

Richard Misrach  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 126

University Art Museum  
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1989

Dead Animals #18, 1987



The Pit is the most recent body of work by photographer Richard Misrach in his ongoing series entitled Desert Cantos. The Cantos, begun in 1980, applies the form of the song cycle to a photographic exploration of the American desert. This classical form involves a series of independent poetic segments, or cantos, which when taken together comprise an entire cycle and may suggest an overall view or philosophy. The world view expressed by Misrach's work is one deeply embedded in the contemporary American experience, while drawing on symbolic imagery to convey more universal meanings.

The photographs of The Pit depict bloated and decaying livestock at one of the many burial sites spread throughout the Nevada desert for the disposal of animals that die suddenly, often of undetermined causes. Such images address contemporary political issues as well as challenge conventional notions of beauty. An antecedent of Misrach's current work may be found in his first published book of photographs, Telegraph 3 A.M. (Cornucopia Press, 1974), which documented the street people of Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue. However, after its publication Misrach realized that this work had resulted, in his words, "in a coffee-table book rather than a tool for social change." Disappointed with his lack of success at creating politically effective art, Misrach, during the late '70s and early '80s, chose to concentrate on the aesthetic qualities of the photographic medium. During these years, he experimented with new techniques and sought out more poetic and spiritually

evocative subjects such as Stonehenge, the Hawaiian jungle, and the western American desert.

Misrach's return to social statement followed his increasing awareness of the human impact on the desert ecosystem. The initial Desert Canto, titled The Terrain, revealed distant telephone lines, faint tracks of off-road vehicles, and scattered refuse. Another Canto, The Event, documented the social spectacle of the space-shuttle landing. Misrach's renewed political approach, however, has less to do with these readily apparent and comparatively benign signs of transformation than with the generally less visible military devastations which have been hidden from public knowledge and view. These include nuclear test sites, the Bravo 20 conventional military bombing range, and, as in The Pit, Nevada's mysterious livestock graves.

The most recent Cantos stretch the boundaries of traditional aesthetics while introducing techniques of investigative journalism to ground these seemingly universal images of cataclysm in a specific historical context. A didactic text accompanying The Pit reads: "On March 24, 1953, the Bulloch brothers were trailing 2,000 head of sheep across the Sand Springs Valley when they were exposed to extensive fallout from a dirty atomic test. Within a week the first ewes began dropping their lambs prematurely--stunted, woolless, legless, potbellied. Soon full-grown sheep started dying in large numbers with the same symptoms--running sores with large pustules and

hardened hooves. Horses and cattle were found dead with beta burns. At final count, 4,390 animals were killed.

"Initial investigations by government experts indicated that radiation was the cause. However, when the Atomic Energy Commission recognized the potential economic and political liability, all reports and findings were immediately classified..."

By placing this statement alongside photographs of countless decaying animals, Misrach not only arouses suspicion as to the cause of these particular deaths, but also creates a metaphoric connection between such ghastly burials and the military's secretive practices. The metaphor of The Pit, however, extends beyond the role of the military testing and cover-up in the Nevada desert: in these images of dead cattle and horses lying amid oil drums and plastic bottles against a backdrop of distant mountains and glowing skies, there is something that speaks of a dismal conclusion to The American Dream. These scenes, the artist seems to imply, signify the end of the line of an attitude based on limitless expansion, environmental exploitation, and military bravura.

Sombre, brutal, and strangely elegant, The Pit recalls a long history of elegiac art. These photographs, however, serve more to forewarn than to commemorate, inasmuch as the extreme conditions they describe remain unfamiliar to most Americans. While symbolizing our own future peril, The Pit suggests that both the cause and the outcome of the present crisis rests squarely in human hands.

Responsibility, rather than destiny, is the final message of these works.

Richard Misrach was born in 1949 in Los Angeles and currently lives in Emeryville, California. Among the numerous fellowships and awards he has received are three National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships (1973, 1977, 1984), a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship (1979), and the International Center for Photography Award for outstanding publication of 1987 (Desert Cantos, University of New Mexico Press).

Lawrence Rinder

Works in MATRIX (all works are from the series, Desert Canto VI: The Pit, 1987, dye coupler prints, 5' x 4', and courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco):

Dead Animals #18.

Dead Animals #104.

Dead Animals #112.

Dead Animals #160.

Dead Animals #167.

Dead Animals #222.

Dead Animals #279.

Dead Animals #294.

Dead Animals #327.

Dead Animals #362.

Selected one-person  
exhibitions:

Musée National d'Art Moderne  
(Beaubourg), Paris, France  
'79; Los Angeles County  
Museum of Art, CA '83; The  
Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA,  
Richard Misrach: Photographs  
of the American Desert '87;  
Philadelphia Museum of Art,  
PA '87; Art Institute of  
Chicago, IL '88; Carpenter  
Center for the Visual Arts,  
Harvard, MA '88; Fraenkel  
Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
'89.

Selected group exhibitions:

Museum of Modern Art, New  
Acquisitions: Recent Color,  
NYC '84; San Francisco Museum  
of Modern Art, Photography in  
California: 1945-1980 '84;  
Barbican Art Gallery, An  
Eloquent Light: American  
Photography from 1945-1980,  
London, England '85.

Selected bibliography:

Fisher, Hal. Artforum  
(exhibition review), Summer  
'79.

Ratcliff, Carter.

"Richard Misrach: Words and  
Images," Print Collector's  
Newsletter, January/February  
'80.

Jordan, Jim. "Desert  
Landscape: A New Ideological  
Frontier," Artweek, June 13,  
'87.

Levy, Mark. Art in  
America (exhibition review),  
April '88.

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