

PHOTO BOOTH

## “LEAVE NOW”: SPRAY-PAINTED HATE IN THE CALIFORNIA DESERT

By Josh Kun July 1, 2017



*“Leave now,” George Air Base, Victorville, California, 2017.*

Photograph by Richard Misrach / © Richard Misrach / Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Within hours of Donald Trump’s victory in the Presidential election, the state of California had declared itself a defiant rebel alliance, ready for legislative war against the new White House. In the months since, mayors, senators, and Governor Jerry Brown have followed through with bluster and backbone, beating back travel bans, border-wall promises, emissions deregulations, and threats of federal-budget

punishments. Calls for California secession have been in the air, too. Why not just make the Leftist capital of the Left Coast—as blue as the Pacific—into its own cold-pressed nation of progressive freethinkers, radical leftists, E.V. drivers, and multiculturalists?

While this California does exist, it is not the only one. Beneath the Golden State's bastions of liberalism are parallel worlds that have also been energized by the events of last November: California hate, California angst, California anxiety. Take, for example, a report released in February by the Southern Poverty Law Center, which found that, in 2016, California was home to seventy-nine hate organizations, more than half of them in Southern California, scattered throughout the suburbs, deserts, and valleys between San Diego and Los Angeles. These inland and desert regions are places where the recession hit hard, and where foreclosures are as much a part of the local topography as palm trees, taquerías, and mobile-home parks. There is space out there, too, lots and lots of space, which makes it hard to generalize about much. There are meth labs, pawnshops, and skinheads, sure, but there are also established Latino suburban communities, new immigrant commuter enclaves, and makeshift dropout bohémias, where everyone seems to be on the run for a different reason.

Drive through the more isolated stretches of the Inland Empire and the Lucerne and Morongo Valleys, and the signs of the other California are hard to miss: graffiti and tagging that seem to cover every inch of the built and natural environment like an aggressive species of kudzu. Hastily scrawled mantras and more elaborate “wildstyle” designs are all over the walls, beams, and floors of shuttered military hospitals, vacated desert homesteads, and, just outside of Niland, a massive warehouse—gutted and decomposing—that is a favorite spot for L.A. street artists to workshop their latest pieces.

This is the post-election California documented in “The Writing on the Wall,” an exhibition of photographs by Richard Misrach that opens this month at San Francisco's

Fraenkel Gallery. Misrach has been capturing the complicated ideological landscape of Southern California and the greater Southwest for more than four decades. During the Obama years, he started noticing that the messages were turning darker. He found a hangman's noose in the sand by the Salton Sea. In Nevada, he spotted a crucified Jesus that someone used for target practice and, right on the side of Highway 50, a large swastika made of stones. Three days before the election, he caught a sign in bright *MAGA* red that declared "Trump Loves American People"—a lone beacon on a hill of desert sagebrush.

In the months since the Inauguration, Misrach, who is based in the Bay Area, has again made road trips south and west into Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico. The boulders and empty buildings have become their own kind of public sphere—a sprawling land-art comments section brimming with evidence of a newly emboldened American anger, racism, and fatalism: "Set fire to your local bank"; "Leave now"; "Everything must end." In the Mojave Desert—miles between towns and only a couple hours drive to the hipster paradise of the Coachella music festival—a swastika crowns a rock formation. In an abandoned home in Barstow, just five side-street minutes from a bustling strip mall, there's another one, sprayed in black and perfectly framed by a kicked-out window. Neither is signed or claimed. Who put them there, nuzzled next to peace signs and hearts inscribed with lovers' names?

For all the ugliness that Misrach captures, he also finds plenty of pushback. A fair number of swastikas have been converted, with a few quick aerosol sprays, into far more innocent squares and cubes. In one of the exhibition's earliest images, from 2011, an empty, deteriorating home in the state prison town of Calipatria pairs the words "desolation" and "love." It's up to us to guess which came first, and which, if either, will win out in the end.