Richard Misrach

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Richard Misrach, a native Californian, has spent most of his career photographing the American desert and is considered one of this century’s most internationally acclaimed photographers. His works are represented in more than fifty major museum collections around the world. Selections from his groundbreaking Desert Cantos series have appeared in three previous books, including Desert Cantos, which received the 1988 Infinity Award from the International Center for Photography; Bravo 20; The Bombing of the American West, which was awarded the 1991 PEN Center West Award for a nonfiction book; Violent Legacies: Three Cantos; and Crimes and Splendors.

John Paul Caponigro

There was one thing that you said that I found very poetic. You said, when we were talking about photographing at night, "It just lead me to it. I learned that there’s a new language of working photographically at night I just fell in love with the language."

The notion of a language of night is beautiful. Tell me more about it.

Robert Misrach

Well thanks, thanks very much. I can only go back to when I worked at night, earlier in my career, very early. I found it really liberating just to be able to work at night because there hadn’t been that much done in the history of photography. You know Brassai had worked at night, and there’s been individual photographs done at night, but there’s just so many other things photographed so thoroughly, it was hard to get away from that. It’s a trap in a way. Early on, working at night, there were so many things I didn’t know. Mistakes I made would lead to understanding new things. I guess the language evolved out of that. And coming back now, many of the things I’m doing at night are really borrowed from that early work, but framed differently.

JPC It struck me that photographing the desert and photographing the night have similarities, both seem like spaces that when first approached can seem empty and yet when you spend time with them you realize how full they are.

RM Right, that’s very good.

RM I was working exclusively at night and it’s only recently that I’ve come back to working at night again. But, as part of the Cantos, the way I’m approaching it now is conceptually much different.

JPC How so?

RM What’s different now is that I’ve become interested, in the last couple Cantos, with language and the way it shapes the way we see things. I’m working on a book right now. There’s a series of skies where I’ll pick a place on a map, like a Rand McNally map, and go to that place and photograph the sky. What’s in the photograph is not clouds, there’s no horizon line. There’s nothing in there. It’s really atmosphere, light. My idea was that the photographs become a rorschachs. What gives it its conceptual meaning is the name of the place. Each of the places is keyed by where I took it.
The night skies is a follow up on that in what I call the series Heavenly Bodies. What I’m implying is the way that the night skies, the stars and the planets, have been named, is actually very Eurocentric. It’s based on Arabic language and Greek naming and mythology. All these different things that have been imposed on the American Southwest. Even though on one hand it’s sort of innocent, just a classification system, a naming system, it actually has a lot of bearing on how we understand ideas, sort of imperialist ideas about how one culture can lay its system over another – again relatively innocently but actually having a huge impact. Along with the skies which are based on place names, the Heavenly Bodies are based on constellation, star and planet names. What I’m doing is still looks very much like night photographs of the sky, it’s pretty straight forward in that sense. And yet, now with foregrounding the names and the language we use to describe those, at least the way Eurocentric culture does, it adds another element to the Cantos.

What I have done with the Desert Cantos is that each has a different strategy or approach to making images. Sometimes they’re very traditional. Others give you different ways to think about the overall picture, which for me has been the desert for these twenty years.


Are there any other themes that you’ve found since the publication of this book?

RM Well at the time of the book there were 18 plus what I call the metaprologue. Since then there have been a number of new Cantos; the Heavenly Bodies for instance is the 21st Canto. And I’ve been doing the 22nd Canto – Night Clouds. The 19th Canto is Las Vegas. The 19th and 20th I’m still working on and I haven’t published any of those yet. The 21st and 22nd I’ve actually been publishing recently and will be doing a book on just those.

JPC Your work seems multiperspectival, it’s almost as if a cubist got a hold of the theme rather the form. And I wondered if you felt that has a scattering influence.

RM I think that’s a really, really good analogy. One of the things that was really influential early on was Ezra Pound’s Cantos, one poem he worked on for 50 years. It’s epic. I had a great deal of difficulty understanding it. One of the problems was you’d be reading along in English and he would move to a Chinese ideogram or French--he actually used seven different languages in a given poem. And for somebody who’s not fluent in different languages it has the impact of rupturing your way of understanding something. It was very purposeful on his part to put these obstacles of language in there so that you become conscious of the whole system. You don’t get a neat narrative or a neat poem. Once you run into these obstacles of language you have to stop and think about other things. So, for me, in putting The Playboys or The Paintings or these language things in with these more conventional landscapes they inform each other. It does scatter, it does rupture, the way cubist paintings would. Each gives you a different way to approach something and sheds light on everything else.

JPC Right. In a sense, less authoritarian and perhaps a little more true to our experience of life, which these days is none too cohesive.
RM Our experience with knowledge, the way we know things, is not that neat. It doesn’t fit into a grand narrative, the way we’ve been taught to read. Things just don’t work that way any more.

JPC As in western culture, there has been a division, arbitrarily between art and science. You mentioned that you had received criticism from both the artistic or aesthetic community and the documentary or journalistic community (not that we can divide those simply). I wonder what both camps have said. Interestingly you seem to be placed squarely with one foot in each. What are their concerns?

RM Right. At the risk of oversimplifying it, with the dead animal pit, the idea is that I would be aestheticizing this horrific thing, making beautiful objects out of something terrible. Also I took political or poetic license with historical texts, as proof that I was not interested in making just beautiful pictures of dead corpses. Fredrick Sommer did some things that were incredible studies of death, which is something in and of itself. That just wasn’t what I was trying to do. I was definitely trying to make a political statement with that work. I felt it had to do with nuclear testing. I took a historical text of an event that happened in the 1950’s and paired it with 1980’s images, trying to make a point that this could be happening today. I took political license there, I broke the rules of documentary photography. So I upset the documentarians there. People who were into aesthetics thought the work was not aesthetically interesting. I basically collapsed, in my own mind, the distinction between documents, which to me are very bogus. The kinds of things we see in Life magazine, just don’t work any more. These fine art books that come out that are documents of heroin users starving to death, it feels dishonest and disingenuous. I think making photographs like that has gotten more problematized, it’s gotten more complicated now. We know too much. We can’t do those things. In my own way I think it broke down. Where the document begins and where the aesthetic object begins is really hard to tell. That’s fairly obvious in the work; there doesn’t seem to be an illusion of a straight document. What’s gotten complicated is the ways we use that kind of photography in our culture and society these days.

JPC As you broke down the conventions of pictorial language it seems you’ve also been trying to expose the conventions of photographic language.

RM I have to say, it’s not so much pointing out how other people have done it. That would be a pretty cheap shot. What I was trying to do was explore it for myself. The problems rest very much in my own work. I’ve been struggling with this all along. My very first project was a documentary of street people in Berkeley – Dorothea Lange or Bruce Davidson type documentary – when I was 22 years old. That’s when I first realized there was a major discrepancy between my good intentions and how the images actually functioned in the world. I had a coffee table book (Telegraph 3 am) of poor people on the street, with a show at ICP. I was very young and it raised all those problems.

It makes somebody go in the museum in the afternoon after a really nice lunch, feel guilty for a little bit, and maybe then send twenty bucks to a cause. But does it really change the world? What really is the outcome of all that? It tends to elevate photographers to heroic status and I don’t know that it helps anybody. It’s easy to cast it that way. The reason I’m bringing it up is because I’m struggling with it myself.

It feels exploitive. It feels careerist. I’m thinking mostly of work of people who are starving, famines, that kind of stuff. You go see it on a museum wall, these big beautiful crafted prints, and it just feels wrong. It feels like one of those patterns we got into without really questioning it, from Life magazine days. In that particular historical moment, that context, it made sense. It was a way of seeing the world, but I think it’s becoming a pattern of representing other cultures – bringing back trophies of other peoples’
suffering. Somebody called it victim photography. My work definitely borders on the edge there and maybe goes over. I don’t know. It’s a hard one.

In a way I’ve been struggling to get out of that hole ever since, and I don’t think I have. But I think the work is an honest struggle with the problems. Any criticisms I would make could be turned right back on the things I’ve done. It’s a very difficult thing once you start trying to show what would be considered documents or show what our world is made up of. It’s very complicated to start representing things like that.

**JPC** The sky work is extraordinarily formal. It’s ironic in the sense that it is a document, based on its photographic nature, and yet at other times it almost seems like a document of nothing, another empty space. There’s probably something more at work here than post-modern irony.

**RM** Oh yeah. There’s a lot. I was reading a lot about the way the camera influences the way we see. The camera is an invention of the 15th century. Renaissance one point perspective, the horizon line, all those elements were a convention that we have come to just use. It’s been very effective and very exciting and powerful. I take a tool, an instrument for recording three dimensional perspective and point it at something two dimensional and see what happens. In other words can you make a picture that didn’t have those things? Again it freed me up to incorporate language in a stronger sense to play with the way meaning is made in a photograph. But I also found it to be incredibly beautiful. There is irony in the sense that you know photography is the tool for realism and yet what I’ve got is extreme abstraction. They’re very precisely made in terms of the actual color. In other words I don’t fool around with color filters to distort the color. I try to get a so called accurate color. They bring up notions of field painting and yet they’re literal.

There’s nothing to latch onto, no clouds, no horizon line, no subject matter so to speak, it’s just atmosphere and light. The title does become very important. And what I include in the title is one, the name of the place, but two I also engrave inside the frame the actual minute and date the image was made. I don’t think of it as irony so much, but it points at the idea that the camera is always conceived of as this thing that catches an instant moment and yet you look at the sky and it’s a metaphor for eternity, it’s timeless. So you have those two ideas pitted against each other; they’re forced to collide against one another. It becomes a diary, it’s a dysfunctional diary. When you keep a diary you talk about specific moments and the details of a particular day. Well these things are so detailless to turn them into a diary turns the notion of a diary on its head.

**JPC** Is this play with convention more than conceit? Self-consciously pointing to convention it also points out the language that’s being used and perhaps if the viewer becomes conscious of that, the content of the picture might become more transparent.

**RM** I couldn’t have said it better myself. The thing is again it could easily be read as a shallow game. I can understand that. But for me it was a really, really important push for my own ideas about what all these images that I’ve been working on for all these years are. It was a lot of soul searching, and it was my way of realizing things, and it works for me.

**JPC** I sense that, one just has to say it, because, without having heard that, one could wonder.
RM No and I respect that, because the pictures are so simple, to the point of being almost vacuous. I’m so aware of that, and that was the challenge, and I went with that. There was something I was really pushing for my own growth.

JPC Pair that with photographing others’ paintings, that kind of appropriation probably doesn’t take on it’s full meaning until it’s in context with the other work.

RM Absolutely. Any given single Canto has no bearing whatsoever without the rest of the Cantos. That’s clearly why I structured it that way from the beginning. It’s the same as an image, you take one image and as soon as you start pairing it with other images it takes on much bigger meaning. We’ve all been doing that. What I’m trying to do is take each of the Cantos and do the same thing by building on it with other Cantos. If you take the pictures of the paintings out of context they become something completely different and it’s not something I was interested in. But I do know that that work is very difficult for people. It doesn’t look like quote "my work" unquote.

JPC I’m curious, with the critical apparatus at work, and the necessity of artists writing their own texts, we’ve had to talk quite a lot to fully reveal things, do you ever wonder what room is left for the non-linguistic concerns?

RM I’m sorry say that again?

JPC I’m wondering, with all of this fancy talk, art history, people talking about pictures, the artist being forced to speak about work, in a sense to explain it, it used to be thought that there was a level of the image that carried the content that was beyond words.

RM Well people use to believe that but I have to say I never subscribed to that. I’ve had some pretty nasty arguments where somebody says, " If you have to talk about it ... Either the pictures speak for themselves or forget it." And I’ve never really subscribed to that. I think there was a period of time where we all came to agreement, we all agreed that pictures had certain meanings. But then people like Sherry Levine would come along. She’d rephotograph a Weston or Evans, literally copy it as closely as possible and put it on the wall. And even though we all hated it from our certain photographic background you had to acknowledge the work changed its meaning. The same picture, in other words, the exact same picture, or what would appear to be the exact same picture, had two different meanings. I thought it was brilliant. The picture itself shifts meaning radically depending on how it’s contextualized. It’s as simple as that. And to me that was sort of a revelation that there’s no inherent meaning in an image. And so I think it can be very important to try to use language to put a spin on your own work so to speak.

JPC In sense, an artist is trying to shape a statement. And as more of the statement becomes linguistic the artist has to take a hand in that process in order to take control of the statement.

RM Yes. You make a statement by not putting language with it. Just choosing not to use language is a statement.

JPC Exactly.
RM When I first started you didn’t think about it that way. You looked at Ansel Adams’ photographs and it seemed so clear what that meaning was. But now we revise history and reconsidered things, we know more about Adams. We took things for granted, we’ve learned we can’t do that today.

JPC Photography is inescapably wrapped up in the historical. The present always looks to the past and reshapes history to justify itself and its ends. Fascinating. But do you really think that all of the content of the picture is culturally constructed? I’m wondering if you do find room for a level a content within the work that is beyond that?

RM I definitely think there are other levels going on. It’s so incredibly complex.

RM You have to make your own ethical and moral calls along the way, sometimes in the face of general consensus. In the history of photography there’s a literary model which has been used over and over again, which is the photographic essay. It’s basically a literary model from Robert Frank and Walker Evans. The model that I’m trying to build on is the epic model in literature which is something that is accumulating over time. I really feel like it’s not really done; none of the individual Cantos is actually going to be done until they’re all done, because I think then the whole thing is going to change. I’m not really done but I’m still putting it out into the world or sending it out there. I’m learning a lot struggling with that and what that means.

JPC Can you find you can ever see a time when you could truly bring this to closure?

RM People ask me basically after each Canto if I think I’m done or if there’s much more, and I don’t know. I think the potential for the desert to give up these Cantos is infinite, so what will be done will be me and not the desert. And that could happen. After each one I never know what’s going to be next.

JPC I find the desert fascinating. It’s a very fragile environment. It also points to our fragility. We’re codependent with the land and when the land is so fragile we too are fragile. Many people see the desert as a place of death. When I first moved from Connecticut to New Mexico it was a pretty barren place to me. But I learned to walk out there and instinctively avoid the cactus, look for the lizards, watch the night hawks. You become accustomed to a different rhythm.

RM Yeah. When I was kid growing up the desert horrified me. I used to go skiing and we’d drive through the desert. You don’t want the car to break down. You don’t want to stop. You don’t want to get out. You don’t want to do anything. Once you fall in love with it that’s it. The light, the space, the solitude, the silence. Oh my god. It’s a really powerful place to be. You’re with yourself. But the problem is because people characterize the desert as a waste land that’s why military corporations like to dump their toxics out there, because they consider a place like Nevada a "national sacrifice area." Because it’s a waste land. It’s ugly. It’s barren. And yet it is a remarkable place.

JPC It’s exquisite.

RM So it may not be for everybody, and maybe it takes a little special appreciation, but I think that once you do fall in love with it, that’s it. It’s just so incredible.

JPC If there’s an ecological issues that’s second to population control it’s probably desertification.
It’s particularly ironic that many environmental advocates these are now trying to preserve what is there in previously forgotten territory, at the same time in other areas we are turning what was green into something less fertile.

**RM** Oh Yeah. The rain forests. We’re out of control. It’s unbelievable what we’re doing. It’s insane.

**JPC** How many head of cattle go on an acre out here? A hundred acres per head of cattle?

**RM** There’s one photograph, it’s called "Smoldering Cow Patties" If you go back to the fires. See all those little things? That’s all cow poop. Smoldering, right there. It’s covering up the sun. That’s what we’re doing.

**JPC** Yeah and with a rising population how does an environment like that sustain us?

**RM** The controlled burns and the smoke that’s generated by turning these fields over, it’s just unbelievable what goes on all the time. Everyday they’re doing that kind of stuff. Obviously if you have a bombing range, or dead animal pits, or fires, or floods, it hits you over the head. I started to think sometimes it’s the conceptions that we have that are the problems and the way we do things. For the Skies, originally I had a short text in the beginning about ozone depletion and pollution. And then I realized in this historical moment you don’t have to tell anyone. We all know now. There’s a long history of people photographing clouds for their beauty, their formal beauty, and I just don’t think you can do that any more. They’re still beautiful but there’s no way we can look at them instantly and see beautiful abstractions and forms of light, because of what we were just talking about. Those sunsets, those beautiful reds are coming out of the pollution. Some of the clouds out there are completely man made. It’s a different time and a different way of thinking.

**RM** I take a lot of political license and I’ve been criticized roundly for that. And that’s fine. But the point is that without it then it becomes something else, it becomes a study of just the beauty of death and there’s a certain amount of that there but I definitely want to put my spin on it. People will come to it and take from it what they want. but I definitely had an agenda when I did it and I hold onto the agenda as much as I can.

**JPC** And the agenda was what?

**RM** To politicize it. to basically put it into a political context as opposed to putting dead carcasses in peoples faces for fun.

**JPC** So it brings something that was hidden to public consciousness?

**RM** And it’s actually worked even though people have questioned this as documentary photography. Are you playing with the rules? And I definitely am. Some people really hate that and some people think it’s OK. It problematizes all documentary work. Somebody was just telling me the other day that in Timothy O’Sullivan’s photographs of the Civil War, that he did for Brady, he would move the corpses around to get better pictures. I didn’t know that before. That kind of stuff happens all the time and the idea that documentary photograph is objective at all is just a bogus concept. But it’s one of the secret myths about documentary, that it’s objective. If you ever sat down and broke it down to what’s really
being said, all the time, then you’d realize that it’s completely subjective, it’s a point of view. But there is a myth that documentary work, whether it’s a film or a photograph, is somehow clean.

JPC I know. We tend to trust the machine, but not each other. I encounter this all the time when I talk to people about using digital technology. The traditional notion of a photography is that it’s one instant, or one passage, as in the case of some of your photographs, of a certain amount of time on one sheet of film. That’s it. You’re allowed to push the contrast and the color around a little bit but don’t take a tree out. If you’re going to crop, crop with the edge of the camera. There are many biases about how you should use the instrument, which helps determine what it will make. The result is there are a lot of dictated notions wrapped into our cultural definition of what photography is, should be and should do. To the same degree, there are also notions of what the land is, should be, and what we can do with the it conscientiously.

RM True, true. We have all these hidden rules, after a while you just don’t pay attention to them. They are just the rules we live by so it’s good to bump them around a little bit.

JPC Many of Native Americans don’t make such a separation between themselves and the land. As a result they’ll use language like “I call this bread.” rather than our western “This is bread.” It’s an entirely different way of relating to objects and one’s environment and the establishment of ones identity, subtly encoded in language.

RM If you were an Indian, lived in Carson City or Lincoln County, you might not think it’s a big deal, but on the other hand, when you start looking it’s part of the big picture of what we’re doing. That’s why I’m bringing this work in.

RM This is the Bonneville Salt Flats. Do you know the story of the story Donner party?

JPC Refresh me.

RM There were settlers that came out in the 1800’s, came to California from back east in wagon trains. They got stuck in the Bonneville Salt Flats, which is on the Utah Nevada border. They got slowed down, caught in the mud there, delayed for a couple weeks. When they made it to the California Sierras, winter had set in by one day and they had to resort to cannibalism, half the party died. It’s one of the great settler sagas and tragedies of all time. There have been movies and books. Well the irony is at that same place today they hold the world land speed records. But the people there today don’t know the irony of this whole idea of conquering speed and the west. This is the worlds fastest mobile home – 96 mph. I’m sure this guy didn’t know that the Donner party had something that wasn’t too far a field from that and had a little more trouble. Here are these two guys and it’s like they just got off their horse but the horse just looks a little different.