



Richard Misrach, *Untitled 1132-04, 2004*- Misrach says he began to notice how “people group up and leave a sort of comfortable space around them—something that maybe would only be revealed when you stand back to see it.”

Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, SF, Marc Selwyn Fine Art, LA, and Pace/ MacGill Gallery, NY

Richard Misrach's Ominous Beach Photographs

A new exhibition of oversized photographs by Richard Misrach invites viewers to have fun in the sun. Or does it?

By Kenneth R. Fletcher
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You might think that Richard Misrach took the photographs on these pages while hovering over different beaches around the world. But he actually shot them all from the same high-rise hotel in Hawaii. Misrach, a 59-year-old fine arts photographer known for his pioneering work with color and unsparring images of the despoiled American West, says he enjoyed the lofty perspective from the hotel's balconies: "I always thought about it as being a god's-eye view, looking down and seeing these amazing human interactions."

Though the connection may not be obvious, his pictures of people relaxing and playing were deeply influenced by the events of September 11, 2001. That morning, Misrach, who lives in Berkeley, California, happened to be in Washington, D.C., which was shaken by the attack on the Pentagon, and he was anxious about his son, Jake, then a freshman at New York University. He finally reached Jake and was able, a few days later, to drive up to Manhattan. "I went in at night past blockades and got into the city," he says. "There was still ash falling from the sky. It was really eerie. I found Jake and took him to a friend's house outside the city."

After returning to California, Misrach decided to go ahead with a planned trip with his wife, Myriam, to Hawaii, where they had often vacationed. But he was "haunted by the whole experience in New York," he said at the Art Institute of Chicago (the show's organizer). "It changed the way I looked at everything." So even his picture of a lone couple on a beach can be vaguely unsettling: their isolation underscores their vulnerability, and the photographer's long-range viewpoint is clearly that of someone *watching*. It's no accident that the title Misrach gave to the exhibition and book of photographs taken in Hawaii over four years is "On the Beach," from the 1957 Nevil Shute novel about life after a nuclear holocaust.

The photographs are, in a word, stunning: the largest measure 6 by 10 feet and are so detailed you can read the headlines on a beachgoer's newspaper. To create the pictures, Misrach used a view camera that holds 8-by-10-inch negatives, which, he says, "give you a level of definition that you'd never get with a 35-millimeter camera." He scanned the negatives into a computer, and sometimes digitally removed people, heightening the feeling of isolation. When he was satisfied with an image, it was burned with lasers onto photographic paper that then went through a chemical developing process.

These ambiguous pictures would appear to be a departure from his best-known series, including the politically overt "Cancer Alley" of 2000, which exposed industrial pollution along the Mississippi River, and his 1990 "Bravo 20," about the devastating environmental effects of bomb tests at a U.S. Navy range in Nevada. The beach images "seem much more beautiful, almost in a way more soft than some of his other work," says Sarah Greenough, photography curator at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where the show is on view through September 1, before moving to the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. "After you look at them for a while, though, they are hardly soft at all. There really is something very ominous going on."

Misrach says the new work is of a piece with his focus on people and the environment. But, he says, "it is much more about our relationship to the bigger sublime picture of things."