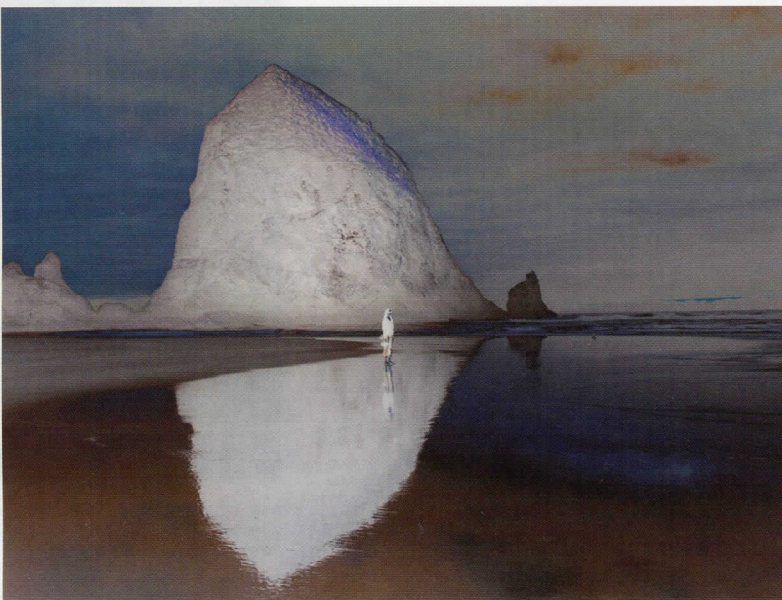


Richard Misrach:
 Untitled, 2007, pigment
 print on Dibond,
 59 by 78½ inches;
 at PaceWildenstein.



RICHARD MISRACH PACEWILDENSTEIN

Firmly identified with the introduction of color to “fine” photography in the 1970s, and with the use of large-format traditional cameras, Richard Misrach is an established poet of the world as it is. In his new photographs (2007-09), made mostly with digital equipment, he casts that role aside. The images remain big, even epic—many are 10 feet high or wide—and almost implausibly beautiful. And their subject is still the natural landscape. But that landscape’s grandeur is undermined by a simple procedure (or a simply summarized one; its application is probably much more complicated). The colors are reversed when output as pigment prints, making the photographs chromatic negatives.

The results are surprisingly disorienting. On the shore of a limpid, orange-tinged expanse of water, a hump-backed blue landmass lies like a beached whale, though we know it must be a low hill glowing red in raking light. (In fact, it is a sand dune on a lake in Nevada.) Sharply etched forms, some frigid blue and some nearly white, rise out of the sea like icebergs; in actuality they are dark, rocky outcroppings along the Oregon coast. The curl of surf in one shot is a fleshy, almost comically tender pink. A sublime—no other word serves—image of luminous indigo clouds blossoming hugely above a glassy sea, and flowering even more decadently in reflections on the water’s surface, looks like nothing on the planet at all.

A few photographs are very nearly abstract, with all-over patterns of hard-to-identify vegetation (seaweed, though you’d never know it, in one case, and dense, leafless shrubbery in another) distributed evenly across the picture plane; Pollock, and perhaps Mark Tobey, seem to be reference points. And several images are almost entirely drained of color. This is where the new work seems most polemical, and in some ways most interesting. A feathery line of trees stands ghostly white against a pitchy sky, in one photo. In another, a choppy body of black-veined white water terminates abruptly at a dark horizon, in a minimalist composition that recalls seascapes by Hiroshi Sugimoto and by Vija Celmins. Both images pose the question, if darkness is the opposite of light, what is the opposite of color?

Photography didn’t invent black-and-white imagery, but it certainly caused it to proliferate so widely that when color was introduced to the medium, it seemed almost unnatural. With his new work, Misrach appears determined to renew that sense of unfamiliarity—to revive the idea that color is unreliable, artificial. But he is careful not to put its seriousness at risk. It’s a tricky balance to strike.

—Nancy Princenthal