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Richard Misrach's Landscape Photography : (Re)Framing the American Disaster

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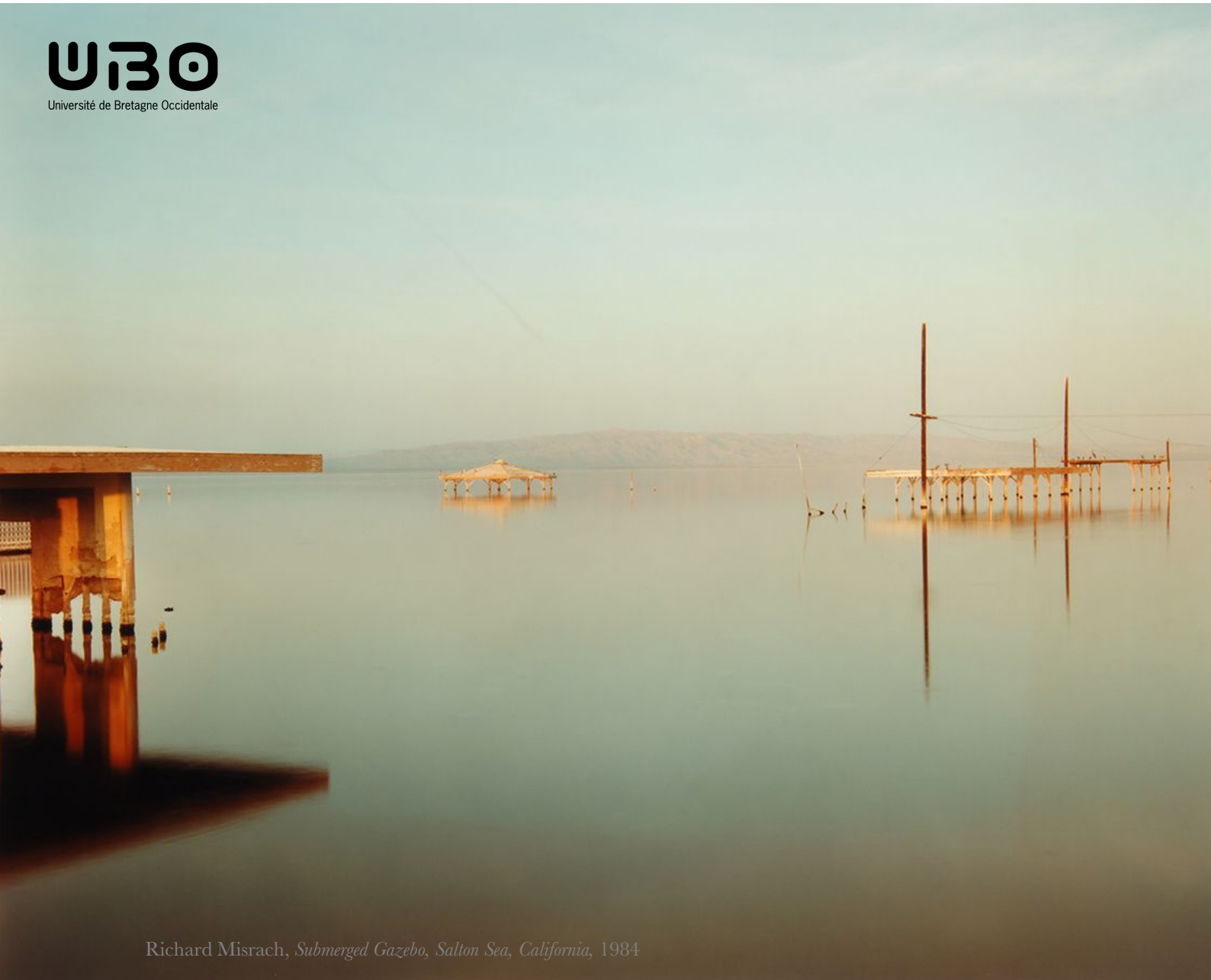
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Richard Misrach, *Submerged Gazebo, Salton Sea, California, 1984*

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(Re)Framing the American Disaster**

Under the supervision of
Lise DELMAS and Gwenthalyng ENGÉLIBERT

Université de Bretagne Occidentale
Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines
Département d'Anglais
M1 Textes, Images, Langues Étrangères
Juin 2021



FACULTÉ
DES LETTRES &
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INTRODUCTION

“Photography and political engagement blossomed simultaneously for me, though I did not make the connection at the time. In a way, my work over the last fifty years has been about navigating these to extremes—the political and the aesthetic.”¹

“Photography turns fact into thought, and can yield an inexhaustible meditation.”²

The photographic work of Richard Misrach (1949-) explores the manners man and nature intertwine and collide in the American landscape, from the American western desert to the South East. While producing highly aesthetic photographs by developing colour photography and returning to traditional large-scale format, Misrach is perceived as having politicised landscape photography. From bombing ranges to petrochemical pollution, he repeatedly explored places that pertain to defining traits of American identity and captured occurrences of disaster.

Starting his education by studying mathematics then psychology, Richard Misrach learned photography by working as an assistant at the ASUC Studio (Associated Students of the University of California) in Berkeley supervised by photographer Roger Minick who became his mentor. Misrach’s first photographic project titled *Telegraph 3 A.M.: The Street People of Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley Avenue* (1972-1974) sought to document the street people of a Berkeley avenue at night, in black and white. Although it earned him an award, Misrach nonetheless realised with bitterness the limitations of his photography which did not allow for significant social change.

Still photographing at night and in black and white, Misrach abandoned the human figure and turned to landscape, first capturing eerie cactuses with a strobe. He rapidly shifted to colour and kept on photographing the desert extensively, using an 8x10-inch view camera. His explorations led him to his main ongoing project entitled *Desert Cantos* which is a multifaceted investigation of the American desert and its alteration caused by man’s activities.

¹ Richard Misrach, *The Photography Workshop Series: Richard Misrach on Landscape and Meaning*, New York, Aperture, 2020, p. 10.

² Richard Misrach, in Baptiste Lignel, *Richard Misrach*, Paris, Photographer’s References, 2016, p. 89.

From then on, his work has been divided between two poles, the aesthetic and the political, which intersect at times. Every now and then, Misrach turns to solely aesthetic contemplative projects—contrasting with series that will be studied in this dissertation—such as the *Golden Gate Bridge* series which he repeatedly photographed under varied meteorological conditions. He also experiments with digital cameras and manipulations, and produces series such as *Color Reverse*, *Color Reverse Scrubs* and *iPhone Studies*.

Nowadays, Misrach is largely regarded as having participated in developing the status of colour photography as a legitimate fine art practice and is often presented as one of the most influent photographers of his generation. In that respect, English photographer and curator Roger Badger talks about *Desert Cantos* as being “possibly one of the most ambitious [projects] in the history of the medium.”³

Although Misrach provides us with a wide, affluent and varied body of photographs, there is a conductive thread common to most of his projects. For over forty years, Misrach has photographed floods, (desert) fires, dumpsites, military testing zones, hurricane-devasted areas, intoxicated places—namely places that serve as a backdrop for disasters in the United States.

Theorising disaster

The events perceived and defined as disasters have evolved conjointly with man’s mastering of nature. From being rooted in the supernatural and considered Acts of God up to the Middle Ages, disasters were gradually seen as Acts of Nature mostly because science became the main source of knowledge in the 18th century thus allowing for rational explanations.⁴ Another step in this evolution was brought about by twentieth-century theorists who identified the Industrial Revolution as an ultimate step closer to the Anthropocene and firmly established disasters as being in fact man-made, suggesting we have in fact entered a generalised “era of disaster” enhanced by nuclear technology. Sociologist Frank Furedi insists on the fact that “in the aftermath of disaster today, the finger of blame invariably points towards another human being.”⁵ Thus, even disasters that could be perceived as natural—as having an origin in meteorological forces that man cannot prevent such as earthquakes, wildfire, hurricanes, etc—

³ Gerry Badger, “In Photographica Deserta – The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach”, *Creative Camera*, 1988.

⁴ Enrico Quarantelli, “Disaster planning emergency management and civil protection: the historical development of organized efforts to plan for and to respond to disasters”, Unpublished manuscript held at Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware, Newark, 2001, pp. 3-4 (quoted by Frank Furedi, “The Changing Meaning of Disaster”, *Area*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2007, p. 483).

⁵ Frank Furedi, “The Changing Meaning of Disaster”, *Area*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2007, p. 484.

are in fact often embedded with man's poor prevention and managing of resources, and sometimes result in great inequalities among the victims most of the time based on their social class (for example with Hurricane Katrina). Furthermore, climate change has become a ubiquitous factor which taints most disasters and accelerates their occurrences.

Thus, this evolution in the perception and the supposed source of disasters goes hand in hand with a transformation in disaster's definition. In terms of temporality, it changes from a precise limited event to an ever-expanding combination of occurrences which stretch out to the point that disasters have become omnipresent. Furedi mentions a belief shared by academics that "disasters are increasing in frequency."⁶ This shift regarding the temporal nature of disaster is supplemented with "a manifest tendency towards expanding the range of events that can be characterised as disasters,"⁷ hinting at the variety of forms disaster can take.

Another essential side to disaster definition has been tackled by scholar Isak Holm. According to him, disaster must be distinguished from other types of disrupting events producing harm, such as apocalypse, catastrophe, and cataclysm. The concept of apocalypse contains religious implications and depicts the end of the world as a unique overpowering event. It has been thoroughly studied already in regard to visual arts and is far from Misrach's concerns. A cataclysm implies the harmful event occurs on a global scale with magnitude and annihilates parts of the earth. Finally, catastrophes and disasters can be quite similar and are often used indifferently. Yet catastrophes tend to be linked to events that cause great numbers of casualties. On the other hand, disaster appears as rooted within our everyday lives, as something we are familiar with.

On the specificity of disasters, Holm explains that they are not only man-made but more importantly that they are *media-borne*⁸ and thus dependent upon their depiction through media. This characteristic encapsulates numerous thought-provoking implications. Mediatic coverage of disaster involves matters of representation and framing, together with the production of narratives and discourses. This mediation of disaster allows for the fabrication of a precise image that is inscribed in a collective imaginary—Craig Calhoun even talks about an "emergency imaginary."⁹ Holm adds that disasters presented from the perspective of the media are also

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Isak W. Holm, "The Cultural Analysis of Disasters", in Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel (eds.), *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012, p. 17.

⁹ Craig Calhoun, "The Idea of Emergency: Humanitarian Action and Global (Dis)order", Didier Fassin & Mariella Pandolfi (eds.), *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, New York, Zone Books, 2010, pp. 29-58.

“culturally mediated, filtered through society’s repertoire of metaphors, images, narratives”¹⁰ which fits Furedi’s idea according to which “the experience of disaster is mediated through the public’s cultural imagination.”¹¹ Susan Sontag adds that photographs have a “determining influence in shaping what catastrophes and crises we pay attention to.”¹²

Corpus, approach and questionings

In order to account for the diversity of Misrach’s photography while remaining in a reasonable scope, I decided to focus on four specific projects which are particularly relevant to the exploration of disaster representations: *Desert Cantos*, *Petrochemical America*, *1991: The Oakland-Berkeley Fire Aftermath*, and *Destroy this Memory*.

Desert Cantos is Misrach’s opus magnum. Started in the late 1970s, *Desert Cantos* is a complex ensemble of series which Misrach is still developing to this day. As mentioned previously, it encompasses over forty subseries—named *cantos*—which depict varied aspects of the tensions between man’s activities and the natural desert. The next series, *Petrochemical America*, was conducted from 1998 to 2010 and focuses on the pollution in Louisiana along the Mississippi in an area nicknamed “Cancer Alley” because of its dramatically high level of cancers. The two last projects *1991: The Oakland-Berkeley Fire Aftermath* and *Destroy this Memory* function in a different manner from previous ones and focus on localised disaster that profoundly impacted local communities.

The difficulty is to position this dissertation within disaster research which stands at the crossroad of many different fields, with an important branch in sociology revolving around notions of resilience and vulnerability. Although sociology is not my field of expertise, as a starting point, this approach enables me to view Misrach’s work as a demonstration of environmental vulnerability and its impact on communities which inhabit it, therefore voicing a form of denunciation while giving space for resilience by creating meaning around disaster.

Thus, I choose to associate a diachronic and a synchronic approach to undertake an aesthetic analysis of disaster representations. By leaning on philosophers and landscape theorists, I seek to examine aspects of genre, reception, functions, and meanings related to disaster photography—in their plurality and sometimes contradictory forms.

¹⁰ Holm, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹¹ Furedi, *op. cit.*, p. 487.

¹² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York, Straus and Giroux, 2003, Chapter 7.

Therefore, my intention is to determine what singularises Misrach's own approach to disaster. In order to do so we will examine the ways in which Misrach proceeds to a *(re)framing* of disaster through his use of photography. The concept of (re)framing implies semantic variations useful to this dissertation. It questions the idea of frame, of limits, of selection; what should or should not belong to the realm of disaster. Framing disaster also alludes to the media and their discourse and narrative surrounding disaster, and thus to the fundamental media-borne quality of disaster. Finally, the prefix 're' is fruitful because it refers both to something that comes back, something that is repeated and something that is re-evaluated. It denotes distance, discrepancy and subjectivity and enables to place Misrach as providing a distinctive insight on disaster. To sum up, I seek to show Misrach proposes a transfer, a remediation of the experience of disaster by offering a photographic experience which unfolds through space, time and senses, and ultimately creates space for new disaster narratives.

In order to conduct this study, the demonstration will be threefold. The first part will tackle disaster's ties to time. We will examine to what extent disaster can be perceived as a process mirroring Misrach's own creative process. We will also focus on the links photography as a medium establishes between past and present. The study of Misrach's complex position in the unfolding of disaster will lead us to highlight temporal paradoxes of disaster as being ineluctable and yet unsure. Then, we will determine the ways building a temporal distance can also influence matters of reception and genre.

In a second part, we will focus on the notion of spatiality in relation to disaster. We will address what is concealed and implied in the photographs through the motif of traces before examining how Misrach plays with codes that pertain to American imagery. We will then investigate the interplay between the material and the intangible as agents in the disruption of usual disaster representations. Ultimately, spatiality will enable us to consider where Misrach positions his work within American landscape tradition and how disaster lastingly modifies the American land and by extension calls for a redefinition of landscape photography as a genre.

In a third part we will take some distance and try to examine Misrach's work in relation to aesthetics. We will first question the relevance of almost systematically rooting landscape photography within the realm of the sublime which, in the case of Misrach, seems rather reductive and narrows down the scope of his work. We will discuss how the core of Misrach's photography and what allows for it to have so much impact on receptors precisely comes from the deep and inherent tensions his photography puts to the fore. This will lead us to try and determine what aesthetic territory Misrach's photography falls into and how it contributes to creating meaning around disaster.

I – TEMPORALITY OF DISASTER: SEIZING A PHENOMENON

Disaster sustains intricate and complex relationships to time. It is constructed, performed, and lasts through time and therefore produces its own temporal rules. The realisation of disaster occurs according to distinct times and simultaneously binds past, present, and future. Furthermore, photography as a medium also displays numerous and intimate links with temporality. It could thus be relevant to examine the different relationships which tie time, disaster, and photography together, precisely in relation to Misrach's photography.

1. Reminiscences

1.1. Getting hold of a process

a. Disaster and disasters

As suggested in the introduction, disasters can be defined and analysed from several perspectives. Two major paradigms stand out: that of *disasters* as singular and individual events and that of *disaster* as a continuing and totalising event. In order to understand the nuances between these two approaches, it is necessary to examine the evolution disaster went through in terms of its recent historiography.

In the 20th century, most scholars tended to consider disasters as singular events. According to disaster studies pioneer and sociologist Charles Fritz, disasters can be defined as “an *event concentrated in time and space*, in which a society or one of its subdivisions undergoes physical harm and social disruption, such that all or some essential functions of the society or subdivisions are impaired.”¹³ A disaster therefore has temporal boundaries, can be named and framed as starting here and stopping there. Thus, disasters can be seen as individually distinct from one another and defined in a punctual¹⁴ temporality.

At the turn of the 21st century, a general shift occurred among researchers, scholars and theorists. These changes are epitomised by Frank Furedi's 2007 article from its very title “The Changing Meaning of Disaster.”¹⁵ Indeed, the diversification of the forms of disaster—from the impact of nuclear power to terrorism and climate change—annihilates previous forms of disasters and brings about new threats which are omnipresent and redefine the very idea of

¹³ Charles Fritz, “Disasters”, in Robert K. Merton and Robert A. Nisbet (eds.), *Contemporary Social Problems*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961, p. 655, (My emphasis).

¹⁴ In the sense that they occur once.

¹⁵ Frank Furedi, “The Changing Meaning of Disaster”, *op. cit.*

disaster by destroying its boundaries. As Furedi argues, “instead of representing it [disaster] as an ‘unusual, unique, unexpected event’, it is increasingly seen as an everyday event.”¹⁶ There is therefore a movement towards a stretching out of disasters whose length extends in time and changes from the punctual to the permanent. Hence, disasters are also inscribed in some sort of continuity. As scholars Ekström and Kverndokk put it, “disasters are not events but processes with unclear beginnings and no obvious endings”¹⁷ and are therefore constantly actualised and renewed.

What is striking is that, despite an apparent appeal towards a definition of disasters as not being events anymore, those two sides to disaster, which I name *disaster* and *disasters*, are not cancelling up one another and tend to be combined and vary in intensity. The limit between the two can be blurry. Disasters build up a continuum from which isolated occurrences can be identified.

If punctual and permanent coexist, it could be advanced that disasters can be singled out in the midst of a continuous state of disaster. These individual occurrences could in fact stand at a climax in the unfolding of disaster, being the visible peak which comes through the surface and reveals what lays beneath. This principle of hidden phenomenon is also advanced by Holm: “the vulnerability perspective of contemporary disaster research suggests interpreting catastrophes as if they were in fact *crises*: not as sudden exogenous calamities but, rather, as endogenous results of human agency invisibly working their effect slowly over a period of years.”¹⁸ His interpretation of disasters as crises also testifies of a boundless and ever-growing character which is hard to delineate.

To sum up, *disaster* and *disasters* do not necessarily call for a hierarchy but provoke a complexification of the phenomenon of disaster as a whole. These ambiguous and paradoxical features have an impact on disasters’ representations and are visible in Misrach’s photographic work. Richard Misrach’s series can be separated according to the two poles. While *Petrochemical America* and *Desert Cantos* tend to capture phenomena that stretch out in time, *Destroy This Memory* and *Oakland-Berkeley* focus on disasters concentrated in time. Thus, Misrach equally captures disasters that are loud, obvious and momentary, and those that are hidden, quiet and continuous.

Destroy This Memory, shot in 2005, pictures a ravaged New Orleans a few weeks after Hurricane Katrina. It could be said that this disaster is only temporary since the time of this

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

¹⁷ Anders Ekström and Kyrre Kverndokk, “Introduction: Culture of Disaster,” *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, Vol. 7, No. 3, October 28, 2015, p. 356.

¹⁸ Holm, *op. cit.*, p. 16, (My emphasis).

hurricane is dated and located. However, this disaster had long-term consequences and was long in the making.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it can be argued that in this case punctuality predominates. In a similar way, *Oakland-Berkeley*, which focuses on the aftermath of the eponymous fire, also puts to the fore the momentary quality of disaster. These occurrences of disasters can be dated and pointed at, and their effects can be numbered and accounted for.

On the other hand, *Petrochemical America* and *Desert Cantos* seem to function differently. *Petrochemical America* was conducted over a span of twelve years which enables to record the effects and impacts of petrochemical industries. No particular event can be singled out, but chemicals dumping and pollution are continuously happening throughout the years and cannot be measured or quantified in an exhaustive way; their impact cannot be encompassed. In each case, these plural disasters gradually unfold through time. Their manifestation gain momentum at times and their actual scope is hard to grasp.

The oscillation between the two tendencies is thus visible in all four series. It also highlights the idea that there is a disaster that can be considered as active, as opposed to a disaster, not necessarily passive, but discrete in its invisibility and in the measure of its widespread realisation. This dual distinction in terms of temporal nature of disaster within Misrach's four series impacts representation and reception further and will be discussed later on.

b. Process and subject intertwined

With these two conceptions of disaster in mind, it could be now engaging to try and observe the relationship between the temporal characters of disaster previously mentioned and Misrach's work. The core of Misrach's creative and photographic process is indeed intimately connected to the varying forms of disaster and can be seen as mirroring, fitting, mimicking its structural and temporal shapes. Furthermore, as we have previously seen, disasters can be defined as unfolding processes so that a comparison of the two might be fruitful.

A first and major common feature is the serial character of both disaster and Misrach's photography. Seriality implies the possibility to consider two different scales which are that of the individual and that of the collective, depending on the chosen perspective. Just as punctual

¹⁹ Holm explains that New Orleans was vulnerable to disaster prior to Hurricane Katrina because of several factors including natural location below sea level, poor man-made management of the levees, and social inequalities. (*Ibid.*)

and permanent disasters, a series of photographs can be examined by focusing on the series as a whole or on particular photographs.

As a matter of fact, this serial structure is built up and created through the effects of time. It is according to this ever-expanding process principle that Misrach has built his major ongoing project *Desert Cantos*, started in 1979. Indeed, it is composed of several series or *cantos*, which depict diverse issues and aspects of the desert and man's relationship with it. What is particular about them is that they are only completed thanks to collection and compilation through time, some series extending in the scope of several years or even decades. Some are still being developed and completed to this day.

In a similar manner, this arborescent progressive form refers to Pound's *Cantos* which are a direct inspiration acknowledged by Misrach:

I came across an essay by the cultural theorist W. J. T. Mitchell comparing the photographic essay and the literary essay. I was also trying to read Pound's epic, fifty-year long poem, *The Cantos*. Pound (as well as Dante in *The Divine Comedy*) used a traditional story-telling structure—essentially chapters called cantos—to build an epic idea. A light bulb went off: for my work, rather than create a series of independent essays, why not use this other literary structure as a means of creating a more complex, comprehensive epic? By linking the different essays, new relationships and ideas were being released. It even allowed for self-reflexive considerations of how the medium's language was shaping the ideas.²⁰

Thus, mixing different literary forms, such as the essay and the epic, and applying them to photography enables Misrach to put forward new representations and new visions of disaster, notably their interconnection and intricacy.

In a similar way, the construction of series as a gradual and slow process can thus be reminiscent of the very method and technique of film photography and connected to Misrach's way of approaching his subjects. For example, in *Desert Cantos*, Misrach usually immersed himself in the desert for days and weeks, repeating the same gestures, the same rituals: "I spent 2-3 weeks at a time in my VW camper, roaming the landscape without an agenda. I stocked my van with an 8x10 in. Deardorff camera, tripod, coolers with film and film-holders [...] and chased the light from dawn to dusk."²¹ Repetition is thus embedded within Misrach's process.

Still, although all his projects are constructed as series, this choice is not a mere presentational device and is in fact the consequence of representational concerns. Serial form is suggestive for the reader of a need to assemble the fragments and to reconstruct an ensemble. Thus, seriality in photography allows for a certain representation that perhaps is closer to the dynamics of disaster. It is a methodical means for Misrach to account for a truer vision of

²⁰ Richard Misrach, in Baptiste Lignel, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

disaster by encompassing its scope of complexity as well as translating the principle of actualisation.

Furthermore, seriality enables Misrach to diversify his approaches depending on the different series:

I decided to employ that strategy in my cantos. Some would function metaphorically (The Fires, The Floods); some were more documentary in nature (The Event, The War); some were theoretically or conceptually driven (Pictures of Paintings, Skies); some were comprised of words and pictures (The Test Site). Connecting different photographic approaches enabled new meaning and drew attention to the photographic language employed. I now had a new form that enabled a rich exploration of my subject and my medium.²²

The different nature of these subseries would then allow for a variety of readings in accordance with the way the beholder views the photographs and links the different series together. Some series can be brought together to create striking contrasts, and a countless number of interpretations can be made depending on the inner associations of individual or serial points of view. Thus, when one stares at Misrach's photographs—especially during an exhibition or through a book—one undergoes the process of navigating through the layers. There is an urge to know more, to explore the photographs, the different series, to assemble the different pieces—to go under the surface.

In that respect, some series which seem quite innocuous at first glance—such as photographs of the sky²³—turn into bitter and darker commentaries when associated with squarely heavy subject matters such as toxic contamination, nuclear testing, or man-caused fires for example. The different series are balanced out as a whole thanks to the inner associations of their varied nature. As Misrach comments on his work: “It does scatter, it does rupture, the way cubist paintings would. Each [series] gives you a different way to approach something and sheds light on everything else [the whole *Desert Cantos*].”²⁴ Consequently, seriality is a means to account for a fragmented yet multifaceted vision of disaster and implies the necessity to assemble in order to make a coherent whole and comprehend the big picture, the general narrative.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²³ Including series such as “Canto XII: The Clouds (Non-Equivalents)” and “Canto XVIII: Skies”.

²⁴ Richard Misrach, in John Paul Caponigro, “Richard Misrach (interview)”, *View Camera*, September-October 1998.

1.2. Photography as past resurfacing

To bring about echoes of the past is an inherent quality to photography as a medium. The prevalence of the “thing that has been there” (*ce qui a été là*)²⁵ is even more striking and confronting when related to capturing occurrences of disaster. This resurfacing phenomenon—that the beholder cannot control—transforms into an imposed confrontation and forces the beholder into acknowledging and accounting for what the photographs show and tell. Misrach’s photographs—disseminated with many representations and forms of disaster—make it hard for the beholder not to consider the subject matter they are facing.

Besides, to interpret photography as past resurfacing also implies an interconnection between past and present, the past disrupting the present. Photography therefore participates in the process of actualisation of disaster since it brings past events to a present audience.

a. Layers of history: embedded disasters

Some photographs are constructed as a *mise en abyme* of disasters. Thus, one photograph can encapsulate several disasters which are presented as layers; the resurfacing past has to come through these different levels. This is especially the case for the series inscribed in a continuous realisation of disasters.

In the series *Petrochemical America*, two photographs allow for a reflection on embedded disasters. *Community Remains, Former Morrisonville Settlement, Dow Chemical Corporation Plaquemine, Louisiana* (Figure 1) addresses petrochemical pollution as well as the heavy racial and segregationist past of Louisiana. It represents what is left of the settlement of an African American community on the foreground—namely housing pads—while in the distance, the silhouette of a chemical corporation comes forth through a thick layer of mist which filters the light, making it look yellowish. These rectangles of cement and dirt seem meaningless and unimportant, nonetheless they are the focal centre and the main subject matter of the photograph. A caption—or rather a minute paragraph—goes with the photograph and testifies Misrach’s will to tell the story of these people forced to be relocated:

In 1932 a rural African-American community, established since 1870 at a riverside settlement called Australia Point, was displaced by the Army Corps of Engineers in order to build the

²⁵ Roland Barthes states that what makes photography distinct from other arts is its inherent quality to bring together past and reality. He names this property the phenomenon of “that-has-been” (*Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography* [1980], New York, Straus and Giroux, 1981, p. 76).

levee, and relocated in Morrisonville. In the 1950s Dow Chemical expanded into the area, and residents began to complain of mysterious odors, headaches, and other health ailments. Eventually, the company installed special radios in homes so the plant could inform people of highway evacuation routes in the event of a spill or accident. By 1989, Dow had decided to buy out most of the residents in the area, dispersing what was left of the original community in order to establish a “green” buffer zone. All the buildings were demolished.²⁶

The way the title is constructed also corroborates this movement from past to present, this movement out, with the words “remains” and “former” directly coupled with the name of the corporation. From the start, Dow Chemical is presented as having overcome the settlements. Thus, the text is complementary to the photograph and confirms what the beholder can already sense while simply looking at the photograph. Their successive dislocations have been erased and materialised by a layer of sediment, reduced to disappear with time, swallowed by the industrial sprawl.

When Misrach intentionally associates this caption to the photograph, he might intend to use the function of photography in its acceptance of showing the width and the realness of a phenomenon. It becomes tangible and concrete through the effect of “bearing witness” provided by photography. In other words, although photography is a construct and results from the photographer’s own choices and technical parameters, there is an inherent mechanism that makes the beholder more likely to believe that what they see has some part of truth in it. Photography and reality have peculiar bonds and Misrach’s strategy to inscribe his *Petrochemical America* photographs in historical and scientific grounds²⁷ not only accounts for the disasters represented but brings their issue to an audience.

Through this superimposition of disasters, *Community Remains* underlines the interconnection and interdependence of these disasters. There is indeed a cause-effect relationship, the oppression of minorities being more likely to invite an overwriting and an addition of disasters or damaging circumstances. As a matter of fact, another complementary example is visible in *Home and Grain Elevator Destrehan, Louisiana* (Figure 2) which displays the striking visual impact of the overpowering industries compared to individuals and poor communities living in the area. At first sight, the house can even be tricky to identify since it is almost absorbed and swallowed by the monumentality of the grain elevator and melts into it in terms of colour-scale. Power relationships are clearly visible in the composition and structure of

²⁶ Richard Misrach and Kate Orff, *Petrochemical America*, New York, Aperture, 2014, p. 71.

²⁷ *Petrochemical America* is a collaboration with landscape architect Kate Orff which confronts Misrach’s photographs with scientific information such as graphs, data, maps about the different types of pollution contained in the photographed zones, the number of impacted inhabitants, the interrelatedness of these phenomena, etc.

the photographs, and the perspective of time passing in these landscapes can only indicate a further obliteration of these former places of life.

Desert Cantos also includes cases of embedded disasters. The subseries “Canto III: The Flood” was shot around Salton Sea, California. Also called “the Accidental Sea”, Salton Sea is the result of ill-managed irrigation of the Colorado River which flooded an ancient dried out lake from 1905 to 1907. This man-made sea in the middle of the Coachella Valley was then promoted as “a miracle in the desert”²⁸ and several resorts were constructed around the lake. Still, successive floods and fluctuations of the sea level caused the resorts to gradually be abandoned. Today, the water is highly polluted from the agricultural pesticides used in the soils nearby, and since the sea is gradually drying out, some toxic dust storms occur more and more frequently.

The photograph *Submerged Snack Bar, Salton Sea* (Figure 3) illustrates this superimposition of disasters. The sea—being man-made in the first place—provoked the creation of resorts and facilities that are completely unnatural and should otherwise never have been located there—namely in the middle of the desert—such as the snack bar visible in the distance. Successive uncontrolled floods in the 1970s made the area useless. Thus, tourism which was not supposed to take up so much space was reduced to abandoned and gloomy man-built structures left to decay. In the photograph, the man-made elements stand out and visually disrupt the calm and quietness of the water reflecting the peaceful hues from the sky. Once deprived from its context and history, the photograph seems eerie, with symmetrical elements equally floating in the air and on the water, which have become one large gradient. It is the story of the place which enables the beholder to understand the order of appearance of the different elements; sea, man-made tourist complex, sea rising.

In regard to these two photographs, *Community Remains* and *Submerged Snack Bar*, the way temporality is represented and perceived from a formal perspective can be examined. Despite the fact that no real hierarchy can be made between the layers represented (is pollution more serious and critical than racism or forced relocation?), there is a movement according to which the first disaster is silenced by the second. There is a physical and visual process of engulfing and concealment, one disaster gradually being erased by the next. These remarks hint at the analysis of what is left, the remnants, the traces which will be developed later on during this dissertation.

²⁸ Salton Sea was labelled as such in an advertising film from the 1950s named *The Salton Sea Riviera: A Miracle in the desert*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ByCJpqusGU>, Accessed February 2, 2021.

2. Peripheral time

When considering temporality, questions about Misrach's location within the unfolding of disaster can be raised. It directly implies his point of view and the distance he chooses to install between the moment of disaster and his camera. Although Richard Misrach is close to and feels at one with disaster in terms of process, it is striking to see that in terms of the chronology of disaster, he positions himself in the periphery of disaster, that is to say he always distances himself from the eye of the storm and usually lays before or after disaster. This uncertainty and in-betweenness characterises his approach.

2.1. Disaster and delay

In order to identify more precisely how Misrach chooses to place himself in relation to the unfolding of disaster, it is once more relevant to dissociate the series according to the *disaster* and *disasters* paradigm.

a. *Post- (and pre-) disaster landscapes*

When it comes to punctual disasters—that is to say for *Destroy this Memory* and the *Oakland-Berkeley Fire*—Misrach never inscribes his photographs within the realisation, the climax, the very moment of disaster. Rather, he comes on the scene of disaster after they have occurred, and focuses on the aftermath, the impact, everything that is purely *post*-disaster. This temporal discrepancy necessarily provokes differences if compared to photographs which were taken closer to the disaster or even during the disaster. The very tension of the disaster has decreased, a sort of disturbed and sick calmness has come back, it is time to look for what happened and to make sense of what just unfolded.

For the Oakland-Berkeley Fire, Misrach, who lived nearby in Emeryville, decided to photograph the hills a few days after the fire ended. Such a major firestorm was widely covered by the press, and photographs from its epicentre are available to draw comparisons to those taken by Misrach. Two photographs by Karl Mondon for the *East Bay Times*²⁹ will thus be considered.

²⁹ The *East Bay Times* is a local newspaper based in Walnut Creek, California, that is 16 miles from Oakland. It was formerly known as the *Contra Costa Times* and founded in 1947.

The first photograph (Figure 4) depicts two men in their backyard trying to stop the fire from spreading to their house. Their presence in the frame allows the beholder to identify and connect with them. Consequently, the viewer is appealed and feels engaged with the subject of the photograph—it enables the viewer to wonder what they would do in such a situation. In addition, the photograph was taken in the midst of a movement which renders the men blurry and underlines the spontaneity and instantaneity of the photograph. It is profoundly dramatic considering their behaviour and gesture seem hopeless and vain. Likewise, this photograph displays the nightmare of the scene. The peculiar light, which looks almost artificial—probably a mix between the burning light from the flames and the colder glow of the sun coming through the smoke—adds up to the surreal character of the scene.

A similar effect goes with the second photograph (Figure 5) which displays a wall of fire taking up the house and two men running away with a dog. The dominant element here is the fire which fills up the space of the photograph and seals any possible escape for the eye. In these photographs captured during the disaster, a sense of urgency dominates. They are highly concentrated and packed with time, full of immediacy and imminent threat that build up a dynamic tension encapsulated in the photographs. Furthermore, there is almost a sense of voyeurism as we might feel that the photographer should not be there and should not be able to take the time to even shoot the picture, and by extension we should not be offered an insight on the event.

Hence, these photographs are mainly focusing on newsworthy information and emotions, putting to the fore the impactful character of the disaster by showing the inhabitants trying to tame the flames, fighting against the elements. These images show the width and extent of the fire and might denote an intent to demonstrate the magnitude of the disaster on the part of the photographer.

A comparison can thus be drawn in relation to Misrach's photographs of the firestorm. Surprisingly enough, Misrach's photographs (Figures 6 and 7) look almost serene, despite the subject matter and the implications of such post-disaster photographs. They enclose motionless scenes. There is something quiet, not necessarily scary, but disturbing about them. Their composition is balanced, and the colour-scale is made of different shades from the same hue which create a soft yet disquieting aura to the photographs. Instead of displaying the immediacy of disaster, Misrach shows disaster's lasting effects in time. The time of action has passed, and we are left facing ruins to meditate upon.

The discrepancy between these two moments of disaster could also lay in and be emphasised by the type of camera used. Misrach photographed with an 8x10 inch camera

which implies a slow and reasoned process. He exactly chose where to put his camera while needing time to install it and decide how to set it beforehand. In contrast, Karl Mondon might have used a lightweight camera allowing him to rapidly move and shoot not risking being stuck within the fire, which undeniably forced him into taking lively, dynamic, and raw pictures. Accordingly, this temporal placement resulting in a chronological difference transpires into the different sets of photographs and impacts disaster's representation. Although radically contrasted, both visions convey the strength of disaster through different means.

Another major feature linked to Misrach's position in the temporality of disaster is that most of the time, the photographs are deprived from human beings, which tend to blur the perception of time in the photographs. It becomes impossible to guess if they were taken three days or ten years after the disaster. Hence, Misrach is mainly rooted in the *aftermath* of disaster. Nonetheless, Misrach's photography is not always turning to the past. On the contrary, many of his photographs contain, in a subtler degree, a sense of futurity. Furthermore, we could argue that these landscapes can be seen, not as post-traumatic but as pre-traumatic landscapes, showing the result of man's alteration and changes on the land but simultaneously carrying signs of an atmosphere that is likely to foreshadow possible additional or ongoing disasters.

b. A time of delay

Richard Misrach's photography is also inscribed in the time preceding disaster. It foreshadows and warns the disaster to come. This is particularly relevant when we consider continuous disasters, here, *Petrochemical America* and *Desert Cantos* as a whole.

By pointing at a sense of futurity, Misrach's work can be related to the notion of delay which was introduced by philosopher Günther Anders in *Le temps de la fin*.³⁰ According to Anders, the time we are living in has been so profoundly impacted by nuclear weapons and its implications—the possible annihilation of humanity as a whole—that we are not living in an era or an age anymore but in a delay.

This idea of an end bound to occur inevitably resonates with the greater theme of the apocalypse. Nevertheless, Misrach's representations of disaster as well as Anders' delay are far away from a Christian apocalypse and could rather testify the shift to a secularised apocalypse. Thus, this vision is similar to Jean-Luc Nancy's "equivalence of catastrophes" which is

³⁰ Günther Anders, *Le temps de la fin*, Paris, L'Herne, 2007, p. 110. (This essay was originally published in 1960 and titled *Le Délai*).

characteristic of the state of a civilisation living under the threat of an apocalypse which opens up on nothing and hold no promises, no new beginning.³¹

Misrach's depiction of disaster hence turns to the trivial and to the raw. In his introduction to Misrach's first *Desert Cantos* publication, English critic Reyner Banham distinguishes Misrach's photography from idealised representations of the desert:

The desert that Richard Misrach presents here is the other desert. Not the pure unsullied wilderness 'where God is and Man is not,' the desert of Christian purification and American longing, but the real desert that we mortals can actually visit—stained and trampled, franchised and fenced, burned, flooded, grazed, mined, exploited and laid waste. It is the desert that is truly ours, for we have made it so and must live with the consequences.³²

Banham evokes *Desert Cantos*, but this vision corresponds to Misrach's photography as a whole. As far as subject matters are concerned, Misrach presents a disillusioned, defeated and desacralised version of the American land, overwhelmed by man-caused corrosion and at times on the verge of destruction.

Anders' delay can be grasped in Misrach's photography in that it sometimes indirectly addresses disaster. This anticipation and expectation can orientate the reading of the photographs as a signal to be looked for, a sort of prophecy for this banal, secularised, casual end. Thus, disaster is not always frontally depicted and can be metaphorically embodied by elements of the photographs such as oppressive threatening clouds. A *sense of* disaster lays in the atmosphere of some photographs. That is for example the case in photographs such as *Lake Mead #1, Nevada* (Figure 8) which gives the impression that the scene is too still—with a balanced and symmetrical composition—too quiet and loaded with heavy skies contrasting with the almost golden hues of the earth.

Besides, Anders' delay might above all infer to the notion of wait and to what is inescapable, inevitable and cannot be avoided, only delayed. This concept sparks a reflection on where the tipping point really lays. It even goes as far as implying that any of Misrach's photograph, even those that look the most harmless, can at some point become the backdrop of a disaster. This vision of Misrach's work through possibility simultaneously invokes the contingency of doubt—is every scene a prospective background for disaster? Accordingly, the notion of delay introduces an intriguing paradox which is that of the inescapable and the uncertain.

³¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Équivalence des catastrophes (Après Fukushima)*, Galilée, 2012.

³² Reyner Banham in the introduction to Misrach's first volume of *Desert Cantos*, Albuquerque, The University of New Mexico Press, 1987, p. 1.

2.2. Uncertainty and disaster

As we have previously seen, disaster can be perceived as something that is bound to happen but that cannot be predicted. It is rather visible, translated, and expressed through the forms of accumulation, weight, and tension. Disaster can be compared to something that is always present but concealed, in the background, seemingly peaceful and quiet but growing and evolving.

a. *The anticipated moment*

Another aspect of Misrach's artistic process stands aside from conventional practice. Indeed, he tends to spend a lot of time chasing and taming his subject. Misrach has called this method the "anticipated moment."³³ He describes it as follows: "You see some possibility, so you set up. I've sat for four or five hours waiting for something that never happened."³⁴

As Anne Wilkes Tucker suggested in her introduction to *Crimes and Splendors*,³⁵ the anticipated moment can easily be compared to and contrasted with Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment."³⁶ Cartier-Bresson's method lays at the junction of chance and mastering the camera. Many of his photographs were taken at the precise moment someone entered a minutely composed frame and he pressed the shutter the very second all the components seamlessly merged. Cartier-Bresson describes the decisive moment as such: "Photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organisation of forms which give that event its proper expression."³⁷ This outlook on photography suggests the phenomenon of serendipity—something captured at random and thanks to chance—plays an important role in the process. Nevertheless, this "accident" has to be looked for and provoked; it is not only about luck and being at the right place at the right time. In order to create a compelling photograph mastering and control have to be provided.

In a similar manner, Misrach's anticipated moment is paradoxical because it results in the junction of prediction—Misrach sets the camera where he sees potential—and unhappening—he does not wait for something to unfold, but rather for colours and lights to

³³ Richard Misrach, in Dan Ferrara, "Landscape of Consequence," *Outside*, December 1989, p. 86.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Anne Wilkes Tucker in *Crimes and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach*, New York, Bulfinch Press Book and Little Brown and Company, 1996, p. 21.

³⁶ The phrase "decisive moment" is originally attributed to Jean François Paul de Gondi, also known as Cardinal de Retz, and comes from his *Memoirs* (1655): "il n'y a rien en ce monde qui n'ait un instant décisif".

³⁷ Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* [1952], translated by Richard L. Simon, Steidl, 2014, pp. 1-14.

shift. Furthermore, serendipity is also a key ingredient since photographing in such a vast place as the desert may imply that random findings are often determining the subject to capture.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on this principle is clearly put on the idea of anticipation and wait. In this way, Misrach undertakes an approach to photography which is very much philosophical and meditative. His photography becomes infused with time. His approach almost resembles a pursuit; while storm chasers stride large tracts of territories, Misrach turns into a disaster seeker, “chas[ing] the light from dawn to dusk.”³⁸

At some point we can wonder if the anticipated moment is solely relevant when applied to Misrach’s creative process or if it actually adds and translates to his photography. Since it is intrinsically associated to his desert roaming, it mostly applies to *Desert Cantos*. A series, or rather a declination of the same place embodies best this anticipated moment: photographs of the San Jacinto Mountains in Southern California, taken in 1985 (Figure 10). Misrach shot them several times under short laps of time and different conditions. The result creates images of a great diversity. Depending on the meteorological conditions, a certain mood, a certain taste is produced and supplemented to the scene. Thus, the photographs range from deep sandy thunderous tones to the impression of a foil made from dust and heat, displaying the beauty, the roughness and the dangers of the desert, and presenting the mountains sometimes as a reassuring figure, sometimes as a scrutinising and threatening presence.

b. Nuclear uncanny

Another perspective on this idea of anticipation stands closer to societal and psychological observations. The apprehension and temporal foreshadowing are not only noticeable from reading and interpreting the photographs, but the photographs themselves vehicle and echo actual fears and anxieties.

This phenomenon which is inherent to Misrach’s photography can be expressed through the principle of “nuclear uncanny.” What Paul K. Saint-Amour calls the “nuclear uncanny” is the experience of traumatic anxiety which is produced by the anticipation of a future (nuclear) disaster. In his essay, he puts to the fore the *bukimi*³⁹ or uncanny feeling experienced by Japanese citizens before the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

³⁸ Richard Misrach, in Baptiste Lignel, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

³⁹ *Bukimi* is a Japanese term meaning “weird, ghastly, or unearthly, which is used to describe Hiroshima’s uneasy combination of continued good fortune and expectation of catastrophe” according to Robert J. Lifton, in *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 1967.

In the period of eerie suspension before the explosion, those who registered the nuclear uncanny in Hiroshima were also the first to experience a condition that, in a far more explicit incarnation, would become familiar to everyone living in a targeted city during the Cold War: the sense that the present survival and flourishing of the city were simultaneously underwritten and radically threatened by its identity as a nuclear target. [...] My claim, however, is not that the inhabitants of Cold War cities exhibited post-traumatic symptoms akin to those of the atomic bomb survivors, or *hibakusha*, but that they became accustomed to a more overt and permanent variant of the uncanny *frisson* felt in Hiroshima before the bombing, as a structuring condition of everyday life. In other words, what I have called the conditional space of catastrophe that gave rise to feelings of *bukimi* in Hiroshima became a general characteristic of Cold War urban experience.⁴⁰

Therefore, there are parallels between a known traumatic nuclear past event—the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and the threat of unsure nuclear events during the Cold War looming over populations, including American communities. This imprint within the population was namely visible through popular culture and artistic and literary productions. Namely, nuclear fear was central to the universe brought about by Richard Matheson whose influence on the film industry was considerable. At the time of Richard Misrach’s debut photography, numerous nuclear-threat films were produced, such as *The Day After*, directed by Nicholas Mayer and aired in 1983, which had a great impact upon the viewers and crystallised a common-shared fear of the time. This collective imaginary around nuclear disasters is fed by Misrach’s photographs as well.

In relation to Misrach’s photography, these representations linked to fear and anxiety can be enlarged. Misrach points at the fact that disaster, including the nuclear and war, are closer to what it seems, pervading daily life. The concept of nuclear uncanny particularly resonates with the exposure of series revealing illegal testing by the army. That is the case in *Desert Cantos* with the series “Canto IX: The Secret Project (Project W-47).” In the printed photobook, Misrach introduces the series replacing the photographs in their context, which he seldom does in *Desert Cantos*:

The final stages of the development of the atomic bomb were conducted in a remote, sparsely populated region of western Utah (Wendover Air Base, May-July 1945). It was there that previously researched and designed bomb components were modified, assembled, and flight-tested for the Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombings. The details of W-47 remain classified, and most military and government officials deny the project’s existence.⁴¹

These photographs bring to our sight a damaged and contaminated land which is intimately linked to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

⁴⁰ Paul K. Saint-Amour, “Bombing and The Symptom, Traumatic Earliness and The Nuclear Uncanny”, *Diacritics*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2000, p. 69.

⁴¹ Richard Misrach, *Crimes and Splendors*, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

The photograph *Atomic Bomb Loading Pit #2, Wendover Air Base, Utah*, (Figure 11) displays a landscape transformed by man in a rather subtle and discrete way. The pool-shaped hole in the ground attracts the eye, yet overall, there is a colour continuity between the natural tones of the sand and the ground on the foreground which has clearly been sorted by man as the relief darker lines indicate. This sterile and lifeless environment bears the genesis of the atomic bomb. The composition and proportion between the elements echo the insidious and silenced management of the W-47 project by American authorities. In *Ammunition Storage Bunkers, Wendover Air Base, Utah*, (Figure 12) another instance of these repetitions is symptomatic of the psychological anticipation linked to the nuclear uncanny. The storage bunkers are becoming the spectrum or the distorted doppelgänger of the mountains in the distance. They are hidden, softened into the landscape.

The Wendover Air Base place literally served as a preparatory ground for the A-bomb and can thus be perceived as its replica or spectrum. It is itself an anticipation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, announcing the tragedy while being revealed with a delay, completing a complex timeline embodied by the photographs.

3. Distance

As said in the introduction, one of the distinctive qualities of disaster is that it is media-borne. Conventional media coverage of disaster is linked to immediacy, the event often being the headline of newspapers or being broadcasted continually on news television channels.⁴² No to little temporal filter is applied to the information which is transmitted in all its roughness and rawness. Furthermore, disasters are often framed in a discourse loaded with emotion and spectacle. Mervi Pantti notes that “through ritual performances that include dramatic symbolism and tense emotions, the news media typically dramatizes the event as something that speaks about core moral and social values of the society. At the same time, such dramatization presents the media as the leading actor of the events themselves.”⁴³ The role of the media in shaping our perception of disaster is put to the fore.

When the said disaster is captured thanks to another medium like fine-art photography, the time of its delivery to the world is delayed. The photographic medium⁴⁴ shifts disasters into another temporality and implements distance from the very moment of disaster. Misrach’s photography is inscribed in a different frame and proposes new discourse and narratives. Misrach becomes the mediator between disasters and receptors. The distance becomes twofold, implying matters of reception and genre.

a. Temporal distance and reception

The correlation between distance and reception is mostly associated with the series *1991: The Oakland-Berkeley Fire Aftermath* and *Destroy this Memory*. They can be singled out from the rest of Misrach’s work since they were both published with a significant and conscious delay establishing distance between the unveiling of both the book and exhibition and the time of the actual disaster. For these series, Misrach decided to put the photographs away for a while before going through them again and thinking about releasing some. This choice is directly linked to the nature of these disasters which were pivotal—in the history of the United States for

⁴² Nowadays, social media’s instantaneity accelerates even further this phenomenon of proximity with disaster. Yet, it won’t be taken into account here since these media were not developed during the time period when most of Misrach’s work under scrutiny in this dissertation was produced and published.

⁴³ Mervi Pantti, “Disaster News and Public Emotions”, in Katrin Döveling, Christian von Scheve, Elly A. Konijn (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media*, Routledge, London, 2011, p. 224.

⁴⁴ Here, we consider only film photography as used by Misrach until the 2010s which implies times of process and print. Naturally, digital photography—just like social media—allows for much quicker response and proximity with the time of disaster.

Hurricane Katrina, and at the scale of a community for the Oakland-Berkeley Fire. *Destroy this Memory* was published five years after Hurricane Katrina and the approach was pushed even further with *1991: The Oakland-Berkeley Fire Aftermath* with a twenty-year gap.

By doing so, Misrach presents a mediated experience of disaster which is imprinted with time, which has been reframed. He builds a second-hand experience of disaster through photography as a medium, which is delayed one step further by the passing of time. Besides, this issue implies a multiplication of the types of distance. There is then, as we mentioned, the distance between publication and event, as well as the distance for the first-hand victims of the disaster. Besides, the distance regarding Misrach himself can come to mind: did he need time to process the event? Was this delay produced out of respect? Was the emotional distance necessary to him? These different perspectives on distance raise questions. What does this temporal gap imply in terms of reception and effects on the beholder? Does time have an influence on the manner a photographic series is received by an audience?

When it comes to reception, a variety of analyses could be developed according to different points of view on relationships between disasters and beholders. Indeed, receptors who have a first-hand experience of the photographed disaster re-live or re-discover it through the mediation of photography, whereas those with a second-hand experience of disaster are only confronted to the said disaster through the photographs. There could also be another layer in reception if we consider people who first experienced the disaster through media coverage such as live television news and then access a remediation of the disaster through Misrach's photography.

Installing distance when tackling disaster conveys complex implications depending on the cases and projects. Overall, it could enable space for mourning and showing respect, considering Misrach's photographs are presented as more neutral, not surrounded by discourse, and suitable for recollection and meditation. Here, a reasonable approach would be to focus on a general perspective without entering in intricate details that would perhaps lean towards research fields which are not at the core of the present dissertation. Furthermore, the information related to these distinct categories of receptors is to this day unavailable. The following investigation will not focus on *Destroy This Memory* because Hurricane Katrina's photographic representation and its relation to media coverage have already been extensively discussed while Misrach proposes something more personal and less redundant with the Oakland-Berkeley Fire.

b. 1991: *The Oakland-Berkeley Fire Aftermath*

On the 19th and 20th of October 1991, a bush fire ignited on the hillsides of Oakland and Berkeley in California. It ended up killing 25 people, injuring 150 others, and destroying about 3,500 homes and 1,520 acres of land. Misrach felt personally close to this specific disaster since he owned two studios in Emeryville as well as a property in the Oakland-Berkeley hills. Furthermore, his photographic studio was assaulted by flames twice causing the loss of a great number of his negatives.⁴⁵ Thus, the event resonated in him in a peculiar and intimate way so that he felt compelled to go and document the aftermath. To begin with, he created a first form of distance between the disaster and the time the photographs were taken when he decided to wait for two weeks before going on the hills with his camera. While the memories of the event and the shock of hundreds of burned houses was still vivid, the fire and smoke had disappeared, and the place had been deserted. Thus, from the very moment he chose to photograph, the hellish images packed with flames and smoke—such as those previously mentioned by Karl Mondon (Figures 4 and 5)—had already vanished. A second layer of distance came from the very subject of the photographs. During the gallery talk for the opening of the exhibition, Misrach pointed at the television news which were “overwhelmed with spectacle” so he started “feeling reluctant” about putting out the work and feeding this information overflow.⁴⁶

This project can be set apart from the rest of Misrach’s work as being the most intimate. Several elements corroborate this small-scale dimension. Indeed, while the fire covered a rather concentrated and local population, its joined photobook publication is also the smallest print run with one thousand printed books. Hence, this series of photographs is turned foremost towards the inside of the community. In addition, the photographs were revealed during a double and simultaneous exhibition. Two museums from the affected area hosted the photographic series at the same time: the Oakland Museum of California and the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.⁴⁷ To keep up with his initial intentions, Misrach also chose to donate the photographs to the museums and all benefits to local non-profit organisations. Therefore, the whole process gravitates around the scale of the community.

In order to be meaningful, the relationship to community also calls for an interplay with the individual. Hence, Misrach photographed elements that pertain to victims of the fire such

⁴⁵ In 1982, a fire destroys circa 3,000 8x10-inch negatives and 1,000 2¹/₄-inch negatives of Misrach’s photographs from a lab in Oakland, California.

⁴⁶ Richard Misrach, “Richard Misrach: Gallery Talk”, *You Tube*, uploaded by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, November 15, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=zl4H4YE2X-s, (10’40-10’44), Accessed March 13, 2020.

⁴⁷ The double exhibition took place from October 2011 to February 2012.

as personal belongings or remnants of homes that can be singularised and whose owners could be identified for example. That is the case in photographs such as *Oakland Fire #104-91 (Swimming Pool)* (Figure 7) which depicts an abandoned pool, a paradoxical symbol of stillness and peacefulness among the environing chaos. *Oakland Fire #98-91 (Mailbox, Alpine Terrace)* (Figure 9) exemplifies the narrative dimension of the series which enables for the creation or recollection of individual stories. Their narrative aspect makes us wonder about the life of the people who lived there in what feels like a far away and long-gone time. Others have an even more intimate dimension and functions as testimonies since they directly relate to individual victims of the fire such as *Oakland Fire #107-91 (Melted Tricycle)* (Figure 31). Thus, as the curator of the exhibition Lucinda Barnes put it, “these are extraordinary works to spend time with.”⁴⁸ The photographs call for remembrance and introspection; they are meant to be digested slowly.

Although personal emotional implication on the part of Misrach is visible, he decided to erase his voice and did not impose a discourse around the photographs. Misrach’s withdrawal leaves space for mourning, recollection, and meditation. The efficiency and relevance of the choice of distance has been noted among the visitors. New York Times journalist Tracey Taylor reports that Mr. Karplus—who was a first-hand victim of the fire—was at first “disappointed by the photographs: “Where are the flames, the sounds, the smoke?” he said. But, on reflection, he said he appreciated the quiet, contemplative nature of the images.”⁴⁹

Overall, the double exhibition, reinforced by the inauguration gallery talk with the presence of Misrach becomes an apparatus for community resilience in the face of disaster. Hence, Misrach planned time to converse with the visitors, whether they be victims of the firestorm or not. The exhibition also hosted a book handmade by Misrach to collect comments and memories from the survivors in the manner of a eulogy. What could have been a conventional art show then turned into a tool for catharsis.

c. A few words on temporal distance and genre

Similarly, matters of temporal distance can also influence the genre which Misrach’s photography falls into. Once more, such a parameter creates a discrepancy between journalism photography and fine-art photography which has been processed through time. Hence, Misrach considers that this hiatus operates a shift in the very meaning of the photographs:

⁴⁸ Lucinda Barnes (chief curator of the exhibition), “Richard Misrach: Gallery Talk”, *op. cit.*, (6’28).

⁴⁹ Tracey Taylor, “20 Years After Fire, Revelation and Tribute”, *The New York Times*, October 21, 2011.

My belief is that when there's a photograph of the daily news on the newspapers we look at it and it's tossed away and only by formalizing that beauty, almost in the way that history paintings worked, it iconizes a moment. It actually helps a moment transcend so that it is not any longer just about the tragedy or disaster or the problem in front of us, but something about our historical moment that needs to be preserved. [Historically, paintings] ma[de] a special way of retaining that history that lasts and that people want to go back and review and think about and contemplate.⁵⁰

This temporal delay supersedes the newsworthy quality originally associated with disaster and brings it into the realm of what we could name historical photography. It becomes a means to reflect upon the past while simultaneously addressing posteriority. Thus, Misrach attempts to make photographs “so visual that thirty, forty years from now people look back and it would represent this historical moment.”⁵¹ In a similar vein, Misrach also likes to compare this phenomenon of genre transformation within his photography to pictures like the Civil War photographs of Mathew Brady which imprinted specific images on the American collective imaginary.

Paradoxically, the will to raise the photographs into the realm of the iconic could in fact be criticised as taking the concept of distance too far. We could question this shift in genre as contributing to putting Misrach's photography on a pedestal, deprived of its straightforwardness and simplicity, thus remote from the beholders and unattainable. Actually, the issue related to where to place Misrach in terms of genre is to be developed as an ongoing questioning throughout this dissertation which will be reexamined in light of further remarks.

⁵⁰ Richard Misrach, “Richard Misrach: Gallery Talk”, *op. cit.*, (38'00-38'52).

⁵¹ Richard Misrach, “Richard Misrach — Interview 2016”, *YouTube*, uploaded by Paris Photo, (1'52-2'00) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkDErNp4Tic>, Accessed March 15, 2020.

**II – SPATIALITY OF DISASTER:
IMPRINTS ON THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE**

4. Traces

As seen previously temporality inevitably takes back to the past and infers to what remains, what is left. Disaster's imprints on the landscape can indeed be perceived as a result of time. Still, it seemed more relevant to explore the notion of traces in relation to spatiality. This choice makes it possible to consider traces in a broad way by referring to what is physically visible on a photograph, what is physically imprinted on a landscape. As a matter of fact, many subject matters in Misrach's work happen to be or can be related to traces. Still, they are not the only reading that can be made of these photographs and are in fact often substitutable with deeper illustrative or metaphorical messages.

Two main angles will be tackled hereafter. Some disasters feature signs of destruction or annihilation, something that has been damaged or destroyed. They can be seen as subtracted matter, a way of indicating something has been erased, taken away, captured away. Another way of perceiving traces in relation to disaster could be to consider objects left there, something misplaced, disrupting which can be read as a sign or a clue, that we are to make sense of and decipher.

4.1. Capturing absence (subtracted matter)

a. Ghostly presence

Traces can be physically produced by subtraction of matter on the landscape, that is to say by actions that result in varied degrees of damage and destruction. Violence physically imposed on landscape testifies of the passage of man on ephemeral or lasting bases.

In *Encrusted Tracks, Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah* (Figure 13) a seemingly benign and ephemeral movement of man has altered and substantially marked the landscape of the Salt Flats. This photograph illustrates a form of struggle between man and nature. The tracks are starting to be covered up by the salt which comes back as a resilient layer of sediment. Their

structure is still visible and has disrupted the ground on a short-term but cyclical scale.⁵² Actually, the Bonneville Salt Flats have been the backdrop of yearly motorcar racing contests since 1914. In addition, the site has been continually mined for more than a century. The extraction of salt and potash combined with repeated races has damaged the place in the long term and on a large scale, the layer of salt becoming thinner every year. Thus, something that may appear inconsequential on a photograph can in fact encapsulate and combine signs of greater mechanisms.

A similar phenomenon is visible in *Wind Mill Farm, San Geronio Pass* (Figure 14). Here, apart from the presence of the material structures, the effects of man seem negligible. The different shadows of the dragging paths and their structure are reminiscent of that of the mountains in the background. The main disparity is that the curves and cavities on the foreground have not been produced by geological long-term shifts. Man modelling the soil and modifying land structures make this landscape look rather fragmented and disjointed, that is to say unnatural, inorganic. In other words, man's shaping of land conflicts with slow natural processes. It testifies of the acceleration of geological time by man through providing visions of the Anthropocene.

Another variation can be seen in *View of Craters from Lone Rock (Looking South)* (Figure 15) which presents an example of subtracted traces produced by the military. These open wounds can be seen as a negation of mountains, the actual opposite of a natural formation. On top of this, the land has been deprived of its original geological structure and cannot be safely walked on. Misrach recalls "there was not an acre of land that was not riddled with crater upon crater, shrapnel, and bombs (practice and live)."⁵³ He adds this landscape was "the most graphically ravaged environment [he] had ever seen."⁵⁴

Overall, traces from tourism, leisure, industry or the military resemble scars that spoil the desert and mark it with unnatural lines vanishing in the distance which scatter the soil and carve ditches on the naked desert. The mark of man is drawn as if to signify land solely as his property. In any case, these traces bring the beholder to focus on and analyse what is absent. Two photographs epitomise this phenomenon. In both *View of Craters from Lone Rock* (Figure 15) and *Community Remains* (Figure 1), the men who caused these disasters are not the only ones vanished from the photograph. The victims of these phenomena are also erased.

⁵² The crust of salt is renewed every year as precipitations accumulate in the winter and evaporate in the summer leaving a coat of salt. However, because of the racing activities, the layer of salt gets thinner and thinner every year.

⁵³ Richard Misrach, *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West*, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press, 1990, Preface p. xiii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

As Matthieu Duperrex points out: “L’absence objective des habitants dans les compositions de Misrach n’est pas un manquement [...] au contraire, elle est au service de la présentation des refoulés du territoire.”⁵⁵ Indeed as we have previously seen, *Community Remains* pictures remnants of African American communities in Louisiana which were forced to be relocated for the sake of corporations. A similar process goes with the areas of Bravo 20 and Lone Rock which are public lands and were taken up by the military. Furthermore, the site stands on traditional and sacred land to the Northern Paiute Native Americans.

Since these physical blanks make the beholder look for and reflect upon their cause, i.e., exposing man, the photographs can point at a sense of common responsibility on feeding and maintaining disasters. To go even further, we could say the motif of traces within Misrach’s photographic work call for an active and dynamic participation of the beholder in engaging with the photographs and looking for the origin of the trace. Based on the formal qualities of his photographs and on the actual photographed subjects—that is without taking into account the remediating projects he built up around *Petrochemical America* and Bravo 20—it can be said Misrach proposes an indirect path to political analyses of his photographs which can come from the beholders scrutinising what they face. Misrach in fact proposes a form of distillation of semiological principles. In other words, he compels the beholder into a semiological reflection by systematically looking for the origin of the traces, for the subtracted matter.

Thanks to these precepts, we can tackle a debate that regularly occurs when discussing Misrach’s photography, that is to determine if Misrach’s photography is intrinsically meaningful and political or if it needs to be supplemented with context and peritexts such as captions and essays in order to do so. Indeed, it is often thought that Misrach’s photography is dependent upon explanation and enviroing documents to be comprehended and to deliver meaning. If it is true that Misrach adds textual elements and “frames his photographs in order to achieve maximum political impact,”⁵⁶ photographs standing on their own do vehicle significance.⁵⁷ There is something in Misrach’s

⁵⁵ Matthieu Duperrex, « « Cancer Alley » ou la décompression du paysage pétrochimique. La collaboration de Richard Misrach et Kate Orff », *Les Cahiers de la recherche architecturale, urbaine et paysagère*, 5/2019, p. 8. <https://doi.org/10.4000/craup.2106>, Accessed February 25, 2020.

⁵⁶ Conohar Scott, *The Photographer as Environmental Activist: Politics, Ethics & Beauty in the Struggle for Environmental Remediation*, Doctoral Dissertation in Philosophy, supervised by Jane Tormey and Johanna Hällsten, Loughborough, Loughborough University, 2014, p. 91.

⁵⁷ We will examine later on how added scientific and contextual information contributes to rooting Misrach’s photography within greater issues.

photography that works without the back support of text. It might result in this semiological urge imposed upon the beholder by the apparent formal simplicity of the photograph.

b. Beyond the frame

Disaster in relation to traces and absence can also infer to what is outside the frame, what expands from the frame, what is unsaid, what has been prevented from entering the photographic space. Thus, traces are not only negative holes of matter in the landscape but can be seen as delineating a space. This idea is recurrently expressed in varied manners within Misrach's work. The repetition of the motif of limits hence structures his photography. Several examples display a literal material embodiment of limits and boundaries such as actual barriers, cones, fencing, grids, walls. Nonetheless, the scope of the limits captured in Misrach's photography goes beyond an inner frame and is more than a compositional device. Furthermore, according to pioneer of landscape studies John Brinckerhoff Jackson, boundaries are key to structuring space since they can be considered as the "most basic political element in any landscape,"⁵⁸ suggesting there is more to retrieve from the motif of limits.

The core utility of the boundary is to delineate, separate, attribute functions and meanings to different spaces. Misrach's photographs present ironic depictions of these limits where the physical frames imposed on the landscape are deprived from their rational purpose. The following photographs demonstrate the range of functions attributed to limiting devices that are challenged by Misrach and ultimately hint at different forms of disaster.

In *Outdoor Dining, Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah* (Figure 16), a series of safety cones are used to draw a space for a dining area in the middle of the desert. These delineating devices separate what is inside and outside the diner and create virtual arbitrary boundaries limiting a man-made functional mercantile space in the middle of nowhere.

In *Navy Fence* (Figure 17), the barbed wire fence is meant to keep civilians from intruding the military zone of Bravo 20. Considering this military project was illegal and supposed to be concealed from the public, the function of this fence should also be to keep the area secret, which is obviously not the produced effect with such a see-through fencing. Graphically on the photograph, the fencing brings rhythm and repetition to the scene. It disrupts the quietness of the white desert by implementing lines to the landscape. The only way these posts are integrated to the landscape seem to be through Misrach's choice to place his camera so that the fencing

⁵⁸ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1984, p. 13.

aligns and respects central perspective and receding lines, thus following traditional space representation.

The motif of limits does not apply only to desertscapes. In the *Petrochemical America* series, the photograph *Hazardous Waste, Containment Site* (Figure 18) also displays the deficiency of such fencing and space limitation. Misrach's cynical irony is revealed by the combination of "containment site" in the title together with the sign on the fence which reads "danger, contaminated area, keep out, entering could cause harm to your health." There is no actual need to enter the prohibited zone for the chemicals to spread and become a threat. Once more, the fencing proves to be useless. This failure is put to the fore in the caption accompanying the photograph in the photobook:

Between 1958 and 1973 Dow buried forty-six thousand tons of toxic waste in unlined pits and now cover more than thirty underground acres. The company attempts to pump the waste back to the surface before it reaches the drinking-water aquifer for the city of Plaquemine. These efforts notwithstanding, every time the Mississippi River rises it floods the waste site, potentially carrying toxins into the river and polluting the water supply as it makes its way down towards New Orleans.⁵⁹

The fence holds little to no power compared to water level-variations. As suggested in the caption as well as in the photograph's composition, water dominates and overpowers human installations. The water indeed takes up most of the space in the photograph and by reflecting the colour of the foggy sky gives the illusion that the river has flooded the whole place, suggesting that there is in fact no limit to the chemicals' dissemination and contamination. This poor attempt at controlling and preventing chemicals and toxins from spreading clearly turns into a failed containment. Overall, this photograph demonstrates man's inability to prevent known yet unmeasurable disastrous factors from escalating.

The case of the US-Mexico border depicted in *Border Cantos*⁶⁰ displays another striking misuse of limitations. The series provides variations in terms of the quality and completeness of the wall. *Wall, East of Nogales, Arizona* (Figure 19) shows a segment of the border wall which undulates along the natural relief of the land and appears as an abrupt cut in the landscape dividing a normally visually consistent land—the division does not follow any logical geological shift in the landscape. In a different manner, *Wall, Near Los Indios, Texas* (Figure 20) displays an incomplete and fragmented portion of the border wall. The structure stands erect in the middle

⁵⁹ Richard Misrach and Kate Orff, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁶⁰ *Border Cantos* is part of the *Desert Cantos* project but was developed into a distinct project which resulted in several exhibitions and a photobook (published by Aperture in 2016). This project a collaboration with artist and composer Guillermo Galindo. More at <http://bordercantos.com>, Accessed March 8, 2021.

of nowhere. The construction of the wall—being the backbone of Trump’s anti-immigrant policies—is pictured as failing to limit population fluxes.

The overall absurdity of this system of limits is exacerbated by two photographs. *Downed Safety Cone, Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah* (Figure 21) underlines the extreme irony and ludicrous side to this imprint of man on wide and open spaces. The lonely cone has been overturned and is reduced to a harmless and inefficient alien object in the white background of the Salt Flats. Similarly, *Black Line, Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah* (Figure 22) graphically marks the desert with a dark pigmentation of the soil, contrasting with the white surface. It is hard to determine what the function of this specific line is supposed to fulfil. However, *Black Line* is reminiscent of the American passion and obsession for the line, for the grid. On the matter of the grid, Pier Vittorio Aureli remarks:

The grid plays an ambivalent role in urbanization. At first its geometry is ostensibly artificial, which makes clear that it is anything but a natural order. But when grids became the rule of colonial settlement, this ostensible geometry became so ubiquitous as to appear almost natural, therefore hiding its actual instrumentality in the commodification of land.⁶¹

There is therefore a shift from an alien element to landscape that gradually becomes ubiquitous and by extension normal, common and natural. The phenomenon is visible to the extent that lines and grids are everywhere, from the shape of many states borders, the symbolical line of the railroads, the plots of land delimited by the 1862 *Homestead Act*, the very apparent structures of buildings,⁶² to the organisation of the suburbs. Hence, the taming of the environment as a will to make it known, familiar and owned is reduced to its most simple and generic form: a line that encapsulates a whole concept and ideology within a single minimal element. The so-called American Grid and its geometrical lines testifies of the American manufactured and utilitarian vision of land over landscape.

On the whole, most of these lines are graphically open or physically inconsistent. Thus, disaster is not prevented from spreading. Disaster lays in the meaninglessness and the failure of these limitations that cannot contain or delineate.

The concept of limits and frame can be taken further in relation to disaster photography and to absence. We can therefore examine what actually lays outside the frame of the photograph, what is unsaid, what expands from the photograph’s space. In *Swamp and Pipeline, Geismar, Louisiana* (Figure 23), we can observe a pipeline crossing a bayou. This pipeline becomes an alien human element which simultaneously disrupts a balance and provides a horizontal

⁶¹ Pier Vittorio Aureli, “Appropriation, Subdivision, Abstraction: A Political History of the Grid”, *Log*, No. 44, Fall 2018, p. 158, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26588516, Accessed March 29, 2021.

⁶² Kamila Benayada, in François Brunet, (dir.), *L’Amérique des images, Histoire et culture visuelles des États-Unis*, Paris, Hazan et Université Paris 7 Diderot, 2013, p. 196.

structure to the photograph while drawing a physical contrasting line on the green landscape. Its rusty colour and damaged texture account for the deteriorated state of the landscape as a whole. The motif of the pipeline is actually used as a guiding thread around which most of the *Petrochemical America* book is conceived. The second part of the book is made of a great variety of graphics, statistics, maps and detailed explanation that deepen what is hidden through Misrach's photograph. The motif of the pipeline is used throughout this section to graphically and semantically produce a cohesive whole. This guiding line puts to the fore the network system invading "Cancer Alley" and metaphorically turns into a representation of the veins of this part of Louisiana which is deadly and only contains black oil blood.

4.2. Signs to decipher

a. Consuming landscape: road imagery and distortion

The road within Misrach's photography can be perceived as the distortion of a collective imagery and imaginary which enables Misrach to put forward abuses on and consumption of landscape. By using such a motif that is ubiquitous to the American psyche, Misrach proposes to nuance the vision of American identity in his own terms. The literal motif of the road can be noted in three successive photographs in *Desert Cantos*, more precisely in the very first canto "The Terrain." In *San Gorgonio Pass* (Figure 24), *Palms to Pines Highway, Santa Rosa Mountains* (Figure 25), and *Road, Picacio Peak State Park* (Figure 26) the road is repeatedly presented as the central element, being the sole feature standing out in the envioning bare desert. The choice to put them as a tryptic series emphasises the significance of such a trope. As a matter of fact, the road, together with road narratives, such as road movies and road novels, has long been associated with the foundation of an American character.⁶³ The inherent notions of exploration, conquest and movement west are considered to have participated in singularising America from Europe.⁶⁴ Eyerman and Löfgren remark: "The dream of 'hitting the road' and the weightless life along the way has [...] a long cultural history. It draws upon an image of constantly changing

⁶³ Jenny Brasebin, *Road novel, road movie : approche intermédiaire du récit de la route*, Littérature comparée, études cinématographiques et visuelles, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Université de Montréal, 2013, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Even though road narratives associated to travel narratives have been thoroughly expressed and developed in European literatures and other cultures, it culminates in the United States where road and consumerism melt together. This enthusiasm was visible especially in the 1970s with a significant production of road movies, and the genre is still popular nowadays.

United States of America, on the move somewhere, and is composed of a specific iconography and aesthetics.”⁶⁵

The road as a symbol can embody and convey a wide range of concepts and connotations depending on the context. In Misrach’s photography, the archetypal notions of freedom and finding one’s own identity do not dominate. We are closer to the typical purposeless roaming, or flight of some road movies where things end up poorly,⁶⁶ or where the road rather refers to concepts such as subduing and controlling and becomes the stage of a fight to death.⁶⁷

Furthermore, apart from San Gorgonio Pass, the road does not open up to an inviting and mesmerising line running towards the horizon. The road is partly concealed within the landscape and resembles more a scar that cuts the landscape open than it is suggestive of movement. Thus, Misrach’s photographs in “The Terrain” can be reminiscent of the way the West has been conquered. From wild and unknown—annihilating the point of view of Native Americans—the land is contained and tamed thanks to the imagery of the western. It becomes familiar and is rendered accessible and available through the road itself.

Nonetheless, what might be the most striking addition to road imagery lays on what surrounds the road itself. The road imagery can be extended to places peripheral to the road and encompasses facilities and comfort areas such as an abandoned and flooded gas station or an otherworldly empty desert diner. The first photograph, *Flooded Marina (Gas Pumps), Salton Sea, California* (Figure 27), depicts the remnants of a gas station that was part of the Salton Sea resort. The remaining metal elements are rusty, and the original colours have faded. A former dock with half-submerged boats is visible in the distance. Most of the scene is sky and water. The central element is the gas pump sign letters that have been photographed from the back so that they cannot be read right away. A bird standing on the left-hand letter and a few other birds swimming in the distance are the only living entities in the photograph. The inverted letters ironically point at the failure of the resort and can be seen as symbolising the loss of meaning and uselessness of the place.

Outdoor Dining, Bonneville Salt Flats (Figure 16) depicts a sort of diner or rather the furniture typical of a diner—six sets of table and chairs, a counter—installed in the open air, in the desert seemingly in the middle of nowhere, in other words, in a strange place to find such an equipment. What adds to this surrealness is the fact that the ground and the sky are almost the

⁶⁵ Ron Eyerman and Ovar Löfgren, “Romancing the Road: Road Movies and Images of Mobility”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 12, 1995, p. 53.

⁶⁶ Such as in *Thelma & Louise*, directed by Ridley Scott in 1991.

⁶⁷ Such as in the short story “Duel” by Richard Matheson written in 1971.

same colour, making the diner float in space and enhancing the colour contrast. The artificiality of the plastic surface of the chairs is itself accentuated by the unnatural saturated orange shade. On top of this, the Coca Cola fridge is the only linguistic sign present in this desert and hints at the omnipresence of multinationals that invade even the most remote places and that rather prioritise profit over environmental concerns. Here the experience of the desert provided by the road leads to consumption rather than being an escape and leading to cultural contestation.⁶⁸

By connecting these two photographs, we obtain a commentary on landscape consumption. There is first the literal consumption of the place embodied by these locations which are highly artificial and misplaced with absurdity of the diner in the middle of such a blank space and with the fate of the Salton Sea resort, that “miracle in the desert” which should not have existed in the first place. Then the implied consumption of the food and drinks in the diner and of the gas that comes from petroleum extraction. The road has provided access to desert consumerism and can be seen as a means to consume desert in itself, by crossing it.

These photographs thus provide another side to road imagery that is more bitter and cynical. Misrach’s troubled representations show another side to this idealised symbolism by connecting it to a post-modern malaise and highlighting the symptoms of an identity crisis. By doing so Misrach enables us to observe the way disaster has become a constitutive and core element to this new identity by altering symbolic places.

b. Intericonicity: consuming images

In the introduction to *L’Amérique des images*, François Brunet suggests that American images are continually quoting other images,⁶⁹ asserting the omnipresence of images and intericonicity as eminently American. He adds that the phenomenon does not deprive these images from “producing sharp commentaries of society,”⁷⁰ which can be verified in Misrach’s work. From the 1970s on, we enter a period of global mass consumption—which Anne Crémieux names the media’s empire⁷¹—where images are not only a product to be consumed but themselves consume and modify one another. Intericonicity can then be understood as an

⁶⁸ David Laderman argues that “the driving force propelling most road movies [...] is an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique”. (David Laderman, *Driving Visions: Explorations of the Road Movie*, University of Texas Press, 2002, p. 1).

⁶⁹ François Brunet, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, (My translation).

⁷¹ Anne Crémieux, in Brunet, *op. cit.*, pp. 270-271.

active role played by images and leads to wonder, as Mathilde Arrivé puts it, “*what do pictures do?*” (“*que fait l’image*”).⁷²

At least two examples of intericonicity can be found in Misrach’s work and related to the general idea of an American imagery. First of all, the photograph *Tourists* (Figure 28) can be related to the *Sightseers* series⁷³ by Roger Minick who was Misrach’s mentor.⁷⁴ Although both depict tourists, they do so in radically distinct ways. Minick decided to turn tourists into an actual photographic subject that carries a certain Americanness: “in the end I came to believe that there was something more meaningful going on—something stronger and more compelling, something that seemed almost woven into the fabric of the American psyche.”⁷⁵

In Minick’s work, almost all photographs function in the same way. If we take the example of photographs such as *Uncle and Nephew at Brice Canyon National Park, Utah* (1981) or *Couple at Canyonlands National Park, Utah* (1980) (Figures 29 and 30) we can notice that the tourists are the central figures of the photograph and that the actual landscape serves as a background. This effect of “false backdrop or diorama look”⁷⁶ is emphasised by the use of flash-mounted medium-format camera. This creative choice reinforces Minick’s approach who views the tourists with an amused and almost tender eye. Thus, the flash and the subjects posing for the photograph provide a humoristic and artificial side to the pictures—enhanced by the colourful outfit of the couple which contrasts greatly with the natural background.

On the other hand, the perspective displayed in Misrach’s photograph suggests a more serious tone. Misrach’s tourists are reduced to two small figures, lost and swallowed in the vast and overwhelming landscape. Indeed, scale and distance are the two main parameters confronting the photographs. In each, the focal center places the tourists as the main figures. However, the proportion and balance between tourists and landscape are opposed—dominant landscape versus dominant human figures. Furthermore, Minick’s tourists are facing the camera and are aware the photograph is being taken—they strike a pose—whereas Misrach’s subjects

⁷² Mathilde Arrivé, “L’intelligence des images - l’intericonicité, enjeux et méthodes”, *Que fait l’image ? De l’intericonicité aux États-Unis / What do Pictures Do? Intericonicity in the United States*, in *E-rea* [online], No. 13.1, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.4620>, Accessed March 8, 2021.

⁷³ *Sightseer* is a photographic project started in 1976 by Roger Minick. It was shaped through extensive series of road trips over the years and around hundreds of American overlooks. More photographs are available on the dedicated website: <https://www.sightseerseries.com>, Accessed February 23, 2021.

⁷⁴ In 1968, Roger Minick’s *Delta West* exhibition ignited Misrach’s interest in fine art photography. Misrach discovers the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC) Studio which was directed by Minick and starts working there part-time, using the darkroom after hours to work on his own prints. Misrach views this period as an apprenticeship where he learned to master printing. Minick also co-designed Misrach’s first photobook *Telegraph 3 AM* (1974).

⁷⁵ Roger Minick in the *Sightseer* website’s “Field Notes” section: <https://www.sightseerseries.com/field-notes>, Accessed February 23, 2021.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

are in the distance, shot from the back and most likely unconscious of the fact that they are being photographed.

Moreover, Misrach does not mention the location of the photograph, which is quite rare for him, and rather chooses a generalising name whereas Minick is specific in the place where the photographs were taken. This decision further testifies of their different approaches. Misrach does not intend to present the tourists as individuals and rather shows them as the symptoms of a greater disease, focusing on tourism as an industry. On the other hand, Minick plays on the singularity of his subjects and focuses on what they bring to the series as individual entities. It can thus be said that Misrach displays a darker and accusatory look on the presence of these tourists within the landscape.

In comparing these two photographers, we are dealing once again with the issue of relativity of photographs. Depending on the context and the surrounding photographs, a specific photograph can convey varied meanings. If *Tourists* had been taken by Minick and part of his series *Sightseer*, it would be regarded lightly as an anecdotal human presence in the landscape, as miniature people in the desert. However, the fact that the photograph was taken by Misrach and implemented in *Desert Cantos* makes it stand out as yet another facet of consuming landscape and imparts a more serious turn.

Here, intericonicity enables a reevaluation. Minick's series was completed in the late 1970s and the early 1980s whereas Misrach's photograph was taken in 1994. Misrach is thus positioned once more with distance by re-using and bending the codes established by his mentor to produce a commentary on another cause of mass damage inflicted upon the American landscape.

A second striking case of intericonicity in Misrach's work can be analysed. *Oakland Fire #107-91 (Melted Tricycle)* (Figure 31) is reminiscent of William Eggleston's⁷⁷ tricycle sometimes found with the title *Tricycle, Memphis* or *Untitled* (Figure 32). Both photographs picture suburban kid tricycles. The parallel has actually been acknowledged by Misrach as a conscious reference. He mentions he wanted to create a dialogue between the two and produce a darker side to Eggleston's photograph.⁷⁸ Interestingly enough, both Eggleston and Misrach chose the tricycle photograph as the cover of their photobooks.⁷⁹ This choice could suggest that the suburban

⁷⁷ American photographer William Eggleston (1939-) is credited with establishing the recognition of colour photography as a fine art. The 1976 exhibition *William Eggleston's Guide* was the first solo-exhibition dedicated to colour photography displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

⁷⁸ Richard Misrach, in "Richard Misrach: Gallery Talk", *op. cit.*, (21'00 to 21'52).

⁷⁹ The respective tricycle photographs are on the covers of Richard Misrach's photobook *1991: The Oakland-Berkeley Fire Aftermath* (2011) and William Eggleston's photobook *William Eggleston's Guide* (1976).

tricycle truly embodies a side to American identity. Indeed, in terms of landscape and place, the suburbs are a peculiar type of place to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century. According to Robert Beuka, the proliferation of suburbs did more than instigate topographical changes:

With its instantly identifiable, uniform architectural styles and landscape designs, the American suburb has contributed toward a proliferating sense of placelessness and in turn the perceived homogenization of American life. In this manner, the explosion of suburbia over the past half century has immeasurably altered the ways Americans think about place and their individual and collective relationships to it.⁸⁰

Photographing the suburbs invites to a profound reflection on the changes they provoked. Suburbs can be seen as the transposition of the prevailing modes of mass consumption into the housing organisations and structures, that is to say into landscape, up to producing a sense of rootlessness and alienation. Thus, the subject of a child's tricycle in a suburb might encapsulate a larger series of issues in relation to a general feeling of malaise linked to this "placelessness" which was exploited in works of fiction and impacted representations. In her work *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, Berenice Murphy further associates the suburbs with a general idea of unease:

[I]n the 60 years since the mass suburbanisation of the United States began, writers, film-makers and the public at large have shown themselves more than willing to engage with narratives in which the niggling suspicion that something dark lurks below suburbia's peaceful facade is dramatically vindicated [...] It reflects the fear that the rapid change in lifestyle and modes of living which took place in the 1950s and early 1960s caused irreparable damage, not only to the landscape, but to the psychological state of the people who moved into such new developments and broke with the old patterns of existence.⁸¹

Thus, it could be engaging to examine to what extent the tricycle photographs address the issues of what is concealed and eventually tackle this "dark[ness] lurk[ing] below suburbia's peaceful façade." In both cases, the photograph has been shot in a place familiar to the photographer—Eggleston grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and Misrach knew casualties of the hill-fire and owns a property on the hills. There is therefore a personal character within the two images. Still, many elements oppose the photographs.

The chosen angles play a determining role in the reading of the two photographs. In Eggleston's shot, the low angle, reminiscent of the perspective of a child, glorifies the tricycle which seems to be proudly standing. Furthermore, the tricycle is framing a projection of suburban typical ideals such as the car in the centre, embodying the material comfort of middleclass families living in the neighbourhood. Although no children are depicted, the

⁸⁰ Robert Beuka, "Introduction Utopia, Dystopia, Heterotopia", *SuburbiaNation*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 2, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-73210-4_1, Accessed February 23, 2021.

⁸¹ Berenice Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 1-2.

photograph provides a prospect, a projection into the future. On the contrary, Misrach's tricycle does not announce any opening onto the future, there is no perspective of what is coming, the surroundings have been burned to the ground. Misrach's high angle overhangs and overruns the tricycle and creates a heavy scene loaded with implications. It closes the frame and prevents the beholder from getting a sense of the immediate space behind the tricycle. The setting is lifeless and hopeless.

The tricycles themselves trigger a series of comparisons. Whereas Eggleston's tricycle is blue, red and white—perhaps hinting at the colours of the American flag—Misrach's stands out with its primary artificial colours on a background made of grey, black, ochre, and rusty tones. The materials are also different, metal opposing plastic.

The plastic one is not as damaged as what is around. The fact that the tricycle partially survived the fire—the object is easily recognizable even though it does not seem functional anymore—compared to the surroundings could stand as a symbolic resistance of mass-consumption goods and to the fact that they are bound to survive and persist to (m)any disaster(s). These modes of production and consumption are so deeply rooted it will take more than a disaster to tear them down. The state of the plastic that has melted is thus deprived of any structure and substance. Once more the fact that this somewhat vain and paltry human artefact has survived demonstrates the persistence of such materials produced by industry. Nonetheless, although it has physically endured the fire, it is shallow, deprived from its original purpose, deprived from its very substance.

The context of production of Misrach's photograph puts to the fore another interpretative issue. Indeed, the very idea of analysing such a photograph could also seem out of place. Is it necessary to look for an interpretation, a deeper meaning within such a heavy context? It brings us back to the child who must have played with it, and by extension to anyone impacted by the hill-fire. Moving beyond this issue, we could say that metaphorically in Misrach's photograph, the suburban horror is not implied anymore, it has become true.

These intericonicities allow for new assessments. They provide a rereading and reinterpretation of Misrach's work at the time of pervasive disaster. The photographic heritage is actualised in the light of a different context, infused with disaster.

5. Materiality and immateriality

5.1. Focus on matter

a. *Tangible photographs*

Yet another narrowing down from the spatial and the physical can lead to issues of materiality and matter. Indeed, we can easily notice that the notion of matter is omnipresent and exacerbated in Richard Misrach's photography. When it comes to photography, the concept of materiality can at least be twofold. In the case of Misrach, matter is often the very subject of the photographs; a lot of them are composed of very few elements and focus on rocks, sediments, sand. Furthermore, materiality can infer to the very surface of a photograph and to its qualities as a picture, as an object, as a medium. In other words, the notion of materiality encompasses content and form. We will examine how and why matter is so predominant in Misrach's photography and how form helps deliver content.

First of all, Misrach's photographs have a particular material quality due to the camera used for most projects. Misrach photographed for over twenty-five years with an 8-by-10 view camera which is known to account for a great number of details which exceeds what the bare eye can normally see. Thus, Misrach is able to put to the fore the very components and ingredients of his photographs such as textures, colours and light. The use of colours and light is indeed predominant in his photography as exemplified previously with the series of the *San Jacinto Mountains* (Figure 10) which, the very same way Monet painted his *Haystacks* series, is composed of variations in the time of day, creating a wide range of results. In a similar vein, a great majority of Misrach's creations were captured at dusk or dawn which convey specific lights and visual qualities.

This proximity with the photographed matter is emphasised and enhanced thanks to the form, the substantial envelope of the photograph, which extends beyond its actual physical flat and plane surface. Indeed, choices regarding scale and size—that is to say the spatial presence of the photograph as a physical object—are determining. Whether it be in the context of an exhibition or the publication of a photobook, Misrach tends to choose large format for his photographs. These decisions are therefore coherent and create a continuity with the original size of the negative from the view camera. When it comes to the prints for an exhibition, Misrach decides on unconventionally large scale in order to deliver a minute reproduction and

to display as many details as possible. Thus, he went from intermediate sizes for *Desert Cantos*⁸² to prints covering whole wall sections for more recently published series such as *Petrochemical America* and *The Oakland-Berkeley Fire Aftermath*. In a similar manner, Misrach chose rather large reproductions for his photobooks which are generally providing images circa 25 x 30 cm, maximising the whole space of the book.

Overall, these choices to put to the fore the content of the photographs, and especially in the context of a museum exhibition, lean towards a certain form of sacralisation of the photographs. This presentation of large-scale photographs on full portions of the wall together with the context of the museum, which invokes specific behaviours and is likely to call for recollection, concentration and peacefulness, could be seen as giving something more to Misrach's photographs. On the contrary, we could argue that the same scale could deprive Misrach's photographs from something and bring the idea of distance too far as suggested earlier in the discussion on distance and genre.

Although nowadays museums are often thought in ways that they tend to become accessible and less of an elite space, there is something about their very nature that makes them different from any other place. It still seems an object put in a museum is deprived from its substance and systematically turned into an object to contemplate. In "Museology and the Sacred", François Mairesse establishes a series of striking comparisons between museums and sacred places, where objects "testif[y] to a very specific relationship to objects, resolutely removed from the tribulations of the secular world."⁸³ He particularly insists on the recurrent denomination of museums as temples both in relation to its form and essence.⁸⁴

Therefore, it could be argued that the dimension of the photographs together with the context of the museum compensates for what Walter Benjamin called the loss of the "aura" of the work of art that can be technically reproduced. Thus, the original aura of a work of art—which is often argued to be non-existent in photography due to the inherent unlimited possibilities to print the same image again—is replaced by another form of magnitude. The photographs turn into a fresco or a tableau.

Such an efficient and impactful layout exposes matter, lays it bare. Form enhances content which becomes deprived of superficial or synthetic components: there is no intermediary like a physical framing; there is no need to get close to the photograph to perceive

⁸² The photographs in the 2012 *Desert Cantos* exhibition at the Robert Mann Gallery in New York City included original prints from the 1980s. The sizes ranged from 14×14 to 48×60 inches (circa 35x35 to 122x150 cm).

⁸³ François Mairesse, "Museology and the Sacred", *Museology and the Sacred: Materials for a Discussion*, Paris, International committee for Museology – ICOFOM, 2018, p. 11.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

the details, the scale almost makes the photograph come forth to the beholder. From this perspective, Misrach's works could be put in relation to the concept of simulacra advanced by Jean Baudrillard. According to him, "simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary'."⁸⁵ This remark complexifies considerations of photography as a medium if one considers any photograph to be a simulation of what it captures. This paradoxical tension between direct and indirect experience of disaster lays at the core of Misrach's photography. Although the actual experience of disaster might not be reconjured, this exacerbation of details triggers an immediacy of the photograph's contents.

These remarks point at the differences between a first-hand experience (what is real, the actual disaster) and a second-hand experience (imagined). Is Misrach's photography really an imagined experience, or rather, a diverted, indirect, remediated experience? It seems to cultivate complex relationship to the concept of simulacra. In order to attempt answering these questionings, a deeper dive into the nature of the matters represented is necessary: we need to turn to the very essence of the photographs. It is not only through matter, through the form that the idea of simulacra is overcome, but through the substance of the photographs.

b. Elements

Reflections on the sometimes-minimalist aspect of Misrach's photography can be cut down not only to the omnipresence of matter but to that of elements. Indeed, a parallel reading is enabled by allusions to and depictions of the four elements that were once thought to compose the universe. The first desert cantos—"The Terrain", "The Event", "The Flood", "The Fires"—are loosely associated by Misrach to the four elements earth, air, water, and fire.⁸⁶ Thus "The Terrain" presents earth, pigments, soil, rocks, mountains while, in "The Event", the ground is rather flat and present a similar texture in each photograph while the sky is allowed to stand out and the scene are immersed in an unusually intense light. In a similar manner, "The Flood" displays the omnipresence of water and its struggle and balance with the sky in the space of the photograph, water often creating a mirror which reflects the sky, whereas "The Fires" exhibits flames, smoke, ashes, and burned vegetation.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* [1981], translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 3.

⁸⁶ Richard Misrach, *The Photography Workshop Series, op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁸⁷ To have an insight on each series, see appendixes 14 for "The Terrain", 22 for "The Event", 3 for "The Flood", and 33 for "The Fires".

This focus on elements imparts a quality to Misrach's photographs that once more turn to the rough, the raw. We move to the realm of the elemental, the primary, and are led to contemplate the essence, the origin, the core of landscape and disaster. Furthermore, the predominance of elements and their impact is exacerbated in the desert and must be taken into account considering *Desert Cantos* is Misrach's *magnum opus*. American studies scholar Caitrin Gersdorf provides a useful definition of the desert in *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* (2009). In fact, she synthesises different definitions and gathers them into the word "lack". Desert is therefore characterised by what is missing, by a "lack of water, lack of vegetation, lack of animal life."⁸⁸ She adds:

The desert has inspired cultural fantasies and enabled real and imagined experiences of solitude, contemplative repose, divine revelation as well as anxieties of loss, disorientation, and death. [...] Removed from its geo-ecological referent, the terrain became a trope, a cipher signifying deficiency, lack, absence.⁸⁹

Ubiquitous lack and absence urges us to pay extreme attention to what is substantially left in the photograph: the elements. However, as far as Misrach's photography is concerned, the metaphor is not direct, and the "geo-ecological referent" is instrumental in the literal substance of Misrach's photography and discourse before being perceived as "a trope, a cipher". The first step in considering matter for what it is proves to be key to a further reading. This focus on the terrain as well as the process of laying bare, or deprivation of artifices used in the photographs is best embodied in the desert. Misrach comments:

I saw the desert as a natural and cultural landscape where civilization is played out. The big, open, natural spaces of the desert set cultural artifacts off in dramatic relief, like museum studies. The desert has always provided a rich metaphor in literature and the visual arts, from the Bible to science-fiction films, probably because it epitomizes the extremes of the human condition.⁹⁰

Misrach seems to perceive the desert as a bare stage where the elements are highlighted. The combination of elements and desert results in the possible scrutiny of the origin and the religious. Indeed, the desert is the earthly place most directly associated with the birth of many religions.

As a matter of fact, Misrach's photographic work is disseminated with religious artifacts and references, especially biblical references. In the Prologue of *Desert Cantos*—which stands as a full photograph series—Misrach establishes striking parallels between Middle East and the

⁸⁸ Caitrin Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2009, p. 17.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹⁰ Richard Misrach, *The Photography Workshop Series, op. cit.*, p. 53.

Western American desert.⁹¹ One of the semantical relationships that can be extracted from this comparison is that of desert and religion. In a different manner, *Petrochemical America* also tackles the theme of religion. It actually contains a whole micro-series which incorporates religious figures as central subjects.⁹² They usually are lonely religious figures and statues, included in industrial landscapes or standing out on barren and dull surroundings. The most striking example might be *Holy Rosary Cemetery and Dow Chemical Corporation* (Figure 34). A crucified Christ stands erect in the focal centre of the photograph. The multiple crosses graphically mimic and fit in the artificial forest made of vertical metal shapes from the corporation. This superimposition of the cemetery and the industrial complex expresses the loss of intimacy of this space. The photograph excavates symbols of religion and capitalism which face one another and embody a new postmodern America, characterised by fragmentation, repetition and urban and industrial expansion. Another straightforward parallel coming out of the photograph could be the implied relationship between the barrenness of industry and death.

Thus, Misrach interrogates the role of faith in these petrochemical landscapes, where industry seems to have replaced religion as a guiding force. Still as we have seen, both Misrach's photography and definitions of disaster tend to lean towards a secularisation of disaster and its representations, as well as a desacralisation of the desert, labelled "the other desert."⁹³ Hence, the desert that could be seen as an eminently religious place loses its holy character. This creates a paradox when it comes to what was previously advanced regarding the sacralisation of the photographs thanks to their form and scale. This tension with a powerful and sacred material form helps the efficient delivery of a secularised vision of desert and disaster. In fact, Misrach being atheist, his photography proposes an overcoming of the religious towards the realm of the spiritual and the metaphysical. While it has been claimed that Misrach became metaphysical through his photography with the later series *On the Beach*,⁹⁴ clear traces of these considerations are already visible and deeply embedded in *Desert Cantos*.

⁹¹ See photographs such as *Salton Sea, California* (1985) and *Dead Sea, Israel* (1993) or *Pyramid and Sphinx, Las Vegas, Nevada* (1994) and *Tennis Court and Pyramids, Giza, Egypt* (1898) which are presented on the same double page.

⁹² In the photobook, six photographs belong to this religious-themed subseries: *Baptist Church, River Road, St. James, Louisiana* (1998), *Kneeling Christ, River Road, North of Port Allen, Louisiana* (2010), *St. John the Baptist Church, Edgard, Louisiana* (2010), *St. Mary's Chapel, Union, Louisiana* (2010), *Roses, Archer Daniels Midland, Destrehan, Louisiana* (1998), and *Holy Rosary Cemetery and Dow Chemical Corporation (Union Carbide Complex), Taft Louisiana* (1998).

⁹³ Reyner Banham, in Richard Misrach, *Desert Cantos*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁹⁴ The series *On the Beach*, started in 2002, was developed by Misrach and explored through a second series exhibited under the title *On the Beach 2.0* and published as *The Mysterious Opacity of Other Beings* (2016). Misrach stated this series was a response to the aftermath caused by 9-11. Most of the photographs from this project portray people, swimming in or floating on the ocean, which were photographed from a distance and from above so that the people look lost in the overwhelming surface of the water.

Therefore, we could argue that this concern on elements is particularly relevant to disaster and its representations. They constitute a means to represent disaster in an indirect manner which makes the confrontation less violent while still inferring to some sort of frontality and immediacy. This oblique depiction touches something else in us. It mirrors the feeling one might endure when faced with disaster. In other words, this representation makes us face ourselves and look into ourselves, it invites introspection. Ultimately, this proximity to disaster and the opportunity to reflect upon it thanks to the exposure of the photographed elements compensates for the effect of simulacra of the photographs. The inevitable second-hand experience of disaster contained in any photograph and that Misrach could be criticised for is thus overcome. There is indeed a discrepancy between someone who has directly experienced the photographed disaster—for instance the Oakland-Berkeley fire or Hurricane Katrina—and someone who only faces the photograph and for whom the experience of disaster is only mediated. Nonetheless, the exposition to elements and the metaphysical reflections they trigger put the beholders in front their own humanity, condition and vulnerability. Similarly, we are put in front of our potential individual exposure to disaster, since we are all concerned with disasters' expectation, and more widely, with the perspective of death that might result from disaster. Besides, this predominance of elements is another means to reinforce the universal scope of Misrach's work. Indeed, he claims he “want[s] to use [the American] desert as the prototype for what's happening nationwide and across the world.”⁹⁵

5.2. Beyond matter

a. Representing toxicity

Among the disasters captured by Misrach, one kind is particularly tricky to account for. From contaminated water to pollutants in the air, toxic landscapes can take on a great variety of shapes and plastic qualities which makes them complex to photograph and to apprehend. In this sense, scholar Jennifer Peeples underlines “the lack of critical analyses of images of toxins”⁹⁶ particularly alluding to photography. This challenge thus results in the difficulty to “make

⁹⁵ Richard Misrach, *The Photography Workshop Series, op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁹⁶ Jennifer Peeples, “Toxic Sublime: Imagining Contaminated Landscapes”, *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 5:4, 2011, p. 374, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2011.616516>, Accessed March 10, 2021.

contamination visible.”⁹⁷ Indeed, although toxicity can be visible at time, it is mostly hard to be quantified, measured, encompassed or analysed by sight only.

Representing toxicity therefore necessitates special use of devices in order to make it visually stand out within the space of the photograph. This constraint also suggests the question of compensation. Misrach uses features to formally compensate for the lack of visibility of some forms of toxicity by focusing on certain components and ingredients. In order to do so, Misrach’s photographs of toxicity can be classified according to a scale of toxicity representation from the most straightforward and identifiable toxic environment to that which gives only subtle clues of pollutants.

First of all, a direct means to account for toxicity is to concentrate on colours. Through a group of photographs, Misrach puts to the fore the colour palette of toxicity, which is that of the unnatural, the synthetic, the artificial. Colours of toxicity can be perceived as nuances that mutated, as a *slip* of the natural. This colour spectrum is particularly visible through photographs of crater in the Bravo 20 area: *Bomb Crater and Standing Water (Orange)*, *Bomb Crater and Standing Water (Pink)* and *Crater and Destroyed Convoy*.⁹⁸ These photographs present a creation of coloured and presumably noxious water that is initiated by man but out of control. Man introduced the alien component and produced the crater. Natural elements and weather added the rest to create the hybrid mixture. This contrived liquid is particularly startling since water is commonly and primarily thought of as a resource that must sustain life. The pink, red and orange shades of these crater pools contrast with the surrounding sand colours and function as signals in the naked desert. In a similar manner, another palette of the toxic is perceptible throughout *Petrochemical America* which turns to the green. Nevertheless, it becomes uncertain and tricky to assert that the green colour is naturally present, chemically created or simply accentuated by pollutants. Still, an impression of toxicity transpires from these.⁹⁹

Secondly, a sense of toxicity can be accentuated in some photographs through an emphasis on light in order to fill the air, to saturate the photographic space and create a specific disquieting atmosphere. Although colours and light are intimately linked, light and air dominate in this type of photographs.¹⁰⁰ The obstruction of the sky creates an enclosed space and annihilates the usual depth of the photograph.

Finally, representing toxicity can consist in providing discrete clues to a photograph that could at first seem unalarming. In this case, toxicity is concealed in minute details of the

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

⁹⁸ See Figures 35, 36 and 37.

⁹⁹ See Figure 23.

¹⁰⁰ See Figures 40, 41, and 42.

photographs. In *Helicopter Returning from Deepwater Horizon Spill* (Figure 38), there is a vivid contrast between the title of the photograph and the actual proportion in the representation; the helicopter is a stretched and tiny shape in the vast sky, disrupting the deceitful peace of the photograph. This phenomenon is also exemplified in *Norco Cumulus Cloud, Shell Oil Refinery* (Figure 39). The cloud overlooking the scene seems harmless, made of an immaculate and pure white and thus unrelated to the small-scale refinery in the background. Still, even though the refinery is only a tiny presence at the very end of the receding lines, all the natural components of the photographs—the field and the forest—are places in relation to it. These receding lines seem to shrink space and attract everything else towards the horizon, to the refinery. The angle chosen by Misrach and placement in the middle of the field accentuate the relation of the elements by creating a symmetrical composition revolving around the refinery. The link with the cloud is hence established. We are facing an artificial cloud; we are witnessing man-made nature. Thus, the photograph asks the question of what is natural and unnatural among the things that surround us daily. What can we trust?

On another note, it could be fruitful to examine Misrach's representations of toxicity in relation to other photographers who tackled the same issue, notably to David T. Hanson¹⁰¹ and David Maisel.¹⁰² Both Maisel's and Hanson's depictions of toxicity are extremely pictorial. Their use of aerial photography demonstrates the great monstrosity of these contaminated landscapes while simultaneously establishing some distance, disconnecting the beholder from the subject. It can also be argued that the contemplative aspect overcomes the subject matter at times. Furthermore, aerial shots annihilate the notion of depth and flatten the space, as a painting on a canvas. Thus, although Maisel and Hanson refuse their photographs to be associated with abstraction, the link is inevitable and we are likely to focus on the plasticity of the photographs, on the hallucinogenic and sick colours. Misrach stands in contrast. He tends to have more anchorage in what is tangible by being closer to the ground and choosing a more familiar scale.

¹⁰¹ David T. Hanson (1948-). See Figures 43, and 44.

¹⁰² David Maisel (1961-). See Figures 45, 46, and 47.

b. *Skyscapes*

After photographing the land, Misrach added two later series to his *Desert Cantos* which focus on skyscapes. They are part of the nuancing series within *Desert Cantos*, that is to say they strongly balance out the rest of the cantos by accounting for a parallel vision and representation of disaster that turns to the immaterial, the imperceptible, the indirect. They nuance and complexify the series as a whole. Still, they are different from other series where the sky is predominant, such as the *Golden Gate Bridge* series, which are more largely aesthetic and contemplative over any other kind of readings.

Here, photographing the sky is a means to resonate with previous photographers such as Eadweard Muybridge, Edward Weston and Alfred Stieglitz. Thus, the title is a direct reference to a series by Stieglitz entitled *Equivalents* (1922-1934) which is sometimes considered to be the first abstract photographic series. By naming one of his sky series “Canto XII: Clouds (Non-Equivalents)”, Misrach chooses both to allude to Stieglitz and to take distance from his work with the use of negation. In other words, he shifted the concept of photographing the sky from a modernist to a postmodernist perspective. According to Stieglitz’s modernist approach, these abstract photographs composed of colours and shapes were supposed to be the equivalent of a thought or a feeling and therefore isolate the subject matter from a literal interpretation. Misrach’s photographs are abstract as well, and function as a series of sky fragments, each with a different number complementing a common title—*Cloud*.¹⁰³ This erasure of landmarks which prevents us from knowing the time and place of the photographs forces us to focus on them as something different from photographs, intangible artefacts, some composed of pieces of familiar elements such as actual clouds, others estranged from the concept of a sky like in more recent photographs such as *Clouds, July 29, 2018, 8.12pm, California*, (Figure 50), where the clouds become a series of textures and shapes.

In his second skyscape series, “Canto XVIII: Skies”, Misrach goes further in the radical dimension of his work. Abstraction is pushed to extreme simplicity and reduced to colour gradients or single colours. Visually, there is a shift from the landmark of the cloud to a total loss of physical graspable elements: space as we know it has been destroyed. The photographs become so abstract that they leave the realm of photography and turn into pure abstraction, pure colour. Some shots could even be compared to colour-field paintings such as Mark Rothko’s work.

¹⁰³ See some photographs of “Canto XII: Clouds (Non-Equivalents)”: Figures 48 and 49.

However, Misrach rejects the comparison to abstract painting that can emerge from this series because he fears that it would reduce and entrap his work into solely aesthetic concerns. Here, the multi-perspectival reading of the series is inevitable. Thus, Anne Wilkes Tucker comments:

Our delight in the beauty of the clouds, which so dramatically reflects sunsets, are toxic beauties laden with poisonous, but highly reflective pollutants. Rather than the physical land invasions documented in other cantos, *The Clouds* represents the menacing invisibility and unbounded access of chemical pollution in the atmosphere, its poisonous effects unmitigated by the spectacular disguise of cloud forms.¹⁰⁴

Hence, Misrach seems to wonder: can human also impact colours up in the sky? This questioning resonates undoubtedly with the multiplicity of shapes disaster can take on.

The photographs of this series are titled in a way which compensates for the lack of factual information provided by the picture. Misrach therefore added detailed titles which function as captions and indicate the precise time and place—*Paradise Valley, Arizona, March 22, 1995, 7:05 P.M.* (Figure 51) or *Jerusalem Mountain, Arizona, October 28, 1994, 7:52 A.M.* (Figure 52). These slices of sky bring about great contrasts between the time provided in the title and the idea of timelessness and immateriality linked to the subject matter. It may seem useless or pointless to photograph a portion of what is infinite, a second of what will never repeat. Misrach literally takes hold of what cannot be grasped any other way. He underlines the conflict between the momentary and the timeless:

They're forced to collide against one another. It becomes a diary, it's a dysfunctional diary. When you keep a diary, you talk about specific moments and the details of a particular day. Well, these things are so detailless to turn them into a diary turns the notion of a diary on its head.¹⁰⁵

The diary also points at another way to look at the photographs. It implies the notion of “keeping track”, and turns the photographs into samples, capturing the emptiness of the sky while simultaneously documenting something.

¹⁰⁴ Anne Wilkes Tucker, in *Crimes and Splendors*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Misrach, in John Paul Caponigro, *op. cit.*

6. Mapping America's wasteland

Misrach's photography results from a very specific approach that encompasses several influences within American landscape photography tradition. By capturing occurrences of disaster and the imprints they leave on the land, Misrach is bearing witness to and testifying of a gradual evolution of the desert, and more generally of the peripheral lands. We will see how Misrach positions himself within these different traditions and how they implement meaning to his work. Ultimately, we will see how his systematic surveying of landscape and disaster leads to a reevaluation of both place and landscape photography codes.

6.1. Surveying the state of landscape

The mid to late nineteenth-century surveys played an instrumental role in what was to become conventional American landscape photography. These expeditions west defined the diverging functions of photography at that time. Photographs were to be first objective and scientific since they were the first historical account of these new places. Simultaneously, they established visual codes for landscape photography, in keeping with landscape painting tradition. Here, the focus will be on the first inherent role attributed to photography in this context, that is the perception of photographs as survey, as documents, and to a certain extent, as a scientific tool.

a. Documents

Photographs can be considered as documents and turned into samples. This vision of the photographic medium is directly inherited from the American landscape photography tradition. The first surveys west indeed established photography's function. Surveys west were part of the broader phenomenon of expansion. As a consequence, the first photographs of the West had several aims and functions including identifying resources while simultaneously creating and broadcasting the very first images of the west to the east and ultimately to Europe. In *L'Amérique des images*, Anne Crémieux and Anne Paupe argue that:

“l’imagerie de la conquête de l’Ouest et de ses paysages aura donc d’emblée valeur d’archive, de mémoire nationale autant que de découverte.”¹⁰⁶

Here, the scientific aspect of Misrach’s photography can be related to the concept of tangible photographs. Exemplified earlier in relation to matter, the tangible can take on a different meaning if related to the commonly shared presumption that photography appears to show what is real, what is truthful.¹⁰⁷ We naturally tend to trust photography as the reproduction of what is real.¹⁰⁸ There are thus some degrees of a scientific factual value which is to be measured while remaining aware of modifications and subjective decisions that can interfere in the process. Putting matters of objectivity and subjectivity aside, what seems undeniable is the significant impact of the visual in showing and testifying of the existence of a phenomenon.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the first strength and significance of Misrach’s photography may lay in its compelling and engaging visual qualities. The very fact he chooses to capture disasters makes them visible and draws attention on them as an issue to consider.

If we come to analyse scientific and methodologic aspects to Misrach’s photography, several layers come to mind. First, some paratextual choices infer to a scientific approach in the organisation and presentation of the photographs. Several series present photographs whose titles made of generic nouns are associated to a number as it is the case throughout different projects with for instance *Desert Fire #43*, *Dead Animals #59*, *Cloud #240*, *Oakland Fire #104-91* and so on. It enables a classification, most of the time chronological, and presents the photographs as different incidences, different samples of a phenomenon to be accounted for and analysed. At times, Misrach also chooses to provide detailed and descriptive titles with the precise name of the place (*Cypress Swamp*, *Alligator Bayou*, *Prairieville, Louisiana*), and at times the very moment the photograph was taken (*Paradise Valley, Arizona, March 22, 1995, 7:05 P.M.*). These types of titles remain factual and neutral and are deprived of any sort of emotional bias which makes them more likely to be included in a wider scientific discourse. Besides, from this perspective, the serial form in Misrach’s photography can be tackled as a systematic and automatic collection and sampling of the land.

¹⁰⁶ Anne Crémieux and Anne Paupe, in François Brunet (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁷ This belief is intrinsically associated to photography as a medium due to its technical nature as a mechanical reproduction of a ‘real’ situation making photography presumably objective.

¹⁰⁸ However, photography is nowadays commonly understood as the result of manipulations and subjective choices on the part of the photographer, all the more so in the era of digital photography and the endless modifications that can be applied to a photograph.

¹⁰⁹ Historically, landscape photography was used as a ‘form of evidence’, notably by early photographers such as Carleton Watkins, (Conohar Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 52). Although photography is no longer directly associated to this value of presenting the truth, the very fact that Misrach chooses to place himself within this tradition encourages to start a discussion on the legitimacy and meaning of photography as a documentary tool.

To a certain extent, strength and efficiency are perceptible in the photographs standing on their own as having a documentary quality by essence. Still, they are deliberately taken further by Misrach through the means of complementary documentation and contextualisation of his work. Photographs are used to produce something more. They are anchored in a wider discourse, in a wider narrative. That is particularly the case for *Petrochemical America* and *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West* which both stand as separate projects which ambition and scope extend further than conventional photobooks. There, photography serves as a visual landmark, a basis to expand from. Both publications are collaborative projects which are similarly composed of three internal parts: Misrach's photographs, a detailed documented account in relation to the images, and a solution to remediate these damaged landscapes. Throughout the present chapter, we will focus on the documented part and how it relates to Misrach's photographs. The remediating parts will be tackled in the subpart on anti-landscapes.

Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West is an extension of *Desert Cantos* and takes the shape of a separate publication issued in 1990. This one-of-a-kind photobook is in fact a collaborative work—gravitating around Misrach's photographs—which includes specialists from different fields such as local environmental activists and architects. In fact, the publication is organised into three different parts, 'The Story,' 'The Photographs' and 'Bravo 20 National Park: A Proposal,' the photographs being framed in between two important bodies of research. The first part, 'The Story,' is an essay written and assembled by Myriam Weisang Misrach—Misrach's wife. This section consists in a thorough research into the successive military activities and the actual damage inflicted upon the land by the military. The narrative is backed up with a wide range of information such as documents related to the military activity in Nevada including the Supersonic Operation Area, military sites and military-use airspace at the scale of the United States and Nevada, articles from the *New York Times*, interviews of Native Americans, photographs testifying the presence of archaeological material such as burial areas, a variety of letters and notes sent to Congress or to the House of Representatives, and accounts of toxicity reports. A body of photographs in thus turned into a thorough investigation which gives key elements to comprehend the complexity of what is at stake at Bravo 20.

Petrochemical America, published in 2012, functions in a similar manner and is a collaboration with landscape architect Kate Orff. Misrach's photographs open the publication and are followed by an 'Ecological Atlas'. A third and smaller part consists of a 'Glossary of Terms and Solutions for a Post-Petrochemical Culture.' The 'Ecological Atlas'

is built according to the principle of “Throughlines”¹¹⁰ (Figures 53 and 54), that is to say it is structured around Misrach’s photographs and expands through the motif of the pipelines which graphically connects the pages and subjects together and creates “visual narratives.”¹¹¹ The atlas encompasses seven themes: oil, infrastructure, waste, displacement, ecology/economy, food, and landscape. Every photograph is put into perspective with its surroundings and related issues are exposed. The investigation put to the fore by Orff includes graphs, maps and data-narratives which act as a decoding of Misrach’s photographs “by analysing and revealing associated industrial or ecological processes.”¹¹² Throughout this whole part, graphically and visually engaging layouts efficiently connect elements and enable the reader to assemble the big picture and to decipher the interrelatedness of varied issues related to the oil industry. For example, the double page 164-165 (Figure 55) expands from the photograph of the *Holy Rosary Cemetery* (Figure 34) to unpack the history of the place and its gradual engulfing by petrochemical corporations. Thus, through these series of compositions the multiple shapes disaster can take on are detailed and laid bare.

Hence, Misrach stands as a mediator between disaster and his audience and enables the very mediation of this second-hand experience of disaster. Along these lines, the informative chapters of the publication serve as mediation between the photographs and the readership. They enable for an in-depth unpacking of the myriad of issues at stake in one photograph. Therefore, Misrach’s photographs become a pretext, a starting point to not only bear witness but inform and educate. The educational and informative values of these projects once more single out Misrach’s photography from the immediacy of conventional media coverage. The message lays in the distance and precision surrounding the photographs thus enabling the readership to understand the complexity of disaster’s causes.

b. Maps

Misrach uses maps within some of his photobooks which can lead to multifaceted reflections. Indeed, maps are a means to represent space that is very distinct from landscape and thus from landscape photography. Space is viewed from a different angle, a different perspective. The scale and scope of the represented space vary, and specific codifications are

¹¹⁰ Richard Misrach and Kate Orff, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, on the dust jacket.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

usually used in maps. On the other hand, landscape is directly linked to experience while maps tend to relate to more scientific matters and displays precise technical codes and norms. On the matter, art historian Svetlana Alpers states that “maps give us the measure of a place and the relationship between places, quantifiable data, while landscape pictures are evocative, and aim rather to give us the quality of a place or the viewer’s sense of it. One *is* closer to science, the other *is* art.”¹¹³ Thus, the inherent subjectivity linked to landscape representation tends to become less prominent when it comes to maps. As a consequence, it can be fruitful to wonder what relationships, what dialogues tie maps and landscape together. Do they collide, echo, or complement one another? This confrontation leads to the broader issue of space and place representation.

Maps provide different types of information and tackle a variety of phenomena: road maps, topographic maps, cadastral maps, relief maps, geological maps, and so on. In many cases, maps remain useful and practical tools conveying scientific information which help making sense of the world and getting hold of what surrounds us. The *Bravo 20* photobook contains such maps which put in relation military activities, infrastructures, and Native American reservations. All these pieces of information are superimposed throughout one’s reading of the book to create a cohesive whole. They constitute a convincing, impactful and meaningful ensemble which provides substance to the general meaning of the photobook and thus to the photographs themselves by suggesting new possible readings of their visual and metaphorical content. Thus, a photograph such as *Bomb Crater and Destroyed Convoy* (Figure 37)—when brought back to the geographical context given by the maps—can be seen as portraying a phenomenon that has become comprehensible and takes on even more meaning through the metaphorical representation of a wound in the desert.

Hence, the fact that Misrach uses maps in order to retrace his steps and to locate his photographs enables him to anchor them in some sense of reality and gives them weight. It testifies of a will to demonstrate verisimilitude and faithfulness to the real (and not imagined) dimension of the photographs. This approach is particularly visible in *Desert Cantos*. The map preceding the photographs (Figure 56) situates the different cantos according to their different locations within states, underlining an important concentration in California, Arizona, Utah, and Nevada. It thus creates some sort of definite and tangible quality to the photographs. They are inscribed within a measured and quantified space. In a similar manner, using maps allows

¹¹³ Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 214.

for disaster to become closer and more familiar, inscribed within a known space. A certain relationship of proximity to disaster is thus installed.

It could also be possible to view these maps—particularly the one in *Desert Cantos*—as a means to measure the extent and density of disasters in the affected areas; all the more so if we imagine such a map being updated on a regular basis. For example, *Petrochemical America* was revisited by Misrach in 2010 when he went back to the places he had photographed in 1998 in order to compare and examine the evolution of these sites. Nevertheless, Misrach’s approach is not purely scientific nor exhaustive but rather scattered and fragmented, highlighting contradictory motives within his work which cannot entirely fit in predetermined categories. Misrach’s intent is more likely to try and comprehend the world through its space and man’s relationships to it, and to lay an observing eye upon the American landscape.

From a mere use of maps within his publications, Misrach turns his exploration into a lively and active process: he proceeds to creating a cartography of disaster. His work resembles research, prospection and tends to establish an overview. Hence, it mirrors the very process at stake in *Desert Cantos*. Thanks to the use of maps, Misrach seems to go even further and his work takes on a greater meaning when related to the general context of American landscape photography. Indeed, Misrach is creating a space for places of the in-between, places in the interval, places that do not fit in previously determined categories. He unveils a whole geographic side to American landscape which is not usually represented. He proceeds to a cartography of hidden and repressed parts of the land. Misrach brings them to light, provides a space for them and thus gives them some sense of legitimacy as a subject and as a place. They are worth being represented and discussed. By doing so, Misrach chooses to stand at a formal and aesthetic frontier, half-way between the conventional beauty of national parks captured by Ansel Adams and the suburbs of the *New Topographics*. Still, Misrach owes a lot to the latter particularly regarding the effort to represent spaces that “had previously been framed out and erased from American landscape photography, intermediate spaces.”¹¹⁴ Therefore, Misrach does not limit himself to photographing “the other desert”¹¹⁵ and captures *the other American landscape*.

The constitution of this evolving disaster cartography thus becomes a unique means to start making sense and grasping disaster in order to comprehend its unfolding and its plural shapes. Consequently, Misrach opens the way to others to complete this mapping of disaster

¹¹⁴ Matthieu Duperrex, *op.cit.*, p. 11 (My translation).

¹¹⁵ Reyner Banham, in Richard Misrach, *Desert Cantos*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

which is intrinsically fragmented and ever-changing. It could also be perceived as an invitation for the audience to explore these landscapes themselves or at least to reflect upon them.

6.2. Reversing landscape

a. Anti-landscape

We could go further and wonder if disaster and its proliferation within intermediate places are not in fact responsible for the production of a new type of space: the anti-landscape. The notion of anti-landscape has been identified and theorised by David E. Nye and developed in the eponymous publication he directed, a seminal work on the concept. In order to comprehend anti-landscapes, Nye uses John Brinckerhoff Jackson's approach and definition of landscape so as to build his own as its reversal. According to Jackson, landscape should be viewed as "a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence."¹¹⁶ In other words, Jackson turns to the vernacular landscape, the ordinary landscape that we live on and experience. An anti-landscape is thus "a place that does not sustain life."¹¹⁷ Nye elaborates further:

In the worst cases, humans have created places that cannot support life, and these are examples of the anti-landscapes. Such places cannot sustain an ongoing human community within them. Whether temporary or long-term, anti-landscape suggests the post-human. Often these zones are the result of processes (such as desertification, erosion, deforestation, pollution or poisoning) that have occurred so slowly over generations that it can be difficult to grasp the long-term consequences of individual actions.¹¹⁸

Therefore, anti-landscapes are places where life is unstable, barren and at times only discernible through signs of death. They hint at major dysfunctions within the said space. What is also striking is the human origin attributed to the production of anti-landscapes which are presented as "unliveable places that came about either by design or as by-products of human activities."¹¹⁹ There is therefore a circularity to these processes such as "deforestation, pollution or poisoning" which overlap with disasters and make anti-landscapes the visible part of the lasting impact disaster inflicts upon the American land.

We should also notice that the very choice of the prefix 'anti—' is meaningful and different from the use of the phrase non-landscape for example. It is by no means neutral.

¹¹⁶ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹¹⁷ David E. Nye, *The Anti-Landscape*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2014, p. 11.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Indeed, ‘anti—’ can take on varied acceptations such as being the opposite of something, being against or opposed to something which is meaningful since anti-landscapes seem to invert the qualities and characteristics of landscape.

Besides, anti-landscape enables for a supplementary reading to Misrach’s photography. Indeed, the very consideration of these places together with the connection between disaster and anti-landscape through photography connotes a political and engaged stance. ‘Anti—’ thus testifies of a struggle, a fight. Finally, another acceptation of the prefix ‘anti—’ can almost be perceived as a reversal of its original meaning can be to prevent from, to alleviate, and even, to repair, to remediate.¹²⁰ These remarks lead to examine in more depth the political core within Misrach’s photobooks *Bravo 20* and *Petrochemical America*.

In the third part of the *Bravo 20* photobook, Misrach considers what would the site grow into once it becomes public land again in 2001. He then proceeds to detailing a national park proposal that would “transform the 64 square miles of bombing range into America’s first environmental memorial”¹²¹ and simultaneously enable to reflect on the past and be thoughtful about the future.¹²² The tone of this proposal is rather surprising and oscillates from mere satire to actual protest.¹²³ Indeed, Misrach presented it and often talks about it as being foremost satirical. Nonetheless, serious effort has been incorporated into the simulation of this proposal. The project was materialised on paper thanks to the help of architects and brought from imagination to paper through detailed maps and drawings by Rico Solinas. Misrach even included a detailed budget sheet and mentions the park should be financed by the Navy as “compensation for the 33 years of unauthorized use and devastation of public land,”¹²⁴ the expenses including the decontamination of the site.

The satirical aspect of the proposal lays in Misrach’s ideas for the different parts and organisation of the park. First, Misrach imagined the park should take the artificial and symbolic shape of a target (Figure 57). In order to preserve the history of the place he also chose to re-use existing military structures to implement a museum, a café, and a gift shop. On the one hand, the environmental memorial should become a place for education, explanation and reflection. Misrach provides a detailed list of what should be addressed throughout the different structures of the park:

The Bravo 20 Visitor’s Center and Museum will be devoted to the history of military abuse in peacetime. Displays and exhibits will include our radioactive experiments on the residents of the

¹²⁰ Nye, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹²¹ Richard Misrach, *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ As Scott Conohar puts it in his chapter “From Satire to Protest”, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

¹²⁴ Richard Misrach, *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

Marshall Islands in the Pacific, the contamination of continental America by tests at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, the Colorado Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant and Hanford nuclear area in Washington State, chemical weapons storage, toxic waste disposal, and the confiscation of land and airspace throughout America. Particular attention will be paid to the circumstances surrounding the Lone Rock region, with a focus on the military's illegal activities, its despoliation of the environment, its infraction of civilians' rights, and the incredible cost to the taxpayer. To put the consequences and implications of the Navy's actions into perspective, the geological, archaeological, environmental, religious, economic, and cultural (Indian) significance of the area will be highlighted.¹²⁵

We sense a strong will to restore some form of justice to the landscape and to the inhabitants by telling the detailed story and implications related to this piece of land without leaving out any aspect of the complex and intertwined issues at stake. On the other hand, Misrach expresses bitterness and anger through irony by choosing place names that bear heavy connotations (Figure 58). We find names such as 'Devastation Drive,' a road that circles the bombing site, and 'Boardwalk of the Bombs,' a walking path from which visitors can observe remarkable elements photographed by Misrach such as an abandoned school bus and an eagle nest on top of the remnants of a military vehicle. Another direct link to Misrach's photographs is also proposed with the idea of a "walk-in crater" that could enable visitor to literally penetrate one of Misrach's photographs.

Although the national park was never created beyond paper, the Bravo 20 National Park Proposal was sufficiently compelling and significant that it entered and circulated in Congress:

I found some years later that my book was being passed around Congress, and they turned a chemical weapons testing range in Colorado into the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge in 1992, two years after the book was published. I would like to think my project had an influence, but I can't be certain.¹²⁶

The fact that the proposal allegedly reached government and led to actual remediation remains hypothetical. Concrete impact of photography as a political and a recovery tool is questioned. How is one to account for the measurable effects and efficiency of photography on behaviours? That is perhaps what Richard Misrach and landscape architect Kate Orff attempted to initiate with their collaboration.

On a different tone indeed, *Petrochemical America* also contains a remediation proposal. Originally, in the early stages of the project, Misrach intended to produce a book similar to *Bravo 20* and thought about transforming some of the industrial sites into museums in order to, once more, educate and communicate on 'Cancer Alley'. Instead, the publication ends with a 'Glossary of Terms and Solutions for a Post-Petrochemical Culture' designed to put to the fore

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹²⁶ Richard Misrach, in Baptiste Lignel, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

different scale actions that can be performed in everyday life: “Each is a solution that we can choose individually, participate in collectively, or pressure our government to implement.”¹²⁷ Seventy-five entries tackle the categories developed in the ‘Ecological Atlas’: oil, infrastructure, waster, displacement, ecology/economy, food, landscape. The responses range from ecotourism to polycropping and involve both local and global actors and institutions. The solutions are gathered, connected and synthesised in a visual layout that enables to comprehend the interconnection and chain effect which can be instigated thanks to these initiatives to remediate landscape.¹²⁸ As a matter of fact, these solutions mirror the way the interrelated issues are presented in the first place: it becomes a direct response that reverses the principles and issues demonstrated in the second part of *Petrochemical America*. A practical and efficient application is thus created between Misrach’s photography which can seem too remote from triggering immediate action on their own and actual tools, attitudes and behaviour to carry out at one’s own scale.

b. Reassessing landscape photography

The politisation of photographic series such as *Bravo 20* and *Petrochemical America* can ultimately lead to a broad re-evaluation of landscape photography as a whole. It is convenient to situate Misrach within previous American landscape photography traditions. Indeed, different tendencies and movements have demonstrated the complexity of existing relationships to degrees of political involvement.

First of all, there is the case of Ansel Adams, who wanted to turn landscape photography into an object of art while using his photographs to ignite the creation of national parks. Adams (1902-1984) founded the Group *f/64* with other photographers such as Edward Weston who sought to oppose the Pictorialists by asserting an exacerbated aestheticisation of landscape, notably by moving towards abstract lines and erasing the initial meaning and landmark of the land. In many respects, Adams is the opposite of Misrach in that he tends to strictly keep up with the tradition of the sublime and to romanticise landscape, leading to an impression of staging and artificiality which creates highly dramatic and at times unrealistic sceneries. Adams generally uses light minutely to enhance sharp contrasts between immaculate and shiny whites, and deep and overwhelming blacks, as it can be seen in *The Tetons and Snake River, Grand Teton*

¹²⁷ Kate Orff, in Richard Misrach and Kate Orff, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

¹²⁸ Here, ‘landscape’ stands for the inhabited and lived space, as John Brinckerhoff Jackson theorised it.

National Park, Wyoming, (1942) (Figure 59). The light is given a sacred dimension and provides a new insight to the photograph. God's presence in nature is suggested and tends to trigger environmental awareness.¹²⁹ This sacralisation of the American wilderness as untamed and virgin comes in opposition to Misrach's allegedly authentic and realistic representations.

More recently, another photographic project came in continuity with the American tradition while taking some distance from the original purpose and intents of the nineteenth-century surveys. In 1977, Mark Klett created the *Rephotographic Survey Project*¹³⁰ (Figure 60). His approach was to reproduce photographs from the 1860s with precision by repeating camera positions, angles and lighting. By doing so, the aim was to highlight the physical changes of the western land one hundred years later. The result is a confrontation between the original photograph and its updated version, which reveals man-caused transformations and deteriorations. Thus, Adams and Klett—although producing radically different photographs—paved the way for environmental photography by adding meaning to aesthetic images and asserted landscape photography as a political instrument on the same terms as documentary or social photography.¹³¹

Another major photographic trend deeply affected American landscape photography. In 1975, William Jenkins curated a pivotal exhibition entitled *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*.¹³² Although it received various and contradictory responses, it was regarded to be insightful and challenging and had such a lasting influence that the phrase “new topographics” would be used to express a certain type of landscape photography. Thus, typical examples, such as *Mobile Homes, Jefferson County, Colorado* (Figure 61) by Robert Adams, usually depict unromanticised, stark and common pieces of urban landscape overlooked until then. These photographers transcribed the visual and geographical results of the changing America from “an urban-industrial culture to a service-oriented economy defined by suburban warehouses and standardized tract house neighborhoods spreading out, especially across the West,”¹³³ by placing the imprint of man as the focal center. In that respect, this exhibition is

¹²⁹ Ansel Adams dedicated his life to protecting the American nature and to urging people into respecting the 1916 *National Park Service Act*.

¹³⁰ Alongside Ellen Manchester and JoAnn Verburg. The entire project was published in a book: *Second View, The Rephotographic Survey Project*, University of New Mexico Press, 1984.

¹³¹ We think of the use of photography such as made by Jacob Riis with *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890), or by Lewis Hine and his documentation of child labour for the *National Child Labor Committee* from 1908 to 1918.

¹³² The exhibition was presented at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, in October 1975. It featured Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel Jr. The exhibition had such a significant impact that it was reconstructed entirely in 2009.

¹³³ Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach (ed.), *Reframing the New Topographics*, Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. xiv.

considered to have redefined American landscape photography, moving away from Ansel Adams' dominant practice which tended to define and present landscape as separate from humanity. On the contrary, the *New Topographics* proposed a vision of landscape that is intertwined with human activities and impact.

Surprisingly enough, the alleged intent of curator William Jenkins was far from social or political claims. He stated he was "doing nothing more than mapping the contemporary landscape."¹³⁴ He expressed his intention to present "not more than frames laid on the world."¹³⁵ However, this apparent objectivity supposed to be based on description and observation could not be entirely neutral. According to Miles Orvell, "the act of seeing the landscape cannot be a purely objective one"¹³⁶ and the approach was becoming postmodern, "moving us to contemplate the act of viewing itself."¹³⁷ Thus, the *New Topographics* stand at an ambiguous end of landscape photography, presenting a radical shift in form and aesthetics while intending to avoid political claims and implications.

Hence, Misrach seems to stand closest to Mark Klett in both approach and aesthetics. We could say that Misrach simultaneously continues and negates American landscape photography tradition to different degrees. Together with what I argued in the chapter on distance,¹³⁸ we could state that overall Misrach provokes a reversal which implies an evolution of landscape photography as a genre. Misrach's work stands in favor of a political landscape photography. Landscape photography cannot and must not solely be romantic or aesthetic. Misrach manages to transform landscape photography by making it eminently political. It has to be(come) more, it has to serve a purpose and turn into a tool for engagement.

Although landscape photography and environmentalism have been connected to different degrees throughout history, Misrach brings them one step further. The immediacy and proximity with disaster that is characteristic of our contemporary era establishes advocacy through photography as inevitable. The importance of bearing witness takes a new turn and leans towards a sense of urgency. Thus, photography is expected to play an active role, especially when it comes to landscape since it encapsulates changing stages of climate emergency also intrinsically tied to disaster-related issues.

However, some striking paradoxes can still emerge from Misrach's photography. Despite a ubiquitous sense of emergency related to the subject matter of a great majority of his

¹³⁴ William Jenkins, "Introduction," in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, Rochester, New York, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975, p. 5.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Miles Orvell, *American Photography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 53.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Chapter 3 "Distance", pp. 35-39.

photographs, an impression of standstill is simultaneously present which tends to result from aesthetic choices. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how the establishment of new and sharper roles for landscape photography implies the need for the creation of adequate aesthetic codes.

III – AESTHETICS OF DISASTER: SENSITIVE PARADOXES

The peculiar position of Misrach within photographic landscape tradition together with urgency and with his personal placement as a political and environmental activist call for a specific response and thus for the establishment of new aesthetic strategies. His photography answers to something intimate on the one hand, and to something compelling and urgent on the other. What aesthetic devices and choices could encompass this multiplicity of facets related to disaster? What is the most meaningful strategy to convey the powerful messages encapsulated in Misrach's photography? What visually singularises him from other photographers? What expresses the most the dynamics of disaster?

7. Confronting aesthetics

7.1. Sublimity of disaster

a. Burke's sublime

The sublime has long been used to describe both experiences and representations of landscape, whether they be direct or mediated. Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Idea of the Sublime and Beautiful* is largely regarded as a seminal work in discourse of the sublime. He describes it as the "strongest emotion"¹³⁹ that the human mind could comprehend. Thus, the sublime is produced by "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger [...] whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror."¹⁴⁰ Another term that conveniently encapsulates the specific effects of the sublime is the distinctive notion of awe. When put in relation to disaster, it seems awe points at the inherent fascination that is jointly produced with the horror of disaster and is visible in Misrach's representations.

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan remarks: "Nature—wild nature—only began to draw appreciative glances when people no longer saw it as a threat. No longer a threat, wild nature could be incorporated into an aesthetic—the aesthetic of the sublime."¹⁴¹ A shift in man's relation to nature as becoming non-threatening was thus necessary for the sublime theory to

¹³⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757], Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 36.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, "Foreword", in Kenneth Olwig, *Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic: From Britain's Renaissance to America's New World*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press 2002.

emerge. Interestingly, the development of the theory by Burke corresponds to the burgeoning era of man-made disaster in which the contemporary industrial revolution is greatly instrumental. Indeed, the transformations brought about by the industrial revolution largely enabled man to master nature. In a similar vein, Professor J. Nicholas Entrikin underlines that this “disconcerting mix of terror and awe, threat and joy that characterises the sublime has been a significant part of the discourse of natural disaster.”¹⁴² As a consequence, it seems inevitable to draw an intimate bond between the sublime and disaster. The two are intricately linked as they both crystallise and express a relationship to the world, a relationship between the human world and the natural world, between man and its environment.

On the sole principle of representing what triggers terror and threat, Misrach could theoretically fit in the realm of the sublime. Nevertheless, when it comes to aesthetic details and principles provided by Burke, Misrach’s photography does not coincide with most of the criteria.

Edmund Burke indicates some of the key factors to producing a sublime sentiment. He insists on the role of darkness in the creation of sublimity in the sections “Darkness Terrible in Its Own Nature” and “Why Darkness is Terrible.” Thus, darkness is essential in producing terror, since “it contributes greatly to obscurity, which in turn fosters terror.”¹⁴³ Nonetheless, light is not entirely excluded from the boundaries of the sublime. Only a certain type of light can also be source to sublime ideas. Hence, the direct light from the sun “immediately exerted on the eye, as it overpowers the sense, is a very great idea.”¹⁴⁴

These considerations of light and darkness are problematic when it comes to Misrach, especially since light is perhaps the main component to his photographs. Indeed, he mostly photographs the desert at dawn or dusk, that is to say at intermediate times between full light and darkness. On moderate light, Burke observes: “The lights must be unequal, here strong, and there weak; without that noble gradation, which the perspective always effects on parts disposed uninterruptedly in a right line.”¹⁴⁵ Burke insists on extreme light and darkness which contradicts Misrach’s aesthetic choices precisely displaying “that noble gradation” that should be avoided.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² J. Nicholas Entrikin, “Geographic Landscapes and Natural Disaster”, in Jeff E. Malpas, *The Place of Landscape: Concepts, Contexts, Studies*, MIT Press, 2011, p. 119.

¹⁴³ Edward S. Casey, *Representing Place: Landscape Paintings and Maps*, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p. 41.

¹⁴⁴ Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁴⁶ See Figure 27.

Another major aspect which is ubiquitous to Misrach's photography also falls a bit far from Burke's theory. In his section "Vastness", Burke mentions "greatness of dimension" as being "a powerful cause of the sublime."¹⁴⁷ Three possible types of vastness are then listed: length, height, and depth. As we have observed, Misrach did not photograph vistas which had to do with particular heights. He explains:

I have always been attracted to vast, barren, empty landscapes. I've photographed in all the Western desert states, but I've avoided photographing the more spectacular places, like the rocky high altitudes of Utah or New Mexico, or in national parks. Those sites are just too pretty, too known, and too photographed.¹⁴⁸

According to Burke's terminology, Misrach's expression of vastness through open horizons (Figure 13), which he calls length, produces the weakest sublime effect, the idea of "looking down from a precipice"¹⁴⁹ being greater. Indeed, Misrach does not particularly play with points of view—such as low or high angles—and tends to prefer eye-level shots. In fact, he seldom critically manipulates angle so as not to overly dramatise subject matters that are already impacting enough by themselves. Still, it could be engaging to determine how these recurrent depth of field in Misrach's photography produce a distinctive effect upon the beholder. Overall, it seems that the sublime is not sufficient to encompass the complexity of response to Misrach's photography.

b. Contemplative sublime and Americanness

Nonetheless, there are some specific parts of Burke's sublime that better correspond to Misrach's photography. In his chapter "Apocalyptic and Contemplative Sublimity," philosopher Edward S. Casey expands on the idea of the contemplative sublime constructed from Burke's theory. In order to do so he focuses on a "neglected"¹⁵⁰ section of Burke's aesthetic treatise entitled "Privation" which reads: "all general privations are great, because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence.*" Casey compares these privations to "the desolation experienced in certain forms of wilderness"¹⁵¹ which inevitably echo many subject matters of Misrach's. Furthermore, he provides us with interesting parallels, comparing the notions cited by Burke to core characteristics of Luminism and of their "distinctive sublime of

¹⁴⁷ Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹⁴⁸ Richard Misrach, *The Photography Workshop Series, op. cit.*, p. 53.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Casey, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

contemplation.”¹⁵² Hence, the very notions of “solitude”, “silence”, and “vacuity” (more clearly than “darkness” as discussed previously) correspond to Misrach’s aesthetics. Once more, we touch to the straightforward and minimalist aspect of Misrach’s photography where space and atmosphere become the greatest signs. Similarly, these principles also echo Misrach’s very experience when photographing some of the places he went to, as he describes in the preface to *Bravo 20*:

It was also the most graphically ravaged environment I had ever seen. I found myself at the epicenter, the heart of the apocalypse. Alone, no sound, no movement. No buildings, no roads. No indication of life, no promise of civilization. Only the smell of rusted metal. Bombs and lifeless holes. Side by side were great beauty and great horror.¹⁵³

Besides, the clear proximity between Misrach and the Luminists advocates for a typically American sublime that sets itself apart from European legacy which would thus be conceived around extensive use of light and exacerbation of depth of field. Martina Sitt describes one of the distinctive criteria of the American sublime, putting an emphasis on depth and vastness:

[A]ny focus of the gaze, on a small defined area [...] was avoided. The View, as determined by the format, had to be generous and the pictorial space sufficiently open and vast to leave room for atmospheric movement and the like. Phenomena such as the calm before a thunderstorm or the impending storm were the new “heroes.”¹⁵⁴

Sitt points at the fact that the American sublime is quieter, less astonishing and overwhelming. The space provided in the canvas for the light to spread is sublime since it attracts and traps the gaze which follows receding lines towards the horizon, often where the light originates. Another symbolic and cultural reason could be applied to these formal differences. The depth of field of the Luminists hints at a land that was constructed on the prospect of focusing on the present and on future development together with ideologies of Manifest Destiny and conquest, while Misrach, although using similar lighting and depth of field, provides us with vistas whose barrenness and devastation are to be contemplated.

Furthermore, what is thought-provoking with the idea of contemplative sublime is that it fits the time of reading and comprehension necessary to Misrach’s work. There is something slow and progressive that gradually rises when one is viewing a series of photographs by Misrach, something that is not immediate and that reveals itself through observation. Once the

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Misrach, *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West*, *op. cit.*, Preface p. xiv.

¹⁵⁴ Martina Sitt, “Between Influence and Independence; the Relationship between American and German Painters in the Nineteenth Century,” in Stephan Kojan (ed.), *America, The New World in Nineteenth Century Painting*, Munich, London & New York, Prestel Verlag, 1999, p. 225.

mind has wrapped itself around what the photograph encapsulates, around its very strength, its scope is revealed through its precision, simplicity and paradoxical tranquility.

c. Variations of the sublime

The theory of the sublime as foremost defined by Edmund Burke has been nuanced and developed by many theorists and scholars so as to create a whole range of subcategories to the sublime, most of the time still applied to landscape. Many subdivisions expanded from the original theory of the sublime have been developed and could fit to a certain extent Misrach's photography. Hence, Miles Orvell developed the destructive sublime, which focuses on the "spectacle of material destruction" that characterises the current practice of disaster photography.¹⁵⁵ David E. Nye focused on theorising the American technological sublime which takes into account social inflections to the construction of a distinctive American sublime based on technological developments up to a "consumer sublime."¹⁵⁶ Finally, Jennifer Peeples exposed her thesis on the toxic sublime which she defines as "the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe."¹⁵⁷

In each case, these nuanced theories seem to point at the source, the origin of the sublime effect and thus fit precise landscape situations. All of them can resonate with Misrach's work and enable us to examine his work from new perspectives. However, they seem still fragmented and can only be adapted to scattered specific photographs or series. Furthermore, adapting the sublime to any possible situation seems to diminish its very relevance and presents it as a malleable concept that can be manipulated and shaped so as to fit any circumstance. Overall, as much as they bring about interesting outtakes on disaster and photography, their scope remains limited.

While awe and fascination are perfectly fitting for both disaster and Misrach's photography, the sublime is not quite the right term, and its semantic implications seem to hint at something lacking. Misrach's photographs indeed leave room for something disquieting that is less grand and less ample, less spectacular than the sublime, something that is less frontal but still deeply disturbing, compelling and awe-provoking.

¹⁵⁵ Miles Orvell, "Photographing Disaster: Urban Ruins and the Destructive Sublime", *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 4, "Iconographies of the Calamitous in American Visual Culture", 2013, pp. 647-671.

¹⁵⁶ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1994.

¹⁵⁷ Peeples, *op. cit.*, p. 375.

It seems Misrach's photography would correspond better to another theoretical and aesthetic frame that would allow for a quieter route to a similar effect. In relation to this discrepancy, another problematic aspect of the sublime can be raised. As mentioned by Entrikin earlier, the sublime is particularly used in relation to natural disasters. This remark jointly points at something the theory of the sublime lacks when it comes to better encompassing Misrach's photography since it misses out on one of the core aspects which is the fact Misrach's disaster are foremost man-made. It seems the aesthetic of the sublime is too remote from man's presence. That is why the uncanny might be a relevant aesthetic principle to apply to Misrach's photography since it is perhaps closer to man.

7.2. Towards the uncanny

a. Defining the uncanny

The uncanny is a term used mostly in psychoanalysis and in literature, which was developed and defined foremost by Sigmund Freud in his essay "Das Unheimliche" in 1919. The word uncanny is the translation of the German word *unheimliche* which roughly means 'unhomely.' It refers to something that is not known and familiar but that is not completely foreign either. According to Freud, the uncanny is "that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."¹⁵⁸ As far as literature is concerned, the uncanny is thought to "leave the reader in uncertainty,"¹⁵⁹ which corresponds to the feeling one can experience while facing Misrach's photographs.¹⁶⁰ Nonetheless, it is to be noted that the uncanny is a concept which is difficult to grasp and to properly define as it can take several shapes. Hence, Freud also mentions previous investigation on the uncanny, including that of philosopher F. W. J. Schelling according to whom the uncanny "is everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible,"¹⁶¹ giving another depth to its meaning, suggesting it has to do with a process, a movement, something changing, appearing.

In recent years, Nicholas Royle proposed a more contemporary definition which is perhaps closer to current issues and acceptations. Thus, according to him: "uncanniness entails

¹⁵⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche" [1919], <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>. Accessed February 7, 2020, p. 1.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁰ Examples will be expanded upon later on.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4, Quoted by Freud from F.W.J. Schelling's *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 1835.

a sense of uncertainty and suspense, however momentary and unstable. As such, it is often to be associated with an experience of the threshold, liminality, margins, borders, frontiers.”¹⁶² What is striking with this definition is that Royle establishes the uncanny as something ‘on the verge of’, in-between that could eventually be applied to a wide range of features and levels.

Furthermore, since the uncanny is stated by Freud to be concerned with aesthetics, there is no reason it should be restricted to the field of literature. It could therefore be challenging to see how the uncanny can be transposed and adapted to another medium—to photography. Another intriguing side when thinking about associating the uncanny to Misrach’s practice is that he actually graduated in psychology which thus creates another tie between the two.

b. The issue of the uncanny landscape

The uncanny in photography is usually directly linked to the human figure. That is the case with the work of Diane Arbus whose disturbing photographs of twins or disabled people offering themselves to the camera tackle the reaction of the spectator and epitomise the uncanny. Thus, Benjamin Léon refers to impressions close to the uncanny while describing *Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park N.Y.C.* (Figure 62): “la figure familière devient étrange, provoquant une dissymétrie de l’événement représenté que l’on surmonte en acceptant une forme de déchirure à l’image.”¹⁶³ Hence, what is also disturbing is the grenade which can intrigue the spectator regarding its nature, as well as the frontal gaze of the boy. The direct link made with the spectator is also uncanny and forces us to address otherness and to be faced with considerations we tend to avoid or ignore.

To a certain extent, Diane Arbus exemplifies a conventional and rather common acceptance of the uncanny that is really close to the literary uncanny. Indeed, the uncanny is often produced by exploiting the trope of the doppelgänger such as in *Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey* (Figure 63). Therefore, it sets boundaries to the presence of the uncanny in photography and seems on the surface to reduce it to the genre of the portrait and to the sole play with human-like shapes, objects and reflections. As a consequence, it might seem tricky to apply it to landscape photography. However, the materialisation or evocation of man can be

¹⁶² Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. vii.

¹⁶³ Benjamin Léon, “L’expérience de la normalité anormale, sur quelques photographies de Diane Arbus”, *Le souci du monde*, École Doctorale Arts & Médias - ED 267, Nov 2011, Paris France, pp.27-33.

suggested through more means than straightforward figuration, as we have extensively discussed previously.

One of the possibilities to try and perform such a transition could be to wonder firstly what an uncanny landscape could be apart from the realm of photography. This will allow us to root the reflection in order to determine where the points of interest in studying uncanny landscape photography are.

First of all, John Brinckerhoff Jackson describes landscape as such:

Even the simplest, least interesting landscape often contains elements which we are quite unable to explain, mysteries that fit into no known pattern. But we also eventually learn that every landscape, no matter how exotic, also contains elements which we at once recognize and understand.¹⁶⁴

Jackson points at familiarity as a starting point when considering landscape, explaining that no landscape is entirely foreign. This means that uncanniness and landscape can be inherently linked under certain circumstances. When facing a landscape photograph, we tend to attach ourselves to known elements and landmarks that we can find in the picture. We identify the shapes we see and associate them to ascribed elements—these are mountains, this is a lake.

The concept of the uncanny landscape has been addressed by Jean-Luc Nancy. He describes landscape as beginning with “a notion, however vague or confused, of distancing and of a loss of sight, for both the physical eye and the eye of the mind.”¹⁶⁵ There is thus an inherent disturbing process linked to landscape. Furthermore, Nancy defines the uncanny landscape as a space which “opens to the unknown,”¹⁶⁶ a place of “dislocation, [...] strangeness and estrangement”¹⁶⁷ which he applies to landscape painting through the representation of the horizon and that can therefore be related and extended to photography. It would seem that, quite naturally, links are being made with landscape and photography when it comes to expressing or experiencing the uncanny.

¹⁶⁴ Brinckerhoff Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁶⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Uncanny Landscape” [2001], translated by Jeff Fort, *The Ground of the Image*, Fordham University Press, 2005, p. 53.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

c. Uncanny and disaster

As we have seen, disasters, and especially those photographed by Misrach are foremost intertwined with man's activities. Similarly, we have seen the uncanny is usually directly linked to figurative human depictions. It thus seems the uncanny is a relevant aesthetics to tackle the representation of man-made disasters. Indeed, the fact that we are able to recognise and identify man's presence through traces, signs, leftovers makes the photographs uncanny. If it is true that the trope of the doppelgänger is a clear feature in the production of uncanniness, analogous convergence can be seen in photographs which only depict man's absence.

A conventional representation of a doppelgänger motif hints at the doubling and duality of the self, and often implies the representation of two human figures on the image. This double figure functions as a mirror, as a symmetrical device which links two entities together. Still, this effect of doubling and dual relationship is also visible within Misrach's photography despite the absence of actual doppelgänger figures. This duality or connection is transferred; it expands from the space of the photograph to tie together subject matter (the implied human presence in the frame) and receptors. In other words, the dual relationship initially present within the frame turns into a relation that links what is inside and outside the frame. The beholder is therefore frontally confronted with man-made imprints represented in the photographs. Consequently, depending on what is depicted, this process forces empathy and identification (when it tackles victims of disasters), or guilt and responsibility (when it relates directly to consequences of man's actions). This connection points at a shared liability and seems to be a means to ask the beholders if they take part to these landscape transformations. This confrontation simultaneously hints at a paradox: although it might point at something we have not directly done or contributed to, something familiar about them remains.

As a matter of fact, the recurrent use of depth of field we discussed before contributes to producing a similar effect. This compositional device also relates to the uncanny since it allows for a process of 'laying bare'. The gaze gets lost in the barren space, and what was silenced is quietly revealed and exposed. The absence or loss of visual and physical landmarks tend to provoke a disquieting impression upon the beholder. At times, soil and sky display the same colour and provoke a modification of space perception (Figure 22).

The sense of familiarity that prevails in Misrach's photographs also comes from our frequent acquaintance with disaster through an overload of images which pervade collective imagery and imaginary. We are indeed submerged with an extensive visual culture of disaster

that goes from disaster and apocalyptic films to TV news coverage, and is reinforced by the immediacy of social media. In addition, the urging climate and sanitary crises enhance this omnipresence and familiarity with disasters. The phenomenon is growing up to the point that the phrase “America’s disaster culture” was chosen as the title of Robert C. Bell and Robert Ficociello’s 2017 publication which questions the importance of representation in the amplification of disaster. As part of this disaster patrimony, Misrach’s photographs are evocative of these themes, and consequently his representations resonate with familiar vistas.

8. Uncanny poetics

8.1. Aestheticisation of horror

The compelling contradiction between form and content is perhaps what singularises Misrach the most. One of the most striking visual clashes in Misrach's photography is undoubtedly the vibrating contrast between a terrible subject and a highly aesthetic treatment of this subject. This discrepancy between content and form seems to be at the core of his work and provokes great effects upon the beholder. It also raises several questions. Could disaster initiate an aesthetic experience at the frontier of the ugly and the beautiful? Would this experience be close to the uncanny? What is the balance between the two? What dominates, and in which photograph?

a. Redefining beauty

This phenomenon can take several shapes and several degrees of intensity. Hence, horror is not the only disturbing feeling that is turned beautiful by Misrach. Indeed, he plays with multiple layers and types of chilling scenes which tackle the beholder in different ways. Beauty becomes sick, misplaced, deadly. We wonder, should this scene be beautiful? Is it beautiful without Misrach's rendition of it? When observing from a safe distance, it is easier to find beauty in terrible matters. Tensions are emerging: can we reconcile the unpleasant and the beautiful, according to which proportions? Misrach's photographs propose a voyage into redefining what can be viewed as beautiful.

First of all, horror can be turned into beauty. In *Submerged Trailer, Salton Sea, California* (Figure 64), a trailer park has been flooded, depicting the destruction of someone's dwelling while presenting a perfectly balanced and smooth picture under an eerie light where water and sky seem to have merged. In *Desert Fire #255 (Smoldering Cow Paddies)* (Figure 65), a scene of a freshly burned field is turned into a post-apocalyptic battlefield amidst different-coloured smokes which soften the setting into a misty atmosphere. A similar unreal effect is produced in *Night Releases, Mississippi River Corridor, Louisiana* (Figure 66), where an industrial site and pollution are rendered vaporous and subtly unearthly thanks to a variation of shades and lights.

All these examples demonstrate the movement of a serious and often destructive subject matter that has been transferred into the realm of the beautiful. This happens with the use of a filter, a prism, namely through the eye of Misrach and thanks to the photographic medium.

Hence, the use of compositional and formal devices such as angle, time of day, and symmetry, modifies the scene. His choices organise the setting so that it appears as beautiful.

Yet, boundaries of the beautiful remain movable and permeable. The very same devices can be used to alter an ordinary harmless scene and accentuate its features to turn it into something disquieting. Photographs such as *Black Line* (Figure 22) epitomise this transformation of the peaceful into the unsettling. The detail of the line, cutting the photograph in half, contrasting with the dominating off-white of the photograph, radically changes the effect of the photograph. It demonstrates that beauty, and here particularly natural beauty, is fragile and can easily be manipulated or overturned at any time.

In almost every case, we observe a mix of beauty and horror within the same photograph whether it be the abject turned beautiful or the beautiful disrupted. Misrach thus stands on an aesthetic threshold. This balance can perhaps be confusing at times since it can provoke a merging of form and content. If we come back to *Black Line* (Figure 22), the threat to the landscape—that is to say human intrusion within the scene—happens to be the actual visually disturbing element of the photograph. Yet, although monochromatic harmony produced by the dominant white hues is disturbed, the aesthetic interest of the photograph is not altered, on the contrary. This is precisely where the core paradox of Misrach’s photography lies. It is often the very nefarious trace of man which is source to the punctum¹⁶⁸ in Misrach’s photographs.

It could therefore be argued that Misrach is reinventing new standards of the beautiful, by proposing an uncanny beauty which suggests that barrenness and degradation do not necessarily have to be opposed to the beautiful. Yet it raises questions on the fragility and instability of this same beauty embedded in disaster. These tensions are the source to this uncanny beauty which express the experience of disaster and is likely to trigger reactions from the beholder.

These uncanny combinations are indeed acknowledged by Misrach as a means to grasp the beholder’s interest: “The positive side to beautiful prints is that they make us pay attention without necessarily rendering the subject attractive or inuring viewers to the subject’s horror.”¹⁶⁹ What Misrach says is that, even though those antagonistic elements are put in relation and have an effect on each other, they do not add up or cancel one another, they exist simultaneously. Their coexistence seems to be key to produce the inherent uncanny character of disaster.

¹⁶⁸ According to Roland Barthes, seminal concept from *La Chambre claire : Note sur la photographie*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, Gallimard, Seuil, 1980.

¹⁶⁹ Misrach, *Crimes and Splendors, op, cit*, p. 15.

b. “Canto VI: The Pit”

Some of the most striking occurrences of this blending of beauty and horror can be found in the series “Canto VI: The Pit” which depicts dead animals which death’s origin remains unsure. Misrach tried to investigate by asking local residents and government agencies but never received as clear explanation, the animals were either dumped there in accordance with a supposedly common practice in the West, or poisoned because of nearby toxic sites.¹⁷⁰ Misrach decided the series should be presented with a historical text, recounting similar events in the 1950s:

On March 24, 1953, the Bulloch brothers were trailing 2000 head of sheep across the Sand Springs Valley when they were exposed to extensive fallout from a dirty atomic test. Within a week first ewes began dropping their lambs prematurely—stunted, woolless, legless, potbellied. Soon full-grown sheep started dying in large numbers with the same symptoms—running sores with large pustules, and hardened hooves. Horses and cattle were found dead with beta burns. At final count, 4,390 animals were killed. [...] Initial investigation by government experts indicated that radiation was the cause. However, when the Atomic Energy Commission recognized the potential economic and political liability, all reports and findings were immediately classified. The AEC did not provide a public explanation—a dry year and malnutrition were blamed.¹⁷¹

Thus, Misrach connects similar events from two different time periods in order to assert his work as political. This choice provides the beholders with even more horror than the content of the photographs alone. The paragraph alone was seen by some as problematic since it associated historical content from an indirectly related story producing a far-fetched and unnecessary combination which looked like a forced justification for this series.

If we focus on *Dead Animals #59* (Figure 67), we can notice an unusual beauty arise from the picture. The photograph could be compared to a still-life. The colours are treated carefully and with harmony thanks to a scale of natural earth tones which enhance the textures of both the soil and the animals’ skin. The chosen composition with dead cows on the foreground and all the way to the vanishing point, which is simultaneously hidden by a sand hill, can be related to war photography tradition and connotes Timothy O’Sullivan’s *A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania* (Figure 68). Furthermore, the simultaneous depiction of visual pleasure and revulsion can also be seen as the legacy of surrealist photographer Frederick Sommer, known for his treatment of deep-contrasted and smooth photographs that turned the dead animals into matter and tactile textures as in *Dead Coyotes* (Figure 69).

¹⁷⁰ Wilkes Tucker, *Crimes and Splendors, op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁷¹ Fraenkel Gallery website, <https://fraenkelgallery.com/exhibitions/the-pit>, Accessed March 13, 2021.

“The Pit” and the issue of beauty it embodies have raised criticism. Indeed, it is the most direct and graphic representation of death within Misrach’s photography. That alone might be a disturbing and problematic thing to depict. Still, the critiques were mostly pointing at the main issue at stake in this chapter. The intended formal beauty of these photographs was thought to invalidate the horror they portray. Gerry Badger even reports that “there have been accusations that Misrach has ‘exploited’ his dead subjects by utilising the pornography of death.”¹⁷²

Furthermore, critics repeatedly chastised the fact that Misrach earns a living out of depicting someone else’s suffering or picturing death. Some pointed at the so-called consumerist end of his prints:

What does it mean for one of the final resting places of the image of the destruction of someone’s home or the source of death of thousands by explosion or cancer, to be used as a decorative object, hanging in the private home of a wealthy coastal urbanite or sitting on the coffee table of a loft apartment?¹⁷³

Here, Kennedy targets both Misrach’s ethical behaviour in relation to his photographs and the beholder, turned into a consumer who willingly displays Misrach’s photographs as ornamental objects. However, only a few people can financially access big scale prints for their home. The real impact and dissemination of Misrach’s photographs, and by extension of the message they put to the fore, are operated through exhibitions and photobooks, which, although targeting and being accessible to a restrained part of the American population (and beyond) tend to reach out to a greater number. This criticism points at yet another paradox at the core of Misrach’s photography: does the aesthetic construction of his photographs make them a merely acceptable decorative object, or the denunciative and informative character of the content condemns the photographs to remain in the context of a museum, as an object to study and reflect upon? Once more, we can wonder if the two are irrevocably incompatible.

Despite the negative reviews, this response demonstrates the fact that Misrach has reached something that triggers and unsettles people, and that his approach seems efficient and successful. He himself stated that “[he] felt like [he] had developed a language and now [he] had something to say.”¹⁷⁴ Indeed, this use of aesthetics can be seen as a means to disseminate statements and opinions. Misrach implements an idea and the reaction of the beholder is sparked:

¹⁷² Gerry Badger, *op. cit.*

¹⁷³ Nathalie Jeanne Kennedy, *Preservation’s Erasure: Challenging the Popular Reception of Richard Misrach’s Desert Cantos of the 1980s*, Master’s Thesis in Visual Studies, supervised by Jonathan D. Katz and T. Triandos, Graduate School of the University at Buffalo, State University of New York, 2018, p. 52.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Misrach, in John Paul Caponigro, *op. cit.*

I've come to believe that beauty can be a very powerful conveyor of difficult ideas. It engages people when they might otherwise look away. [...] The impact of art may be more complex and far-reaching than theory is capable of assessing. To me, the work I do is a means of interpreting unsettling truths, of bearing witness and sounding an alarm. The beauty of formal representation both carries an affirmation of life and subversively brings us face to face with news from our besieged world.¹⁷⁵

This proves that besides creating an aesthetic and visually appealing picture, Misrach intends to communicate something more through his art. Just as the surveys' photographs or Ansel Adams', Misrach's pictures are embedded in several functions and meanings. Thus, it is precisely by creating a distinctive means of expressing the uncanny beautiful that Misrach places himself as an environmental activist.

Thus, thanks to the use of strong paradoxes which convey both a poetic and an unsettling side, Misrach gradually builds an uncanny language and uncanny norms which frame his photographs and confer an inherent mood and recognisable quality to his art.

8.2. Uncanny and liminality

Among characteristics of the uncanny, liminality is perhaps what resonates the most with Misrach's representations of disaster. This could be the precise means and tool to tackle the fact that Misrach sets himself apart in practice and intents. He takes a step back when it comes to creating meaning around disaster, when placing himself within landscape photography tradition, and when producing aesthetics.

Liminality as a concept can encompass several acceptations which resonate when combined together. The liminal can refer to something that is fixed or ephemeral, positioned in between and can be seen as an intermediate transitional idea. It underlines contrast between two elements, two poles, sometimes two extremes while simultaneously establishing a link between them.

Misrach has sometimes talked about his photography—often about his early work on the desert—in terms that infer to liminality. For example, he explains the moment he likes to photograph is at the “crack between the two worlds,”¹⁷⁶ that is to say at the junction, at a transitional and thus liminal moment between night and day, namely dusk or dawn.¹⁷⁷ Misrach

¹⁷⁵ Richard Misrach, quoted by Gerry Badger, *op. cit.*

¹⁷⁶ Richard Misrach, quoted by Sean Elder, “The Tainted Desert: Richard Misrach's Photographs Document the Beauty and Ruin of the American West”, November 4, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-11-04-tm-5552-story.html>, Accessed January 12, 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Such liminal light can be seen in Figures 3, 24, and 27.

adds: “it’s a very magical time. But I brought artificial light.”¹⁷⁸ This remark highlights tensions between the idea that the photographed landscapes display inherent aesthetic “magical” qualities due to the natural light at these times of day and the fact that Misrach still chooses to have the upper hand, remaining in control by taming the scene with “artificial light.” These commentaries can easily be enlarged and applied to most of his work which tangles unveiling and manipulating, revealing and controlling. Here, the mention of “artificial light” is not to be taken as the only straightforward modification but hints at a series of parameters a photographer can employ in order to master what they capture. This phenomenon could even be perceived as underlining a recurrent paradox within Misrach’s photography for he claims he criticises man-modified landscapes while concurrently choosing to alter our perception of the same landscape. By being somewhere half-way between natural characteristics and artificial parameters, Misrach is attempting to show the supposed truth by simultaneously building one.

Misrach’s comments on his process can also be read differently and infer to another acceptance of liminality which is that of an experience of the limits. Liminality can indeed be defined as a threshold, on the verge of what is perceptible. Thus, the use of words such as “between the two worlds”—could it be worlds other than day and night?—and “magical” could suggest Misrach’s photographs contain a sense of the supernatural, of the unreal, of what supersedes our human condition. This side to Misrach’s work is reminiscent of Royle’s definition implying that “the uncanny is not simply synonymous with the supernatural but is more accurately suggestive of—‘associated with,’ or ‘seeming to have a basis in’—the supernatural.”¹⁷⁹ Photographs such as *Night Releases, Mississippi River Corridor, Louisiana* (Figure 66) or *Dead Fish, Salton Sea* (Figure 70) can correspond to this idea with their misty and spectral atmosphere. Although they are very much anchored with real events, they display eerie and otherworldly aesthetics.

Furthermore, Royle explains: “its [the uncanny’s] unhappening is always a kind of unhappening. Its ‘un—’ unsettles time and space, order and sense.”¹⁸⁰ This observation echoes another aesthetic impression contained in Misrach’s photography which is that of a strange stillness and quietness that sometimes fall close to the peaceful and clashes with the subject matter of disaster. These are exemplified in *Diving Board Salton Sea, California* (Figure 71) with its formal harmony, balance and symmetry up to the correspondence of colours the sick and seemingly unnatural colours between the empty pool and the water on the background.

¹⁷⁸ Richard Misrach, quoted by Sean Elder, *op. cit.*

¹⁷⁹ Royle, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

On the whole, liminality could be seen as a means to explore our very existential human concerns. We could go as far as asserting that the extreme to Misrach's work accounts for and foreshadows not only an experience of the limits but an experience of the ultimate limit, a glimpse into our own death. Perhaps, this ominous atmosphere is what makes Misrach's photographs attractive in the first place, hinting at the fact that they are wrongly simple and in fact bear something heavy.

9. Making sense of the senseless

9.1. Recreating the sensitive experience of disaster

Misrach reproduces mechanisms at stake in the experience of disaster such as awe, fascination and fear. He does not only document disasters as events, as examples of a human threat, as mismanagement of the earth, but uses all components of the photographic medium to recreate a sense of the experience of disaster which becomes compelling and striking.

a. Process of luring in

Other processes—separate from the creative process that we tackled earlier on—are at stake in Misrach’s work. Some trigger effects oriented towards the beholder. Thus, Misrach’s enticing formal choices become a means to “trap” the beholder inside the space of the photograph. Colours, light, depth and symmetry are predominant ingredients that contribute to this phenomenon and enable the photographs to seize the beholder. For example, critic Philip Gafter talks about Misrach’s colours as being “luscious and luxurious, like rich fabrics stretching across the surface of the frame, seductively drawing us in.”¹⁸¹ Hence, repetitive devices such as colour gradients tend to produce effects close to mesmerising upon the beholder. There seems to be something enticing about these soft colours, often organised in *camaieu*.

This mechanism becomes a means to reproduce the strange fascination one might experience when confronted to disaster.¹⁸² Misrach’s strategy hence mirrors the dazing, motionlessness and astonishment caused by disaster. This process also sustains the idea that Misrach’s photography is revealed according to several layers of perception and several readings. The seriousness of the subject matter permeates and comes forward through the first aesthetic layer of the photographs. The aesthetic calmness of Misrach’s photographs turns into a way to consider the violence at stake in most of the pictures. This effect is enhanced by the size of the prints which tend to cover the scale of the wall and stand like open windows into the world.

¹⁸¹ Philip Gafter quoted by Wilkes Tucker, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁸² Bertrand Vidal, « « *Post catastropham omne animal triste est* », Pop-cultures du désastre et consommation ordinaire de l’extraordinaire événementiel », *Sociétés*, 2014, Vol. 4, No. 126, p. 71-80.

In other words, the beholder is trapped in the sense that sole aesthetic contemplative relationship to Misrach's photographs is not possible. It has to lead to the two poles, commemoration or awareness. This precise aesthetic mechanism sets the ground and roots Misrach's photography as distinctive and engaging.

9.2. Beyond a photographic experience

a. Collaborations and mixed media

As we have seen, some of Misrach's photographic series are in fact more complex than mere photobooks since they include collaborations with artists and landscape architects. These contribute to framing a certain experience of disaster. Some projects hint at implementing change on a great scale through the public sphere—with the Bravo 20 park proposal—while others encourage individual action—like the terms and glossary in *Petrochemical America*—although their actual impact cannot be evaluated.

The *Border Cantos* expands further and operates in different ways. Although it is related to the global *Desert Cantos* project, *Border Cantos* led to a separate publication and a series of exhibitions. More importantly, it is the result of a collaboration between Misrach and Mexican composer, performer and artist Guillermo Galindo. The project tackles the humanitarian issues and the ongoing disaster unfolding along the US-Mexico border. It is composed of Misrach's photographs of the wall and Guillermo Galindo's musical instruments created from artifacts collected at the border such as shoes, bottles, tires, clothes and other personal belongings discarded by migrants.

Both the photobook and the exhibition intertwine Misrach's and Galindo's work creating a dialogue between the two artistic forms¹⁸³ (Galindo's work being itself double, half-way between sculpture and music). The joint work thus includes several techniques and mediums which involve several senses, and associate the visual, the verbal, the haptic and the aural, thus superseding the sensitive possibilities provided by a solely photographic experience. The productions are not simply juxtaposed, they sustain an intricate relationship and have become interdependent. They both contribute to a larger meaning. Galindo even invokes an

¹⁸³ See Figure 72.

intermedial relationship between the two: “Richard’s photographs have become music and my music has materialized in his images. At this point one thing cannot exist without the other.”¹⁸⁴

Direct links can be made between the two since objects photographed by Misrach have also been used in Galindo’s sculptures. These strong echoes allow for an amplification and an augmentation of the impact of the project as a whole. Galindo claims his creations are more than mere works of art meant to be displayed in museums: “I consider them instruments, sculptures, receptors, transmitters, totems, or intermediaries of connections. They are not just instruments or sculptures. They are many other things.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, his sound-objects give a voice to those who crossed or attempted to cross the border thanks to an emphasis on individual objects that have a history.

As a consequence, the ghostly dimension which runs through most of Misrach’s work is once more present. It can especially be found through the figures of the “effigies,” structures which resemble scarecrows, made of sticks arranged in the shape of a cross and covered with discarded clothes. Misrach photographed some of them (Figure 73) and Galindo recreated one in his series of musical artefacts by adding strings that visually tie and restrain the human-like figure from any movement (Figure 74). Galindo’s acoustic composition with this “effigy” is one of the most haunting.¹⁸⁶

By giving space for these voices, recreated from remnants of a violent experience, *Border Cantos* perpetuates a sense of loss, death and survival. The merging of the haunting photographs, the worn out or fragmented objects together with the disagreeable sounds of Galindo’s experimental music produce a tale of struggle, mourning and pain. Overall, the musical semantic meaning of *cantos* is brought to life while simultaneously remaining strange and disturbing since the sounds rather resemble deformed complaints and suffering than actual music.

b. Self-narrative

The series *Destroy this Memory* is part of a larger body of photographs that Misrach planned to release on different anniversaries of Katrina, that is to say with a delay, in a similar

¹⁸⁴ Guillermo Galindo, quoted on the website of the San Jose Museum of Art, <https://sjmusart.org/exhibition/border-cantos>, Accessed May 1, 2021.

¹⁸⁵ Guillermo Galindo, quoted in Punch Shaw’s review of *Border Cantos* “*Border Cantos*: a Union of Photography and Sound”, *Star-Telegram*, November 3, 2016.

¹⁸⁶ A recording of the “Efigie | Effigy” performance is available at: <https://vimeo.com/154369901>, Accessed May 8, 2021.

manner he has done with the firestorm in California. Originally, *Destroy this Memory* was not meant to be published or exist at all. It is in fact a peripheral set of photographs. When Misrach went to New Orleans, he brought his large 8x10 view camera and therefore used his usual slow process of spotting the right place and installing the camera. He also brought a pocket camera he used on the side in order to take note of the places he passed by. These photographs were not meant to become a proper project. Nevertheless, when going through the different shots, Misrach decided to publish some of them. He noticed a subseries stood out from the rest through the motif of writings on walls, trees, cars, boards, which became the directing line of the series.¹⁸⁷

The fact that it was a lateral and accidental project makes the photographs appear as spontaneous and raw—they have been rapidly taken and there is no second thought on the angle, the lighting, etc. Hence, *Destroy this Memory* contrasts with the rest of Misrach's production. Indeed, it is the series that is closest to man since it directly captures written messages left by victims of the hurricane. Similarly, together with the Oakland-Berkeley fire series, it contains the most direct relationship to individual scale, although a sense of anonymity dominates. Consequently, the relationship to words, discourse and narration is special in this series.

As a matter of fact, the spray visible on the photographs was initially used by rescuers to mark the houses that had been searched by mentioning the hour of search and the number of victims for example. This mode of expression was then appropriated by the inhabitants giving us access to their raw emotions and thoughts which have been crystallised by the photographs. Practical information, personal messages and general complaints are fused, constructing a collection of fragments, an urgency and emergency narrative.

The photographs and the photobook become a medium at disposal for those who have been through the disaster. The messages of the graffiti encompass different tones and range from the functional to thoughts loaded with emotions. Some rare instances contain strangely humorous messages such as “Please remove your car from my boat without crushing it - boat owner” (Figure 76). Others express anger: “Resign Bush!!!!” (Figure 77) or more survivalist assertions like “I am here I have a gun” (Figure 78). Yet, the messages that dominate are those of despair such as “Michael where are you” (Figure 79), followed by a phone number, and “Help! Help!” (Figure 80). Finally, some messages are more enigmatic and turn to the existential like “Broken Dreams” (Figure 81), and the cryptic “Sorry” sprayed on a car (Figure 82) whose addressee remains unclear. Are these writings addressing whoever might pass by? Are they

¹⁸⁷ Misrach reused the motif of spray-painted graffiti in his series “The Writing on the Wall” by photographing remote and abandoned places that were presented as messages exposing responses to the 2016 American presidential election. This series is part of *Desert Cantos* and was exhibited in 2017 at Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco, California. More at <https://fraenkelgallery.com/exhibitions/the-writing-on-the-wall>.

addressing the media which might broadcast these images? Are they addressing the world? Who is to blame?

The transcriptions of the writings alone can be compelling by themselves, but they take on a whole new dimension when encountered in the context they were composed. The superimposition of words onto dilapidated surfaces and structures such as damaged walls, or discarded boards creates a coherent connection between the content and the form of these writings. They are an attempt at voicing thoughts and vindications on top of what has been altered, what is ravaged, what connotes death and hopelessness.

If Misrach calls the compilation of the photographs and the writing they contain a “found poem,” we could consider the photographs as photo-poetry. Thus, this piece was composed by anonymous voices but assembled, sewn together—like a collage—by Misrach. Matter, elements and surfaces discussed previously as the main subjects to Misrach’s photography are supplemented by language. Besides, the presence of the verbal within Misrach’s photographs together with the mention of their ensemble as a “found-poem” infer a literary dimension to Misrach’s work. As a matter of fact, as it has been suggested previously with the parallel between *Desert Cantos* and the epic, literary references are disseminated throughout Misrach’s work and could be a totally different and engaging perspective to study his photography.¹⁸⁸

The photobook for *Destroy this Memory* is also highly distinctive from *Petrochemical America* or *Bravo 20*. Misrach chose to withdraw from any type of discourse that could have been added to the book. There is no use of words or paratext apart from the spine and the publisher’s details. The title and cover of the book are contained in the eponymous photograph whose wall reads “Destroy this memory” (Figure 75). Thus, Misrach totally erased his voice from the book. Paradoxically, Misrach’s subjectivity is present in the decision of choosing and assembling the photographs together. He is the one who puts the narrative together. Still, he does not significantly manipulate the photographs.

By choosing not to impose his vision, his narrative, Misrach lets the work, and more precisely the victims, speak for themselves. The only narrative is displayed by the victims of the hurricane which comes in perfect contradiction with discourses that can be communicated by the media. He gives space for victims’ voices to be heard and to produce a self-narrative. If the

¹⁸⁸ The dialogue between *Desert Cantos* and Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* could be explored. In a similar manner, *Petrochemical America* could be investigated in relation to Southern Gothic motifs and atmosphere. Finally, the series *On the Beach* is directly inspired from the eponymous 1957 post-apocalyptic novel by Nevil Shute.

writings on the walls are meant to communicate with the world, then Misrach extends this wish. Once more some of the photographs are very meditative, and even become metaphysical with messages such as “What now?” which is actually the back cover of the book (Figure 83) and leaves the beholder in a state of unresolvedness.

Overall, this series epitomises Misrach’s role a silent mediator. Furthermore, if we come back to the very title of the series, “Destroy this Memory”, it is ironic to notice that Misrach chose to do the exact opposite by capturing it. By enlarging this remark, we can say that it in fact hints at a metaphographic reflection on Misrach’s work which, as a whole, throughout its many layers and facets constructs a *memory of disaster*.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation we tried to demonstrate Misrach operates a remediation and a reframing of the experience and the representations of disaster through his photography. Misrach distinguishes his practice according to a wide range of parameters that include his process, the delay in the publication of his photobooks and the places he photographs. His remediation, away from conventional practice and newsworthy media coverage, provides new frames and new readings to approach disaster. Overall, Misrach offers a highly reflective photography that tends to provoke reactions on the part of the beholder.

Misrach gets hold of the complexity of disaster which pervades our daily lives. By doing so, he indicates disaster is generalised and operates according to a spatio-temporal ubiquity. Thus, the mechanism of delay defines disaster as ineluctable. Any landscape reveals its potentiality to becoming a backdrop for disaster. The tension between stillness and pressing time visible in Misrach's images puts to the fore the characteristics common to disaster photography and photography as a medium which brings back the past while being undeniably tied to present and futurity. When it comes to spatiality, Misrach proceeds to unveil new areas of landscape that are overlooked or disregarded. As a result, he builds a disaster cartography and puts to the fore disaster's omnipresence even in peripheral, desolate, and uncared for places.

The pervasiveness of disaster points at a sense of urgency and emergency which in turns calls for the creation of new representations. As a response, Misrach uses new tools, and particularly applies the concept of the uncanny to his landscape photography. This method allows for a layering of the penetration of his photographs. The uncanny feelings which first lay in the visual essence of the photographs are preceding another layer of uncanniness the beholder can experience while getting into the picture and realising its actual scope. Furthermore, the uncanny originally contains psychological implications which adds to the disturbing effects produced on the mind. Hence the uncanny unsettles, but not solely on an aesthetic level. Although Misrach's photographs are often considered as beautiful and leave the beholder in a state of contemplation and meditation, it is only the first stage of the viewer's observation.

In fact, the importance of formal beauty is deliberately more than contemplative. Misrach's distinctive process of luring in *opens a way in* and traps the beholder into reflecting and engaging. In a similar vein, phenomena such as aestheticisation of horror or liminality which have raised criticism are in fact the source to question man's weird fascination for the terrible,

for the abject. These mechanisms enable Misrach to recreate this sick attraction and put to the fore that the strange beauty contained in disaster triggers something in us.

Thus, the barrenness of the desert turns into a perfect mirror. Some photographs are so minimalistic they concentrate the essence of our relationship to nature and exacerbate the effects of disaster. Although sometimes representations of disaster appear as indirect by displaying traces and clues, it seems there is always a looming presence which contaminates the photographs. The beholder is left to analyse the pictures and see how man's doings reverberate insidiously after his absence and into remote details and ghostly places. It is so unsettling it forces us into reflecting upon the transformation of the land and our "failed stewardship of the environment."¹⁸⁹

The confusion of the viewer triggers questionings. The photographs by themselves can arouse thoughts which are deepened thanks to complementary information that locate, frame and root the disaster in some reality while reinforcing the argument. Hence, Misrach provides means to question individual and collective behaviours, as well as shared responsibility. Furthermore, his photography also allows for introspection. Through violent or more insidious encounters we are left to face ourselves, our essence, the meaning of our very existence.

Ultimately, these new representations call for reassessment of landscape photography as a genre. In order to achieve such a personal and pioneering artistic production, Misrach needed to legitimise his work by anchoring his practice in actual photographic tradition. Thus, Misrach chose to extend the American surveys as he pursues the process of documenting the state of the Western desert and other American characteristic places such as Louisiana through an approach at times scientific and methodical, always close to matters and elements. Nonetheless, his photographic practice resonates with the late 1900s and the 21st century, Misrach being deeply rooted in his time. He is indeed unveiling a different side to landscape photography. By focusing on disaster's physical and lasting impact on landscape Misrach advocates for new landscape photography practice. According to the two poles of his photography, it should fulfil different purposes and namely lead to mourning and remembering—with *Destroy this Memory* and *Oakland-Berkeley*—or to taking individual or collective action—with *Desert Cantos* and *Petrochemical America*. Thus, Misrach redefines landscape photography: it should carry responsibilities since it is embedded with matters of ecology and should not solely be contemplative and commemorative but foremost political.

¹⁸⁹ Richard Misrach, quoted in Sean Elder, *op. cit.*

One could however wonder what the limits to the activist scope of his photographs are. Misrach's plans to create a national park and museum on the grounds of the "Bravo 20" bombing range indeed failed and the prestigious publications by Aperture do not reach out to a wide range of people. In addition, there is no alleged impact of Misrach's photographs on people's behaviour. Still, Misrach believes that "[his photographs] resonate; they send waves out there. They add to the way people talk and think about things."¹⁹⁰

Above all, Misrach achieves creating meaning by constructing and assembling his collection of photographs into a heritage of disaster, a memory of disaster. By making sense of what seems senseless, he manages to supersede the notion of trauma while contributing to constructing and defining an American identity tainted with the shades of disaster.

¹⁹⁰ Richard Misrach, in Ruth Dusseault, "The Machine in the Garden: A Conversation with Richard Misrach", *Art Papers* 24, No. 6, November-December 2000, p. 30.

Appendixes

Figure 1: Richard Misrach, *Community Remains, Former Morrisonville Settlement, Dow Chemical Corporation, Plaquemine, Louisiana*, 1998, from the series *Petrochemical America*

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Figure 69: Frederick Sommer, *Dead Coyotes*, 1941

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Figure 73: Richard Misrach, *Effigy #2*, 2009, from the independent Desert Cantos subseries Border Cantos

Figure 74: Guillermo Gallindo, *Effigy (Efigie)*, 2014. Immigrants’ clothing, wood axis, and strings. 66 × 22 × 48 in. (167.6 × 55.9 × 121.9 cm)

Figure 75: Richard Misrach, *Untitled (Destroy this memory)*, 2005, from the series *Destroy This Memory*

Figure 76: Richard Misrach, *Untitled (Please remove your car from my boat without crushing it - boat owner)*, 2005, from the series *Destroy This Memory*

Figure 77: Richard Misrach, *Untitled (Resign Bush!!!!)*, 2005, from the series *Destroy This Memory*

Figure 78: Richard Misrach, *Untitled (I am here I have a gun)*, 2005, from the series *Destroy This Memory*

Figure 79: Richard Misrach, *Untitled (Michael where are you? 9858751247)*, 2005, from the series *Destroy This Memory*

Figure 80: Richard Misrach, *Untitled (Help! Help!)*, 2005, from the series *Destroy This Memory*

Figure 81: Richard Misrach, *Untitled (Broken Dreams)*, 2005, from the series *Destroy This Memory*

Figure 82: Richard Misrach, *Untitled (Sorry)*, 2005, from the series *Destroy This Memory*

Figure 83: Richard Misrach, *Untitled (What now?)*, 2005, from the series *Destroy This Memory*

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The photographs mentioned below are the core of the present dissertation. They are extracted from four series of photographs among Richard Misrach's wide body of work:

- *Desert Cantos*, 1979-present.
- *1991: The Oakland-Berkeley Fire Aftermath*, 1991.
- *Destroy this Memory*, 2005. In this series, all photographs are untitled as part of Misrach's editorial intention not to add a single word or commentary to the book and to the photographs. For identification purposes, the selected photographs have been named after the writings they contain.
- *Petrochemical America*, 1998-2010.

Selected photographs:

In *Desert Cantos*:

Canto I: The Terrain (1981-present)

- *Palms to Pines Highway, Santa Rosa Mountains*, 1983
- *Road, Picacio Peak State Park*, 1983
- *San Geronio Pass*, 1981
- *San Jacinto Mountains over Several Days*, 1985
- *Tourists*, 1994
- *Wind Mill Farm, San Geronio Pass*, 1984

Canto II: The Event I (1983)

- *Black Line, Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah*, 1992
- *Campers and Restraining Wall, Edwards Air Force Base*, 1983
- *Comfort Station, Edwards Air Force Base*, 1983

Canto III: The Flood (1983-1985)

- *Concrete Slab, Salton Sea*, 1984
- *Dead Fish, Salton Sea*, 1984
- *Diving Board, Salton Sea*, 1983
- *Flooded Marina (Gas Pumps), Northshore*, 1983
- *Submerged Snack Bar, Salton Sea*, 1984
- *Submerged Trailer, Salton Sea*, 1984

Canto IV: The Fires (1983-1985)

- *Desert Fire #43*, 1983
- *Desert Fire #135*, 1984
- *Desert Fire #249*, 1985

Canto V: The War (Bravo 20) (1986-1987)

- *Bomb Crater and Destroyed Convoy*, 1986
- *Bomb Crater and Standing Water (Orange)*, c. 1986
- *Bomb Crater and Standing Water (Pink)*, c. 1986
- *Navy Fence*, 1987
- *View of Craters from Lone Rock (Looking South)*, 1987

Canto VI: The Pit (1987-1989)

- *Dead Animals #1, Nevada*, 1987
- *Dead Animals #59, Nevada*, 1987

Canto IX: The Secret Project (Project W-47) (1986-1992)

- *Ammunition Storage Bunkers, Wendover Air Base, Utah*, 1990
- *Atomic Bomb Loading Pit #2, Wendover Air Base, Utah*, 1989

Canto XII: Clouds (Non-Equivalents) (1987-present)

- *Cloud #25*, 1988
- *Cloud #240*, 1993
- *Clouds, July 29, 2018, 8.12pm, California*, 2018

Canto XV: The Salt Flats (1992)

- *Downed Safety Cone, Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah*, 1992
- *Encrusted Tracks, Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah*, 1992
- *Outdoor Dining, Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah*, 1992

Canto XVIII: Skies (1992-present)

- *Jerusalem Mountain, Arizona, October 28, 1994, 7:52 A.M.*
- *Paradise Valley, Arizona, March 22, 1995, 7:05 P.M.*

Border Cantos (2009-present)

- *Effigy #2*, 2009
- *Wall East of Nogales, Arizona*, 2015
- *Wall, Near Los Indios, Texas*, 2015

In 1991: The Oakland-Berkeley Fire Aftermath:

- *Oakland Fire #3-91 (21 Binnacle Hill, with Highway 24, the Oakland Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge in background)*, 1991
- *Oakland Fire #8-91 (Patio Furniture)*, 1991
- *Oakland Fire #12-91 (Hill Highlands Overview)*, 1991
- *Oakland Fire #47-91 (Oakland Police Officer John Grubensky)*, 1991
- *Oakland Fire #81-91 (Archway)*, 1991
- *Oakland Fire #98-91 (Mailbox, Alpine Terrace)*, 1991
- *Oakland Fire #104-91 (Swimming Pool)*, 1991
- *Oakland Fire #107-91 (Melted Tricycle)*, 1991
- *Oakland Fire #113-91 (Buddha)*, 1991
- *Oakland Fire #116-91 (24 Star View Drive)*, 1991
- *Oakland Fire #153-91 (Chimney #3)*, 1991

In Destroy This Memory:

- *Untitled (Broken Dreams)*, 2005
- *Untitled (Destroy this memory)*, 2005
- *Untitled (Help! Help!)*, 2005
- *Untitled (I am here I have a gun)*, 2005
- *Untitled (Michael where are you? 9858751247)*, 2005
- *Untitled (Please remove your car from my boat without crushing it - boat owner)*, 2005
- *Untitled (Resign Bush!!!!)*, 2005
- *Untitled (Sorry)*, 2005
- *Untitled (What now?)*, 2005

In Petrochemical America:

- *Abandoned Trailer Home, Mississippi River, Near Dow Chemical Plant, Plaquemine, Louisiana*, 1998
- *Community Remains, Former Morrisonville Settlement, Dow Chemical Corporation, Plaquemine, Louisiana*, 1998
- *Hazardous Waste Containment Site, Dow Chemical Corporation, Mississippi River, Plaquemine, Louisiana*, 1998
- *Helicopter Returning from Deepwater Horizon Spill, Venice, Louisiana*, 2010
- *Holy Rosary Cemetery and Dow Chemical Corporation (Union Carbide Complex), Taft, Louisiana*, 1998
- *Home and Grain Elevator, Destrehan, Louisiana*, 1998
- *Night Releases, Mississippi River Corridor*, 1998
- *Norco Cumulus Cloud, Shell Oil Refinery, Norco Louisiana*, 2010
- *Pipeline and River Road, Donaldsonville, Louisiana*, 2010

- *Sunset, Mississippi River, Southern University Campus, Baton Rouge, Louisiana*, 1998
- *Swamp and Pipeline, Geismar, Louisiana*, 1998

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