items of furniture—

“DESERT TO PALM 2,” 2015, **Jeremy Kidd**
ARCHIVAL PRINT ON SINTRA, 46" x 108" x 14"

PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LESLIE SACKS CONTEMPORARY

an Ikea cabinet, a broken swivel chair—centering them formally in the frame, with the rest of the scene askew in the periphery. He began his ongoing series *Mock-Ups* in 2011. Now a professor of art at UC, Irvine, Coolidge discovered that the UC system was constructing full-scale sculptural elements of proposed new buildings to show to clients. Isolating these façade-like fragments in the frame, he presents them to us with all the faux verisimilitude of Hollywood stage sets. “They disrupt the way in which we usually think of the relationship of a building and a landscape,” Coolidge says. “The models are aspects of buildings, they’re not in people’s everyday lexicon. Enough so that there’s a shock: you don’t know what you’re looking at.” As sculptural elements representing various academic fields or functions, they float before us untethered from our experience of physical reality, as banal, aspirational facades.

The tilt toward fiction becomes even more uncertain, and unsettling, in the works of photographer Lauren Marsolier, whose spartan, dreamlike works cull discrete elements taken from real life and blend them together into topographies of her own imagining. In one haunting landscape from 2013 called *Building And Tree*, she combined elements shot in Spain and California. “It’s Surrealist, but not a fantasy,” she explains. “I’m trying to display the world outside. The form is fictional—like films are fictional—but they can talk about very real things: the world outside, its hybridity, and the dissonance it causes in us.”

Born in France, Marsolier lived in Los Angeles for several years, before moving to New York and back to France; she returned to LA in 2009. Her works are not specific to California, but in their starkness, implied loneliness and artifice, her carefully composed topographies suggest a mutated vision of Southern Californian, or American Western, suburbia, presenting it like a stage set for a play by Sartre: “No Exit,” set in Palm Springs. Among her inspirations, she cites painters Edward Hopper and de Chirico, and her artworks surely reflect those artists’ sense of isolation and melancholy, their deliberate composition and psychological intensity. But she, too, is drawn to the “New Topographics” photographers, as well as Thomas Demand, “how the work captures the fakeness of the world. Humans are creating a fake version of the world, and I’m very attracted to that fakeness, the artificiality... In Southern California, I think that’s true more than anywhere else. Now we live in Venice, it’s almost like living in Disneyland,” she adds, citing how aspects that seem strange at first gradually come to seem natural, and then familiar.

Still, the stark, dreamlike nature of her meticulously distilled tableaux—all devoid of people, though clearly shaped by and for a human presence—can be confounding. As Marsolier notes of her viewers, “half are attracted to the serenity, and half are spooked by the emptiness.” *Landscape With Lawn* (2012) shows a wall and walkway, set off by bright green landscaped mounds, and a lone bike rack, as telephone poles and craggy mountains span out beyond; in other recent works (which will be shown at San Francisco’s Robert Koch Gallery next spring), we see an austere veranda under construction, or a tiny seating area in the corner of a tennis court, set off from the surrounding barren hills with concrete and fencing, a bunker-like oasis. The works exist in a limbo-like, in-between state, between fiction and document, between virtual and physical reality, like scenes from a 21st-century *Twilight Zone*: “I like to combine things in a paradoxical way, so it causes disbelief, confusion,” says Marsolier. “You don’t know whether to trust the picture.”

The innovative approach to landscape photography favored by British-born, LA-based Jeremy Kidd is rooted as much in sculpture as in painting. Which is apt, as his grandparents were the British artists Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson. “I’ve always been aware of the landscape as something sculptural,” he reflects, though in his pursuit of the sublime, he clearly takes a page from the Hudson River School painters. For Kidd, discovering the vastness of the American West while driving cross-country to Los Angeles in 1986, was transformative: “a fundamental experience of freedom... What was most profound was coming out of Death Valley, where it was 115 degrees, and seeing snow-capped mountains: for a European, that’s a stunning experience.”

His first attempt at making one image from multiple exposures came at Mt. San Jacinto, near Palm Springs, and asking himself “How do you express the experience in one photograph?” Not wanting to mimic a Hockney, he kept going back at different times of day, then combined the shots. Since then, he has evolved his technique of digitally weaving together multiple shots of a location into glossy, irregular tapestries that meld different views and times, in sites as disparate as Hong Kong, St. Petersburg and London, as solid columns seem to branch out like cacti and the world swerves around the viewer in sinuous panoramas. “In nature or city, I’m really looking for exactly the same thing, a particular vortex of elements,” he says. “When you’re having a sublime experience, it’s partially about grandeur... but more than that, a kind of energy. So I’m often trying to impart that, which is why I like big pieces: it’s more of a whole-body experience.”

For his newest work, Kidd has fittingly returned to the desert around Palm Springs. In *Big Horn Palm Desert* (2014), he captures a rocky vista with cacti in the foreground, and the glittering desert town in the background: strikingly, the image blends shots from four distinct times of day, as daytime, sunset, midnight and dawn all flow together in dazzling terrestrial continuity. In other works, he melds together fluid motion shots made as iPhone sketches with still images shot afterward, as their horizon lines undulate vertiginously. In *Desert to Palm 2* (2015), he presents a row of spindly windmills extending into the foreground, with a deep blue, billowing sky punctuated by one sun and five moons—it rose in the sky over the 3-hour, nighttime

shoot. In a recent iteration, he included a sculptural replica of a windmill in front of the image, while one end curls forward to embrace the viewer. “The point at which the image, sculpture, and observer intersect interests me,” he explains. The work is just a prelude: Kidd’s upcoming show at MOAH in Lancaster, opening next February, focuses on windmills in the surrounding Antelope Valley. “They’re surreal, sublime,” he states, of encountering the looming, man-made energy totems in the desert. “You either like them, or don’t like them. I’ve chosen to like them.”

In conceiving his distinct approach for documenting the earth, LA-based Jay Mark Johnson found his key from adjusting perspective—not in space, but in time. It wasn’t a eureka moment, he says, so much as “a eureka question. The conceptual leap was asking the question: could I make a timeline photo? And if so, what would that be?” Trained as an artist, and then an activist in Central America, Johnson moved to LA to work as a cinematic visual effects supervisor; among his tools was a scanning panoramic camera, in which the lens looks out through a slit and spins around on an axis. He found that by turning off the motor so it no longer spun, he could capture a single, vertical glimpse of reality, which changed as objects crossed before it. That insight led to months of experimentation: he looked at human figures in a *tai chi* class, he studied Eadweard Muybridge’s pioneering motion studies. “I lived in Venice, a few blocks from the boardwalk,” he recalls. “I began looking at bicycles, and started looking at ocean waves.”

Since then, he has been avidly documenting both spheres: that of human activity, as well as the terrain of natural phenomena, and how they interact. Whether he’s presenting cars on the Pacific Coast Highway, jitneys in Hong Kong, or freight trains in Prague, the unmoving elements appear as horizontal lines, while the vehicles stand out dramatically, isolated in space and time. Despite the seeming panoramic scale, his view is in fact startlingly intimate. As he notes, “When I go out and look at a wide landscape, I’m just looking for my shot... I’m looking for a perfect little slice of motion.” In his *Carbon Dating* series, Johnson studied human interaction with the land, from Neolithic agriculture in Cambodia to lumber camps in New South Wales. In his depiction of an open-pit mine in Kentucky, the parade of bulldozers churning dirt looks like a scene from a Mideast war. Because of the shuddering of the earth, he observes, the “timeline of a mountain being blasted away becomes a visual seismograph.”

By contrast, Johnson’s April exhibition at LA’s William Turner Gallery, called “Wave Lengths,” was notably serene, capturing the movement of waves (and refraction of light), at shores across the globe, from Morro Bay and Big Sur to Mexico, New Zealand, and South Africa. Some views are placid and soothing, conjuring the gentle rhythmic lapping of a vast breathing ocean; others are more turbulent, capturing the tumult of a storm at sea. They are the visual equivalent of a form of meditation, a photographic mantra for slow deep breathing, that shifts us from our own sense of time to the much grander scale of earth. As Johnson notes, these works are effectively “contemplating planetary space and time. There’s always this contrast, between human frenetic time, and universal, planetary time.” As with several of these artists, Johnson’s work provides us not only a view of humanity’s conflicted engagement with nature, but also a lingering sense of dislocation from the earth that we inhabit: whether it’s in the patterns we make, the forms we construct, or the footprint we leave behind. Their images are both a window and a mirror.

“Los Osos #50, MORRO BAY,” 2012, Jay Mark Johnson
ARCHIVAL PIGMENT, PAPER, ALUMINUM, WOOD FRAME, 25½" X 109½"
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND WILLIAM TURNER GALLERY

