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PHOTOGRAPHY

Following the Flames

By DAVID LITTLEJOHN | December 20, 2011



Richard Misrach almost always manages to make some compelling images out of the grotesque intersection of the natural and the human. *Oakland Museum of California*
Oakland and Berkeley, Calif.

Richard Misrach, age 62, is, to my eye, the most interesting and original American photographer of his generation. His work runs parallel to that of Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky, two German contemporaries. All make very large prints in color (Mr. Misrach's current series includes 14 images larger than five feet by six feet, and two images larger than eight by 10 feet), defying the notions that serious art photography can only be done in black and white, and that the images have to satisfy intimate viewing.

One thing that sets Mr. Misrach apart is that he usually makes sparing and subtle use of color. Even normal blue skies, he admitted to me, may be reduced in the darkroom to a hazy, luminous gray. There are exceptions, like the swimming pool filled with blue water (the house that once adjoined it was burned to ash) and the melted, multicolored plastic child's bicycle—both from his current 1991 Oakland fire series—and the brilliant orange skies over some of his 700 photos of the Golden Gate, taken from the deck of his Berkeley house between 1997 and 2000. For the most part, he takes his large pictures (using a 19th-century view camera that produces eight-by-10-inch negatives) of large, open American spaces—deserts, prairies, ocean beaches. But he almost always includes a sense, visible or implicit, of human interaction and presence, and a magisterial manipulation of light and composition.

He rarely seems to set out to find "the beautiful" (an exception is a 1979-82 series he did at night of strobe-lighted Greek and Roman ruins, on display at Berkeley) but almost always manages to make something aesthetically compelling out of the most grotesque intersections of the natural and the human:

a desert fire burning over a pile of dead cattle; a pink-puddled bomb crater in a Nevada test site; cars half-drowned in a sudden desert flood.

In 2005, Mr. Misrach went to New Orleans (he knew the area from an earlier trip in which he photographed the polluted lower Mississippi) and came back with 2,000 digital snapshots of things like graffiti left on flood-damaged houses: "Possible Body." "Looters will be Shot." "Lisa + Donnie R OK." "Michael where are you?" "Yes Brownie You Did a Heckuva Job." "Not Leaving." "Destroy This Memory"—the title of an interim show of 69 photos, which was seen at five museums in 2005. I call it "interim" because Mr. Misrach also took a thousand more carefully considered view-camera photographs in New Orleans. He plans to show a selection of these in 2025, in the hope that 20 years will have eased the pain of both the survivors and the bereaved.

A similar logic lay behind his displaying this month a selection of 40 of the 200 photographs he printed after the 1991 Oakland Hills Fire, which leapt the border into Berkeley.

Although dwarfed by other natural disasters, and probably forgotten by people without Bay Area connections, the Oakland Hills Fire 20 years ago killed 25 (many of them trapped in their cars, trying to escape), injured 150 and burned down more than 3,000 homes and 450 apartments and condos. The property damage has been estimated at \$1.7 billion—the same (in today's dollars) as the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Overnight, a hillside brush fire was transformed into a major conflagration by a sudden "Diablo wind" that rose within minutes to 70 miles per hour and 100 feet high. Defying more than a thousand firefighters from all over the state, the winds (including flame-generated whirlwinds) hurled fire, flint and embers in a dozen different directions. At their peak, the flames were exploding 10 houses a minute—600 in the first hour alone. Sparks leapt over an eight-lane freeway. In two days, two square miles of wood-framed houses among the trees, built on steep slopes and narrow, winding roads (to capture the great views of San Francisco), had been reduced to a no-man's-land of white ash and crumbled debris, pierced by dark spikes of leafless tree trunks among surviving stone steps and totemic chimney towers.

It is this ghostly, lifeless afterworld that Mr. Misrach captured by setting up his view camera along the empty streets of this miniature version of Dresden or Hiroshima a week or so after the fire. There are no people in his pictures; no cars except burned-out hulks with melted windows.

The first images I focused on were the remains of the burned trees. In most cases, only the hard, black, sharp centers of their trunks remained. Mr. Misrach found many ways of making these spiky shapes eloquent and expressive.

Bleak white-and-gray vistas of vacant lots once filled with vaporized houses say little, which may be why Mr. Misrach almost always includes some reminder of what was once there. A swimming pool, a set of stone steps, a burned-out car or bike, an impeccable set of metal-mesh garden furniture just waiting for drinks to be poured. The tile-roofed concrete garage of a Bernard Maybeck house remains intact, along with the stone wall and steps alongside it, leading up to a wooden house that no longer exists—except in a small mailbox replica.

In the years since the fire, most of the empty lots have been filled with new houses, even if most of the residents from 1991 have left. Many of the rebuilders used their settlements to build new McMansions two or three times the size of the houses that were lost. The trees around them will take another 50 years to grow back. The handsome old houses of the Oakland hills are not what they were. But Mr. Misrach has captured the precise moment when one world ended and another began.

1991: The Oakland-Berkeley Fire Aftermath

Berkeley Art Museum Through | Through February 5
Oakland Museum of California | Through February 12

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