

ENTROPY



Lost in Transparency: The Mysterious Opacity of Other Beings by Richard Misrach

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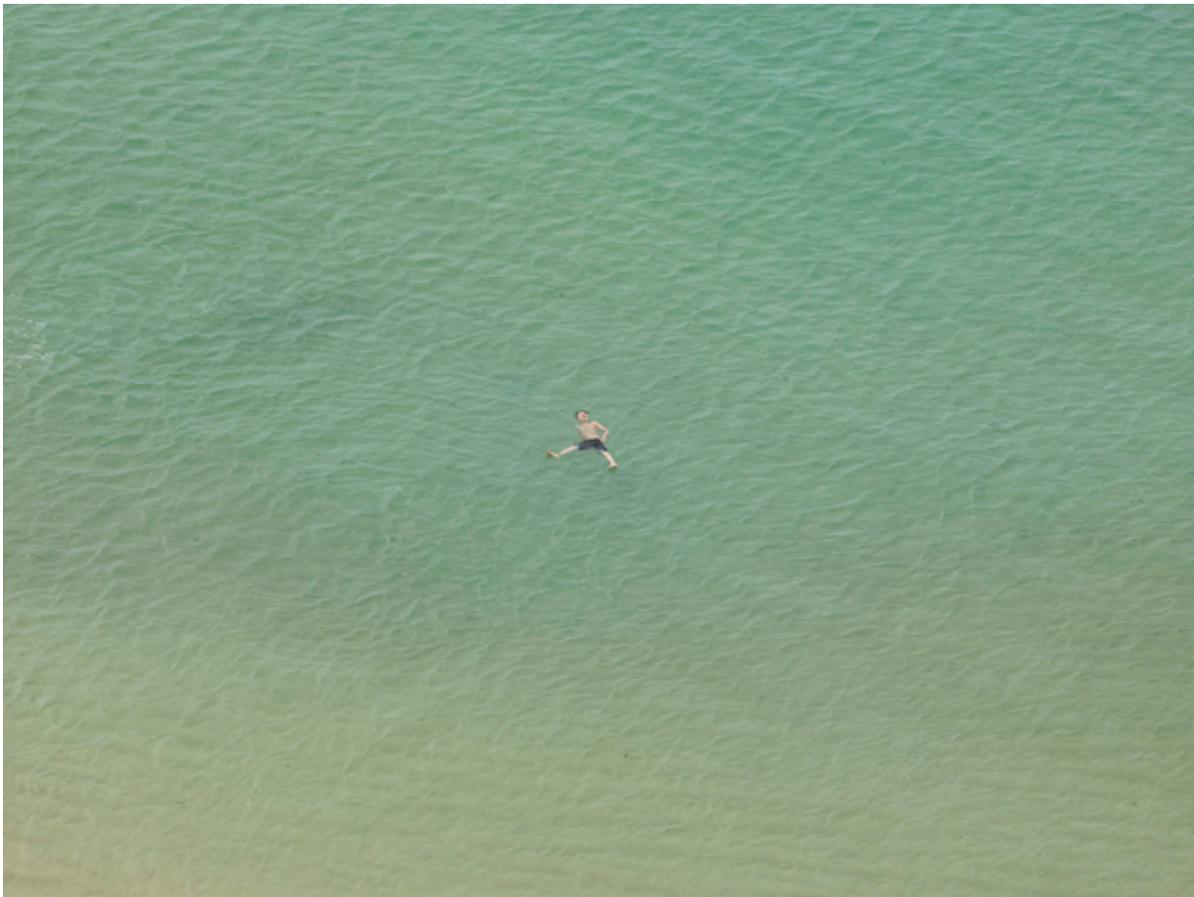
The Mysterious Opacity of Other Beings: Photographs by Richard Misrach

Aperture Books, June 2015

80 pages – [Aperture](#) / [Amazon](#)

What is the difference between *being* and *a being*? This is the densest question asked in Richard Misrach's forthcoming book, *The Mysterious Opacity of Other Beings*. Although the esteemed photographer has interrogated humankind's relationship with the natural world for over four decades, the thing most often absent in his gorgeously devastating portraits of the American landscape has been human beings themselves. The emptied swimming pools, flooded Texaco stations, desert wastelands and petrochemical plants in his extensive catalogue remain for the most part uninhabited, imbuing aching textures with loneliness and disquiet.

But the 21st century has seen Misrach populate his images with people, his acclaimed 2007 book *On the Beach* giving us aerial glimpses of Hawaiian beach dwellers relaxing, swimming, reading and sunbathing. Given the context of his earlier work, the photos are lent a foreboding air. From far above, his view camera soaks in every detail, as though his aperture is the eye of God.



Richard Misrach, Untitled (January 28, 2014, 1:12PM) – © Richard Misrach, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles

The Mysterious Opacity of Other Beings sees a return to foreboding, but also gestures toward a jarring compatibility between humans and the world we inhabit. Fifty aerial photographs exclusively of men, women and children floating in the sea comprise the entire work. The images on the left page are close-ups of those on the right, so that looking quickly from one page to the next makes it seem like you're a soul being stolen to the afterlife. The book's title can be found within a prologue written by Joan Stambaugh, which is about Heidegger's *On Time and Being*, a treatise preoccupied with questions of consciousness and self-awareness.

Misrach's camera describes a subtle dichotomy between unconsciousness and consciousness, states impossible to assign to his buoyant subjects. Granted weightlessness by the water, the bodies often resemble corpses or islands adrift in a fathomless nothing. Some are facedown, some seem to hover, others are almost completely submerged; almost all are alone. The degree of negative space signals a kind of zen, though this is ultimately created by the friction between the fleetingness of human life with an oceanic eternity.



Richard Misrach, Untitled (November 10, 2012, 3:08PM) [detail] – © Richard Misrach, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles

A color photography pioneer who helped usher it to the mainstream in the 1970s, Misrach leavens his metaphysical series with a vivid palette of aquamarine gradations that change from turquoise to viridian to azure. Reading the book is certainly an experience, the craquelure of the water's sunlit surface instilling a hypnotic cadence. Misrach has always documented the ominous or uncomfortable with startling pulchritude, his gaze more aesthetically concerned than photojournalistic, and this is no exception. The images simmer delicately on the page. Using an innovative printing process and a telephoto lens, each photograph permits both expansive scope and intense definition. By keeping each portrait visually similar in composition, Misrach encourages us to look deeper into an image, to glean facial expressions, to read the body language. Are these strangers consumed by loneliness or savoring the calm of the sea? For sure, placing them against a canvas of such transparency reveals a menacing vulnerability that underscores the arcadian reverie of floating off a coast near Honolulu. Discussing *On the Beach*, Misrach noted that the figures suspended in water reminded him of bodies falling in midair from the Twin Towers on 9/11, and they could resemble that here as well. A wave could crash at any second and vanish them. It doesn't

matter: these photographs take place in the present tense, are what Susan Sontag called an “imprisoned reality,” though their meanings are as fluid as the ocean they are carried in.

Perhaps the photographs are so mysterious because they frame the world in an otherworldly way. The fact that humans have explored less than five percent of the ocean introduces another type of mystery. These are not portraits of people, but of the unknown. Because the images suggest a harmony of disharmony, they can strike a discordant chord or a feeling of symmetry. As with the ocean, you must yield to their changing rhythms.



Richard Misrach, Untitled (July 29, 2012 7:43PM) – © Richard Misrach, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles