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‘Submerged Trailer, Salton Sea, California’ by Richard Misrach

By Francis Hodgson

This image by a veteran environmental photographer is both harsh critique and delicate study of light



Richard Misrach. Submerged Trailer. Salton Sea 1983

As a co-founder of the Prix Pictet, awarded since 2008 for images on the theme of sustainability, I have thought a lot about environmental photography. I know that Richard Misrach takes his place in a long line of predecessors, from Carleton Watkins through Ansel Adams and the New Topographics. I know that both irony and the sublime had been found in the landscape many times before him. I’m British, and know well that tradition of engaged landscape photography represented by Fay Godwin and before her by Bill Brandt. But somehow, for me, it always goes back

to Misrach, who was born in Los Angeles in 1949.

Nobody else has made such a sustained political enquiry into our maltreatment of the wilderness in a vocabulary of such exquisite beauty. This 1983 view of a flooded campsite, “Submerged Trailer, Salton Sea, California”, is so simple. Yet it goes so far. Misrach’s big subject for some 40 years of photography at the very highest level has been the complex relationship between man and the environment. Much of that work takes its place in his huge Desert Cantos, which is mainly a catalogue of dreadful abuse, although the occasional noble moment intervenes. As his projects accumulated, it began

to seem that here we had someone whose scope and range were as monumental as the area he worked in, the deserts of the south-western US. As sustained serial works go, the Desert Cantos are on the scale of Balzac.

One of the Cantos is on the subject of a mysterious pit in the desert, full of dead horses and cows. A nuclear accident? An epidemic of some sort? Misrach's point (or one of them) is that the whole mythology of the West was centered on those beasts: the 1,000-strong herds of cattle driven to the railheads, the cowboys on horseback. Suddenly Misrach was looking down at John Wayne and the Marlboro Man, caricatured in a pit full of dead beasts. He photographed them with the twisted agony of Goya or Géricault.

The Salton Sea was created in 1905 by bad management of irrigation waters from the Colorado River. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was substantially enlarged by more mismanagement. It is, in other words, both a part of the larger story of the struggle to bring water to the arid West, and a symbol of the chronic failure of that intervention. Misrach offers us this rare watery tourist spot in the desert, turned sour. Yet his camera is not so very different from the tourists' cameras that would have pointed the same way before the water level changed. We gaze, as sightseers, at a sight no longer fit for sightseeing. There is blame to be ascribed, fault. Yet it is photographed with Misrach's particular genius for light, caressingly.

Richard Misrach is represented by Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York. Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco and Marc Selwyn Fine Art in Los Angeles.