

THE TAINTED DESERT

Richard Misrach's Photographs
Document the Beauty and Ruin
of the American West

BY SEAN ELDER



Richard Misrach, as reflected in his
8x10-inch view camera.

FRAGMENTS OF BOMB AND VEHICLE
LONE ROCK, 1987



IN JUNE OF 1986, photographer Richard Misrach and his German shepherd, Kodak, took a walk through the desert. It was not unusual terrain for them, but Misrach moved gingerly. He was scanning the landscape for more than a great shot: Scattered about were hundreds of unexploded bombs, varying in weight from 25 to 2,000 pounds. He knew how to distinguish between the live ones and the dummies. Live bombs were covered with what looked like alligator skin, or were painted with blue stripes, or had fuses on one end. But Misrach noticed that the alligator skin was peeling off of some, that the blue stripes had faded on

others and many had their tails buried in the sand. Even the dummies, powder blue and Day-Glo orange, contained a smoke charge that could take your hand off.

After several nerve-racking hours, Misrach's confidence increased, his photographer's instincts overriding his fear. He took out his 8x10" view camera and began capturing images of the blighted landscape: the bombs, half-buried in the earth; craters, large and small, some bleeding a brilliant red fluid; demolished tanks, jeeps and trucks—even a yellow school bus, its insides charred black.

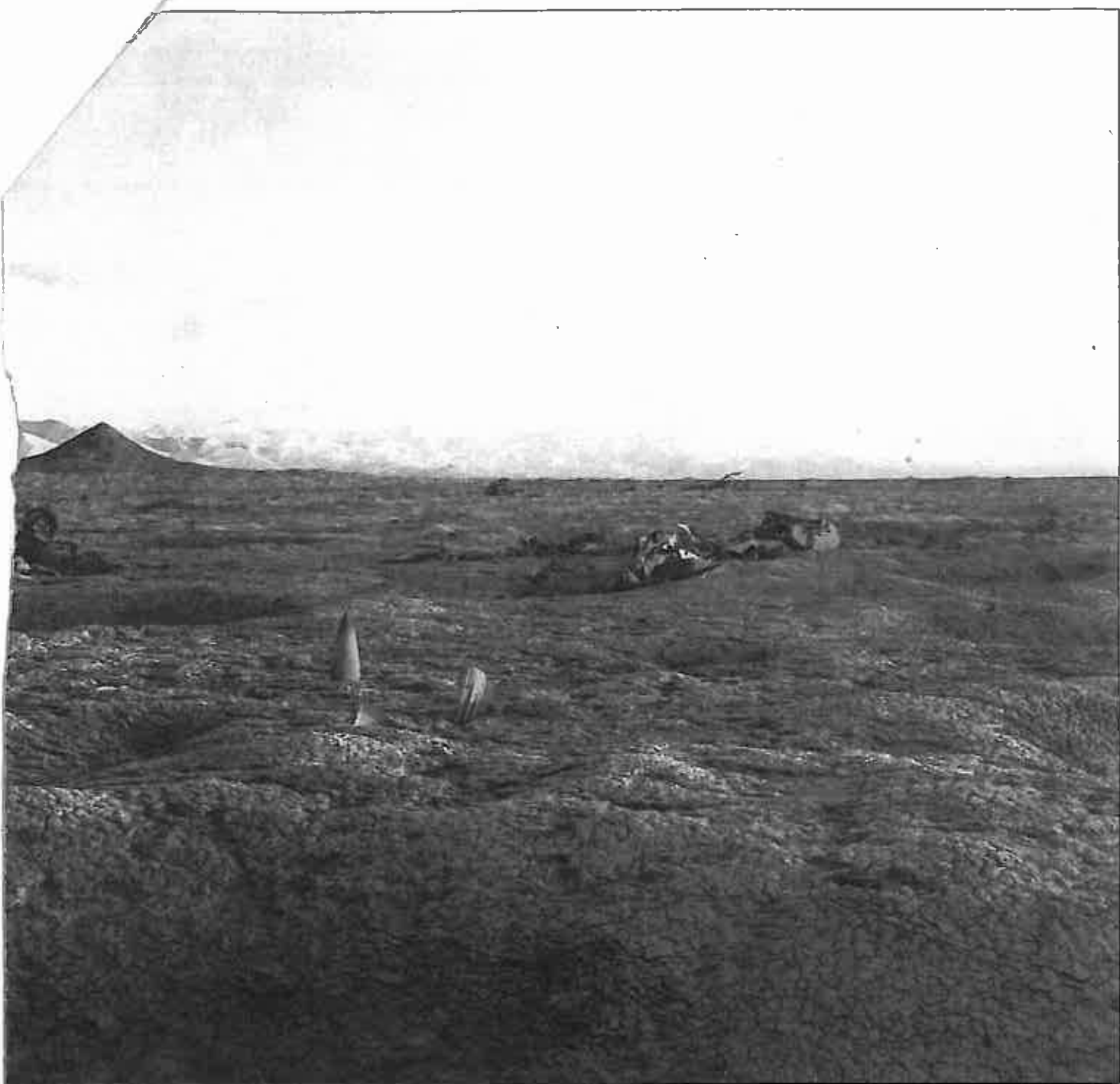
This stretch of the Carson Sink Desert in Nevada was not a military site. This

was public land that the Navy had been bombing illegally since World War II. Although Misrach knew that he had every right to be there, he strained his ears listening for Navy jets, which could return at any moment, strafing and shelling as they pleased.

Richard Misrach has been photographing the desert of the American West for more than 15 years. He has been hailed by critics as one of America's most distinctive and original nature photographers because, among other things, he is not afraid to document the realities of the planet.

Man has left his mark on Misrach's landscapes: Power lines cut across the

William McLeod



pristine scenery, satellite dishes wink in the distance, animals lie bloated, having drunk from toxic sumps. The images are formally beautiful, but the message is grim: Misrach considers humanity's assault on the earth a "failed stewardship." And in Bravo-20, the Navy code name for the Carson Sink Desert, Misrach has found a metaphor for his concerns.

With "Bravo-20: The Bombing of the American West," Misrach is doing more than documenting tragedy through art; he is trying to galvanize people into protecting public lands. An exhibition of his photos, scheduled to open Nov. 19 in San Francisco, will travel across the country

Photographs courtesy of Jan Kitzner Gallery

this year, to coincide with the release of the "Bravo-20" book (Johns Hopkins Press). Both will also contain a history of the bombings and the project (by Misrach's wife, Myriam Weisang Misrach) and a proposal by the photographer about what to do with the land: Turn it into a theme park, complete with a Boardwalk of Bombs and a Devastation Drive.

A VERY APPROPRIATE suggestion for a boy from Los Angeles.

Misrach, 41, spent his wonder years in the upscale neighborhood of Westwood. His father owned a sporting goods business and his mother

was a homemaker. Many of his schoolmates at University High were movie brats and lived lives of unconcerned privilege. Then, in 1967, Misrach enrolled in UC Berkeley.

"Berkeley was going through tremendous upheaval," Misrach recalls. "I've never grown as quickly as I did in that year; it sent me on a spiral of challenging a lot of the values my parents held."

Though he entered the university as a math major, Misrach soon switched to psychology and began a thesis on "altered states of consciousness." He also fell in love with photography.

His role models were Dorothea Lange



and Walker Evans, whose WPA photos of the '30s documented the lives of the nation's downtrodden. Like Lange and Evans, Misrach wanted to make a statement. He had a dream in which faces of burnt-out street-people who were overrunning the city appeared and disappeared. He thought, "I should photograph this, these people, this culture that I'm part of and yet not part of." The results—stark, depressing black-and-white pictures of young people seemingly not long for this world—were published in "Telegraph 3

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A.M." (Cornucopia Press).

"In the end I didn't really do anything that affected social change, and my art wasn't particularly great art," he says. "I came out with this coffee table book that had the greatest intentions yet somehow fell flat."

At 24, Misrach gave up his graduate work in psychology to pursue photography full-time—but not the art/propaganda he had dabbled in. Like many people in the counterculture nationwide, his concerns were turning mystical.

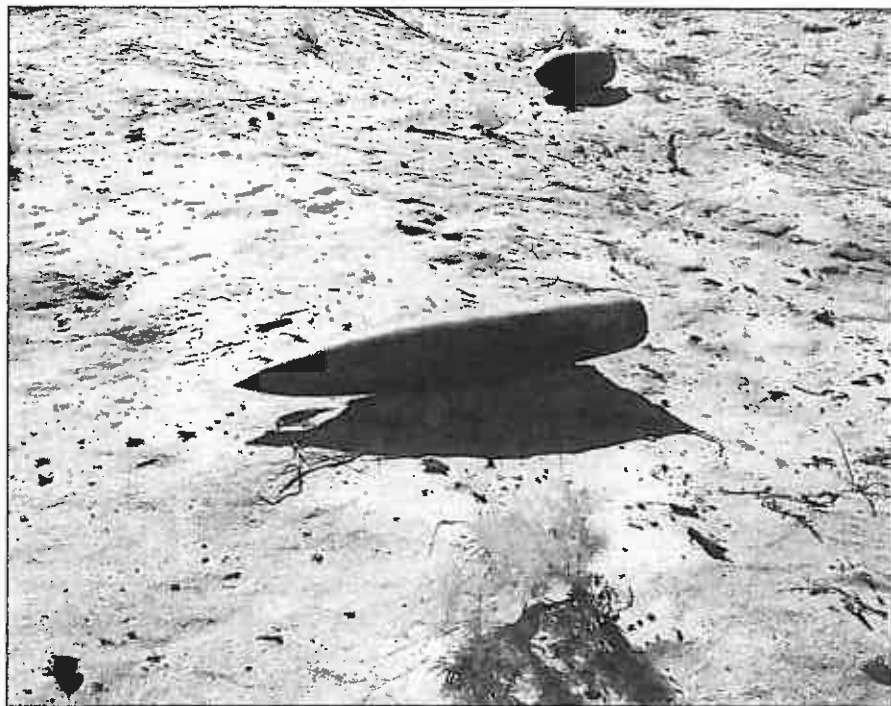
"It sounds sort of hokey," he says, "but I just sort of discovered the desert."

Scouring California, Nevada and Ari-

zona in a VW van, Misrach camped out, taking photos of the landscape, always at dusk or dawn, which he calls "the crack between the two worlds. It's a very magical time. But I brought artificial light."

Those early photos bear little resemblance to any other desert photography, including Misrach's later, better-known work. The light is glaring, intrusive: The photos look like snapshots taken by Martians from the open doors of their saucers. "At that point I was rebelling against traditional landscape photography, like Ansel Adams, and doing exactly the opposite of what he would do," he says. "I was vandalizing with artificial light."

CRATER AND DESTROYED CONVOY,
1986



BOMBS, 1986

Misrach describes those morning and evening hours alone in the desert as a sort of dance: He would hop about in the darkness, trying to beat the light (or darkness), popping flashes, shooting hundreds of rolls of film.

"I felt like I was working out a language where I could talk about things in a very different way," he says. "And that became more important than showing the ills of society. But I think all those elements ended up coming out later."

During the mid-1970s, his work began to appear in a number of group shows and to gain recognition, but Misrach subsisted largely through menial jobs and a couple

of National Endowment for the Arts grants. In 1975, he got his first one-man show, at the International Center for Photography in New York. Overjoyed, he drove across country for the opening—and found not a single person there.

"I was just blown out of the water," he says. "It was absolutely brutal. There wasn't one person. And there was a holographic show upstairs that was mobbed."

By 1981, Misrach had married and became the father of a son. His reputation as a photographer continued to grow. That year, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship, which funded a trip to Greece and a series of spectral images of the Parthenon

and other ruins. He was photographing in color by then, forsaking the 35-millimeter camera for the broad-eyed 8x10". He experimented in swamps, forests and the desert, using less artificial light and framing his shots less rigidly, letting nature claim its own definition.

A new quality began to creep into Misrach's work: a darker edge, a sense of things going awry in the natural world. "I became very future-conscious once my kid was born," he says. "Everywhere I looked, particularly in the desert, I started seeing these incredible symbols of our failed stewardship of the environment."

Small incidents—animals killed by