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Sweeping Aerial Shots of Spain Look Like Alien Terrain

By Laura Mallonee



THE SURREAL LANDSCAPES in David Maisel's *The Fall* don't look like anything on earth. The ashen colors and strange geometry appear otherworldly, like the surface of a distant planet. But his unusual landscapes are aerial views of mining, agriculture and construction sites in central Spain.

[Maisel](#) shoots from planes and helicopters, a vantage that makes the radically altered terrain feel eerie, almost hostile. He's spent 30 years documenting how humans have marked and scarred the earth. Some of his images appeared in the [opening credits of True Detective](#), and his photo book *Black Maps* offers a haunting compilation of aerial photos of everything from pit mines to sprawling suburbs. "There's something both terrifying and beautiful"

about such places he says.

The photographer made *The Fall* while on a separate assignment for art book publisher Ivorypress in Spain. He focused on landscapes around Toledo, a city about 40 miles southwest of Madrid. In the arid region of Castilla La Mancha, the highly alkaline soil gives plowed fields a shiny, metallic tint. Near the rural town of Fuensalida, olive trees dot a landscape of neat sandy groves. And southeast of Madrid in Vicálvaro, neat foundations dug into the pale gray land are all that remain of abandoned real estate developments.

Maisel shot through the open door of a helicopter, a safety harness keeping him from falling out. It was loud and chaotic—thrilling, too. “All your senses are firing on all cylinders,” Maisel says. “You have to be thinking and feeling and seeing and also on top of the technical aspects of what you need to do to make these pictures work.”

He preferred to hold his medium format Hasselblad rather than mount it remotely, as it allowed greater control and let him react more quickly and instinctively to the scenes unfolding below. “Even though you’re in a helicopter that can sort of hover in a stationary way, everything is constantly changing. And I love that way of working,” he says.

The resulting photographs are quiet, reflective and ambiguous—just as Maisel intended. “Even though it’s [the work] somewhat documentary in nature, I feel like it’s maybe a little more of an aesthetic and poetic response to these places,” he says. “If anything the message is: The world is a mesmerizingly beautiful place, even when it’s reflecting the toll that we put on it by our existence. It still has this incredible beauty to it.”

David Maisel’s photographs are on view at the [Haines Gallery](#) in San Francisco through March 12.

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