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Richard Misrach and Kate Orff's *Petrochemical America*: Cartographies of the Picturesque

This article looks at the landscape photographer Richard Misrach's collaboration with the architect Kate Orff in *Petrochemical America* (2012) a prizewinning examination of the effects of the Oil Industry in the Mississippi Delta. Whilst situating its critique of the oil industry in the twentieth and twenty-first century, *Petrochemical America* nonetheless uses a variety of aesthetic devices from previous centuries and traditions, in particular the use of the picturesque in landscapes of the nineteenth century. Through this, and other mechanisms, the images in *Petrochemical America* become potential allegories for the paradoxical co-existence of a picturesque nature visibly affected by industrial transformation.

It was my intention to attempt a description of several districts remarkable for their picturesqueness and truly American character ... yet I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away ... desecrated by what is called improvement; which, as yet, generally destroys Nature's beauty without substituting that of Art.¹

Thomas Cole, "On the The Destruction of Beautiful Landscapes" (1836)

¹ Thomas Cole, "On the The Destruction of Beautiful Landscapes", *Essay on American Scenery*, American Monthly Magazine 1 (January 1836)

More than a century after Thomas Cole's ruminations on the picturesque, Richard Misrach and Kate Orff's photo-text *Petrochemical America* (2012) charts the effects of industrial pollution on southern Mississippi and Louisiana through its own use of picturesque tropes and devices.² However, while *Petrochemical America* is first and foremost an overwhelming critique of "cancer alley", the swathe of land stretching from Baton Rouge to New Orleans infamous for its density of petrochemical plants, pollution, and disease, it is also an exercise in a particular beautiful form of book making; one in which the incongruities between the stark subject matter and its inevitable aesthetic qualities play a significant role. This article will look closer at how the textual and illustrative material supplied by Kate Orff's design studio – together with Misrach's arresting and at times picturesque images – both temper and invigorate the urgent nature of the book's politics. While the destruction caused by pollution in Misrach's photographs is an overt presence, the real charge of the images lies in those things that remind us of the picturesque even if presented obliquely; an unbelievable sunset blocked out by fog, the lush greenness of a waterway rendered toxic by waste. In this way, the presence of the picturesque becomes a pre-requisite for its disruption in *Petrochemical America*. It forms a constituent part of the book's

² Described in the introduction as a "unique collaboration between a photographer and a landscape architect", *Petrochemical America* consists of 47 photographs by Misrach followed by Orff's 'Ecological Atlas' of written and drawn material, some added, superimposed or drawn on top of the preceding photographic material. Sub-sectioned into chapters, the ecological atlas moves from topics such as 'Oil', 'Infrastructure', and 'Waste', to 'Ecology/Economy' and lastly 'Landscape' ending with an added explanatory index of organisations and terms. In Misrach's other ongoing projects, *The Desert Cantos* (begun 1997) – a series of images of the American West and the later *Border Cantos* (begun 2004) set on the border between the U.S. and Mexico, the effects of ecological damage, colonisation, and industrial exploitation are also made visible.

overall aesthetic just as it reminds us of just how beautiful the landscape being disrupted and destroyed actually is.

The Picturesque as Political Tool

In its basic meaning, the word picturesque—resembling a picture or a painted scene, something charming in appearance, or something able to evoke a vivid image—may not readily align itself to the aesthetic design of a book on the effects of the oil industry. However, *Petrochemical America*'s ability to evoke a vivid image of a region whose pastoral qualities have been destroyed relies, amongst other things, on its picturesque qualities. To highlight the precarious state of the landscapes shown, *Petrochemical America* uses the picturesque as a marker for what has been lost as well as as an interrogation into how various forms of framing directs our gaze towards that loss. To understand this use of the picturesque, however, a word seldom used in connection with twentieth and twenty-first-century photography of disaster areas, it is useful to return to the origins of the term, in particular: William Gilpin's *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (1792).³

Gilpin's ideas on the superiority of the picturesque within landscape gardening and pictorial composition relies, at its heart, on the belief in an equal measure of unadulterated, unchanged nature together with a more organised, horticulturally

³ Alongside Richard Payne Knight's *The Landscape* (1794) and Sir Uvedale Price's *Essays on the Picturesque as Compared with The Sublime and The Beautiful* (1810) Gilpin's work still forms the foundation for a conventional reading of the 18th century attempt to establish a category alongside and in response to Edmund Burke's more spectacular and more well-known definition of the sublime in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).

designed version. As Gilpin puts it in the introduction to his *Observations on the River Wye*:

Nature is always great in design; but unequal in composition ... Nature gives us the material of landscape ... but leaves us to work them up into pictures ... I am so attached to my picturesque rules, that if nature gets it wrong, I cannot help putting her right...the picture is not so much the ultimate end, as it is the medium, through which the ravishing scenes of nature are excited in the imagination.”⁴

In Gilpin’s version of the picturesque here, nature’s purpose is to enhance a particular perspective, one that enables “the imagination” to be excited rather than necessarily persuaded by the reality of what it views. As such, it makes sense that the presence of various picturesque tropes, or rather, the impulse to ‘put nature right’ is often overseen in contemporary landscape photography. If the picturesque is partly about putting ‘nature right’ it must also be antithetical to the recuperative, realist impulse of photographs of polluted and vulnerable areas, a form of photography dedicated to showing people the “real” effects of ecological disasters. In this sense, the concept of the sublime – with its focus on awe and fear – and on that which seems beyond our immediate control, presents itself as a much more attractive template than that of the picturesque.

An instance of this can be seen in Cecile Whiting’s “The Sublime and the Banal in Postwar Photography of the American West”. Here, she argues that although

⁴ William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye, introduction, [1782]* (London: Pallas Athene Publishers, 2005), p.17.

20th and 21st century American landscape photography appears to “present a straightforward opposition: pristine, spectacular wilderness in contrast to man-made development and destruction,” the move into the type of aesthetic that pervaded the New Topographics from the 1970s onwards was in reality a continuation of a longer art historical tradition in which the sublime took precedence.⁵ Citing how “Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British and American landscape artists varied in their interpretation of the sublime” Whiting nonetheless points to a crucial move within American visual art; one in which the picturesque aligns itself to that of the sublime. From a vision “which highlighted the theatrical aspects of romanticism” in transcendent landscape paintings of sunsets and grand vistas, the sublime gradually morphed into a vision “that increasingly cultivated an appreciation for a moral sublime”, one in which environmental concerns began to take precedence.⁶ Misrach’s visions of Cancer Alley constitute perfect versions of the Whiting’s ‘moral’ sublime because they – as Whiting puts it - open up “an aesthetic that sprouted out of, rather than eschewed, the imprint of humans on earth”.⁷ As a study of the after effects of ‘the imprint of humans on earth’, *Petrochemical America* combines the moral sublime with what Gilpin saw as one of the main tropes of the picturesque; namely the desire to work them “into pictures”.

For David Punter, the different ways that we define the Picturesque and the Sublime tend to detract from the fact that they are born out of a similar impulse; the impulse to establish a set of rules for how we should ideally relate to our environment. As Punter argues: “The Picturesque is in fact tied into the same psychic constellation

⁵ Cecile Whiting, ‘The Sublime and the banal in Post War Photography of the American West’ *American Art* Volume 27, No 2 (Summer 2013), p.3.

⁶ Ibid. p. 7.

⁷ Ibid. p. 12.

(as the sublime); nature is there to be improved upon, to be adapted”.⁸ For Punter, then, the Picturesque should not be read in opposition to the sublime but as a way to navigate a territory perilously posed between the two. According to Punter: “The Picturesque ... represents the movement of enclosure, control, the road which moves securely and fittingly into the countryside, the comforting flanking, the side-screen ... roughness subjected to symmetry”.⁹

Using Gilpin’s definition as a starting point, Punter reads the picturesque as a way to organize an otherwise insurmountable or disorientating view. However, within this the seeds of something unmanageable are allowed to persist, precisely because the need to enclose and to control the landscape is a constituent part of what creates the Picturesque in the first place. This is crucial, for it allows the picturesque to be read as an investigation into what exactly constitutes territorial integrity as much as painterly enjoyment; two issues that this article will argue are present in Misrach’s photographs in equal measure.

If ‘Cancer Alley’ has all the hallmarks of the sublime, it also uses what Punter calls the ‘comforting flanking’ of various objects both natural and man-made to frame the view. Whatever roughness is presented in the form of discarded materials, debris, or ruined nature, it too is more often than not subjected to symmetry’ within the frame. In other words, rather than show us the toxicity of the landscape as something that overtly disturbs the eye, it is made palpable in other more subtle and often paradoxically picturesque ways.

⁸ David Punter, *The politics of the picturesque: literature, landscape, and aesthetics since 1770*, eds. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1994) p.122.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.224.



Insert Fig. 1. Here

Robert Misrach, *Night Releases*, Mississippi River Corridor, Louisiana, 1998. ©

Richard Misrach, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

In Fig. 1 railcars rest quietly beneath a dense network of power lines, shrouded in what appears to be yellowish grey fog. It is not incidental that the fog is a toxin-laden vapour and that in the background the outlines of industrial buildings and petroleum-processing infrastructure are barely discernible. In shots of actual highways, bridges and pipelines, humans themselves are seldom in evidence – the straight lines of human-made objects, on the contrary, seem to lead the eye away from the scene itself and towards something unseen, something intimated, menacing as well as potentially beautiful. In and of themselves the images, with their low contrast and soft focus, reinforce an idea of a landscape more comatose than anguished, more forgotten than ravished. In this context, the presence of the picturesque renders a vision of nature in which things are just visible enough to be vulnerable, but not visible enough to be overwhelming.



Insert Fig. 2. Here

Robert Misrach, *New Housing Construction*, Paulina, Louisiana, 2010. © Richard Misrach, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.



Insert Fig. 3. Here

Kate Orff, *'Bigger, Farther, Filled with more Stuff'*, 2012. © SCAPE/Landscape Architecture PLLC.

In Fig. 2 Misrach's *'New Housing Construction'*, the photograph of a new build forms the visual foundation for an architecturally drawn version in Section II (Fig. 3).

Here a segmented close-up is surrounded by the material goods that will eventually come from occupancy of the house as either waste or recyclable commodities.



Insert Fig. 4. Here

Kate Orff, 'From Pipe to Plastic Bag', 2012. © SCAPE/Landscape Architecture PLLC.

The two main sections of *Petrochemical America* operate in tandem in this way, allowing Misrach's photographs in Section I to form the backdrop for the various drawn material, superimposed information and text in Section II. The superimposition of data and drawings onto the photographs in Section II thus has several purposes: information that cannot readily be gleaned from the photographs renders the consequences of decades of industrial expansion in more graphic terms and in turn, the graphic nature of Misrach's perspective is given a more overt architectural and spatial dimension. Just as Misrach's photographs in Section I are designed to be more

than simply backdrops for Orff's cartographic material in Section II, the superimposed material draws out the implications of the photographs in ways that are not readily perceivable in the photographs alone. The imposition of the cartographic material inevitably alters the illustrative nature of the photographs: it not only politicises the images in different ways it aestheticizes the process of doing so.

The use of Orff's cartographic material in section II of the book does not however guarantee that *Petrochemical America* – with its attempted representation of a particularly ingrained and insidious pollution – moves away entirely from a potentially reductive idealisation of the US South. One of the more noticeable facets of *Petrochemical America* is that it hovers between clearly referencing a particular type of southern iconography and staying clear of stereotypical versions of 'southernness'. In Fig. 4, it is only the actual naming of the Dow Chemical Plant that distinguishes the images from any number of industrial plants in America. In fact, one might argue that it is often the memory of a pastoral version of the South that facilitates the type of warning presented in *Petrochemical America* rather than any sense of its visible presence. The book's interest in the effects of industry and modernity on the American landscape returns to a pastoral vision of the South because it needs such a vision to demarcate a change that isn't always easy to gauge. As such, the photo-textual project is partly to navigate the politics of such a vision, and it is the use of the picturesque as a way to en-frame earlier traditions both painterly and photographic that enable it.

The Throughlines as Methodology

In Kate Orff's own explanatory notes for the project the cartographic material, the so-called ecological atlas in Section II is created through the use of "a visual narrative called a 'throughline'", a device in which a layering of information combines visual superimposition - as seen in Fig. 3 and 4 - with various forms of descriptive data. While this data provides a historical and geographical sense of the changes in the landscape, it also connects the visible effects of the pollution - more or less palpable in Misrach's photographs - with its more invisible ones, drawings of things that no longer occupy the region; wildlife, communal structures, the outline of previous churches and cemeteries, places now too polluted to be habitable. These 'throughlines' enable a palimpsest of information, or - as Orff says - they enable the latent narratives in Misrach's photographs to emerge as a series of vivid mental images. Once again, it is the impulse towards improving nature that allows for the picturesque to emerge in what might otherwise have been 'simply' a 'documentary' style photograph.

As such, while the 'throughlines' contain a distinctly narrative element, they also contain a picturesque quality that references various aesthetic techniques already present in the photographs despite their realist subject matter. According to Steven Hoelscher, photography's embrace of the picturesque grew out of a general Victorian "search for order" during a period of economic unrest in the nineteenth century, but more crucially, it participated in the creation of a new, middle-class, post-frontier space as well. By turning nature into picturesque scenery, certain regional transformations (not to mention various colonial crimes) could be glossed, allowing

photography to dictate what “the viewer should see, how it should be seen, and when it should be seen all in a matter of fact and seemingly unmediated way”.¹⁰

Hoelscher’s argument pertains specifically to the rise of touristic views and the ensuing commodification of landscape photography. Nonetheless, Misrach’s depiction of a contaminated landscape – despite being critical of the effects of commodification - still carries the residue of this ‘Victorian’ desire for a more ordered version of a landscape potentially “out of control”. Misrach’s images may appear to be “unmediated” versions of the harsh realities of Cancer Alley, but the measured gaze and considered perspectives are clearly designed to allow - in line with Gilpin’s definition of the picturesque – a comprehensive and in some ways ordered view of the surroundings.

Similarly, Orff’s cartographic ‘throughlines’ in Section II are as reminiscent of anatomical, horticultural and geographical cartographies of previous centuries, as they are indicators of a contemporary sensibility in ecological terms. They, too, create a pathway for how we might order and mediate an essentially invisible form of pollution, at least in photographic terms. The attention to detail and the delicately veined outlines of the superimposed drawings in Section II share an affinity with eighteenth and nineteenth-century 3D atlases just as they form a template for a particular form of digital info-graphics and contemporary mapping for the post-industrial age. In this sense, the decorative quality of the ‘throughlines’ has more than simply an informative role. The delicate lines of Orff’s drawings as seen in Fig. 3

¹⁰ Steven Hoelscher, *The Photographic Construction of Tourist Space in Victorian America*, (*American Geographical Society: Geographical Review*, Vol. 88, No. 4, J. B. Jackson and *Geography* (Oct., 1998), pp. 548-570, p.549.

appear ingrained in the photographs themselves, facilitating narratives that according to Orff are already there. In addition, the picturesque qualities of the ornate drawings of material objects, animals, and spaces invoke a more emotive sense of the data supplied. It is not that the cartography merely turns Misrach's polluted spaces into something that on the face of it appears more decorative than the subject warrants, it enhances a picturesque quality already present in the photographs.

In this respect, both Misrach and Orff's use of Cancer Alley indicates an awareness of the inevitably staged and "picturesque" quality that resides even in images designed to be "neutral". Misrach's foregrounding of certain elements, the use of vertical structures, be they trees or chemical plants, to coincide with the photograph's margin, the provision of depth and movements – are all designed to give an overwhelming sense of how nature has been subsumed by industry. At the same time, they enable the viewer to understand the landscape more comprehensibly. Thus, while the use of the picturesque originally presented a version of America as predominantly restorative and/or pastoral, the semblance of something romanticised or pastoral can also, as Hoeschler points out, indicate that the image is about "the passage from one state into another". Even though the stillness and apparent contemplative nature of Misrach's images seem appropriate to the polluted landscape, the underlying subject (namely deterioration and eventual destruction of habitats) is - as the throughlines illustrate – an on-going narrative.

Orff's 'throughlines' although designed to function as a distinctly twenty-first century form of eco-atlas, thus inevitably carry the weight of previous cartographic practice. And yet, by filtering it through the picturesque it aligns itself with a particular history and lineage of American landscape photography as well. If nineteenth century American cartography and photography was fixated on the United States as

emerging nation state, *Petrochemical America* charts – paradoxically - many of the same concerns by looking at the effects of environmental expansionism through a twentieth and twenty-first century lens.

The fact that much of Misrach's landscape iconography owes a debt to the cartographic practice of earlier decades and centuries is of course not surprising. From the nineteenth century surveys of the American West by Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson, to the post-war portfolios of Robert Adams, Edward Burtynsky, Mitch Epstein, David Meisel, and of course Misrach — to name just a few — the constraints and strengths of landscape photography have inevitably been linked to the challenges of capturing temporal processes (whether it be changes in tourism, infrastructure and habitation, or change and decay). Earlier attempts to chart and map the 'wilderness' of America, in order to incorporate it into an emerging capitalist infrastructure, are also present as a response to the effects of 'civilising' that wilderness and what it has done in industrial terms. In other words, the two are part of the same continuum even if their aims are vastly different.

Nor is it strange that American versions of landscape photography tend to cast a broadly colonising eye on its surrounding environment regardless of century or decade. Originally employed to map the colonising efforts of American settlers and the most expeditious ways to occupy territory, mapping in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was always operating in a dual capacity; a capacity that paradoxically mirrors those tensions brought up by and in contemporary landscape photography. As a practical tool for an expansionist ideology and as an aestheticizing tool designed to sanctify and glorify the labour and results of that ideology, mapping's focus on how to best render agricultural and industrial progress is also – although in different ways – at the heart of *Petrochemical America*. Misrach may not be shoring

up the same colonial anxieties as his nineteenth and twentieth century antecedents, but he is still unashamedly involved in how landscape photography functions as an agent of progress, for better or for worse.

In this respect, *Petrochemical America*'s aesthetic quality – its very look - hinges on more than the photographs to indicate what has and might happen in terms of ecological disasters. It also hinges on the fact that its imagery invariably references a period in which the picturesque quality of the landscape was seen as proof of, rather than a critique of, America's divine right to access its natural resources. In other words, if *Petrochemical America* is about the misuse of natural resources, it is also an at times incongruous continuation of a form of mapping that originates in the expansionist ethos of an earlier era. This does not automatically make the look of the book contradictory to the ethical concerns of the material itself nor does the presence of the picturesque disqualify its political efficacy. It simply means that both Misrach and Orff are engaged in a longer and more complex history of the sanctification of the American landscape.

On multiple levels then, *Petrochemical America* is charged with a task not dissimilar to that of the picturesque, namely dealing with the aestheticizing effect photographic framing has on how we view landscapes politically. For Catrin Gersdorf in 'History, Technology, Ecology: Conceptualising the Cultural Function in Landscape', Misrach's photography is in fact a particularly good example of how to straddle the line between art photography and advocacy. Thematically and aesthetically, Gersdorf argues, Misrach does not uncritically perpetuate a picturesque tradition of landscape painting and photography even if he gravitates towards "an

enchanted, spectacular, and yet extremely injured maltreated terrain”.¹¹ For Gersdorf, it is precisely Misrach’s interest in “the power play of biology, economy, topography, and ideology” that ensures his ability to align the politics of pollution with the ‘spectacular’ aspects of the terrain. In this respect, Misrach utilises the picturesque qualities in the landscape in order to illuminate the intersections between economics and a topography both critical and indicative of previous aesthetic and political traditions.

Gersdorf’s argument, however, is not based on a reading of *Petrochemical America* but on Misrach’s *Desert Cantos*, an on-going photographic project begun in 1979 mostly of vast arid landscapes of the American West. Inscribed by technological and commercial usage, *Desert Cantos* often show what appear to be uninhabited sites ranging from waste dumps to military zones in which the intersection between nature and various forms of human encroachment are particularly palpable. Acknowledging the inevitable conceptual challenge posed by “critical landscape photography” *Desert Cantos*, according to Gersdorf, “imaginatively re-design landscape” not as an idealization of the natural or the technological sublime “but as a product emerging from the power play of biology, economy, topography, ideology, geology and religion.”¹²

In this respect, *Desert Cantos* proves a particularly useful example of how critics tend to read Misrach photos; namely as a refashioning of stand-alone landscape photographs that confirm their applicability to contemporary issues such as migration and ecology. Nonetheless, the *Cantos* are fundamentally different from *Petrochemical*

¹¹ Catrin Gersdorf, ‘History, Technology, Ecology: Conceptualizing the cultural function of landscape’ in *Icon*, Vol. 10 (2004), pp. 34-52, p.45.

¹² *Ibid.* p.49.

America, a project designed as a photo-textual exercise above all. While both projects strive to embody the tension between an aestheticized landscape and its usefulness in political and ideological terms, the fact that the terrain charted in the *Cantos* could be from any number of regions is crucial. By charting the ‘sameness’ of many territories across a vast area, the *Desert Cantos* are partly about the homogeneity of capitalist exploitation, whereas in *Petrochemical America*, the cartographic material reiterates the specificity of singular figures and communities, all the way down to local species and animals indigenous to ‘Cancer Alley’. Another difference is that while the havoc wreaked on the landscapes of *Desert Cantos* is signposted very clearly in the photographs, it is not necessarily so in *Petrochemical America*.

Rather than define *Petrochemical America* as picturesque per se, the decorative aspects of the cartographic material could be read as a form of re-enactment of the picturesque, or, as something that enables already existing picturesque elements in the photographs to emerge more clearly. Many of the landscapes in Section I are arresting, photographically and emotionally, not because they show pollution as frightful or ugly or even as a scar on the landscape, but because the pollution overwhelms the scene as something both intangible and yet compelling visually. This sense that something elusive is being marked out, or rather framed through Misrach’s measured gaze, is - as previously mentioned - linked to a history of mapping the United States as a nation more broadly, but it is also crucially linked to an ontology of disaster photography as a genre in itself. As John Roberts points out in ‘Photography and the Photograph: Event, Archive and the Non Symbolic’ the very concept of disaster photography relates to the medium’s ontological status because it points to something intrinsic within the photographic

process; the fact that as a document of a particular time and place, the photograph is always at its heart an image of the event after the fact. According to Roberts:

in this photography there is clear sense that photography has arrived after the event to record what remains of the event, ... Essentially, this is a photography of the event-as-aftermath ... emphasising the melancholic allure of photographic stillness. This kind of elegiac and mournful photography has a long history ... Alexander Gardner, Roger Fenton, Mathew Brady, ... through to Richard Misrach, ... it represents photography trying to establish a new reportorial role for itself by making a case for the necessary lateness of the photograph.¹³

For Roberts, the role of the photographer as reporter, artist, and narrator allows ‘the event as aftermath’ to take centre stage within a genre marked equally by nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first-century histories of photography. Orff’s throughlines in this context operate as part of what Roberts might define as a ‘reconstruction of evidence’ a way to flesh out the ‘remains’ of the pollution that constitutes the event – however intangible. By comparing such photographs to Mathew Brady’s Civil War images, littered with another form of very palpable human waste in the form of corpses, Roberts’ reading of the documentary impetus is hardly optimistic. Photography not only has to ‘make a case for its necessary lateness’, it necessarily operates with the knowledge that this is impossible. In several ways, then, *Petrochemical America* is symptomatic of the impossible premise of such a desire, a

¹³ John Roberts, ‘Photography and the Photograph: Event, Archive and the Non-Symbolic’, *Oxford Art Journal* 32, no. 2 (2009), p. 289.

book whose narrative point and aesthetic charge can only rely on the aftermath as essential to the photographic process. More importantly, within the use of the picturesque lies another constituent trait of Misrach's work, namely that 'photography of the event-as-aftermath ... tends to stress' just as its nineteenth century forerunners did, 'the melancholic allure of photographic stillness' in very picturesque terms.

The fact that *Petrochemical America* shares what Roberts defines as 'the melancholic allure of photographic stillness' does not mean however that it is fundamentally stuck in time. One of the aims of Section II's Ecological Atlas is precisely to indicate that the situation documented has a history of economic misuse, racism and social displacement and that changes in law and practice can, if not radically alter, then at least disrupt the process of continuous pollution. However, while Orff's writing and drawings in Section II indicate a long sociological history of human, regional and geographical abuse, what Roberts deems particularly elegiac and mournful in Misrach's photographic visions is as much artistic as it is sociological. This sense of melancholia – rendered through the stillness that Roberts defines - has to find, as it were, a resting place together with the wider political point of the book. If *Petrochemical America* is a warning about the future damage of unhindered pollution, a project designed to warn future generations of what will happen to other places and regions, Misrach's environments are somewhat distanced from this sense of urgency. In other words, the stillness of the photographs may be another reason why they risk being subsumed by their own picturesque if mournful qualities.

For Misrach this comes through precisely in the "allure of photographic stillness"; a restrained sense of the beauty of the landscape as modified and enabled by the intrusion of the effects of the industrial. The photographs aesthetically recall the past even if they invoke something unmistakably contemporary. If Misrach's

photographs facilitate a sense of mourning and loss it is because of the presence of the picturesque rather than its absence. To facilitate this, the landscapes tend to distance the observer in ways that are similar to that of the traditional picturesque view-point. We are thus drawn in as witnesses to something that is near enough to be understood and yet far enough away to not be directly threatening. Likewise, the constant presence of smoke and pollution in *Petrochemical America* often functions literally as a smoke screen that sets the landscape further away from the viewer, as seen very visibly in Fig. 1. One could argue that underlying Misrach's use of the picturesque lies an attempt to establish some limits to our experience of nature; limits not entirely unlike that advocated by Gilpin's eighteenth century version. Here, however, those limits are also in place to show how the damage done to nature constitutes a form of alienation, one rendered in visual, political and aesthetic terms simultaneously.

The Picturesque as Historical Marker

Because the picturesque in photographic terms is often read as exclusively visual and so ultimately indifferent to the political, social and moral aspects of what it renders, Misrach's subject matter appears unrelated to the more conventional picturesque principles of framing. However, as seen, it is acutely aware of such tropes. The use of side-screens, distant perspectives and the architectural intrusion of ruinous material – abandoned sites and structures – while central to the landscape tradition, may seem incidental, but of course shares crucial qualities with the picturesque. Often the photographs defeat recession to a distant point; planes extend horizontally, and the image presents itself as a segment of a continuum, casually cut off by the borders on the top and to the left and right. While the presence of decay and roughness could be

read as an aspect of the sublime rather than the picturesque, for Misrach the immersion of pollution into the surrounding air, shown through lighting and perspective provides a landscape in which industrial ruins, rather than idealized sites of past triumphs and accomplishments, are solid reminders of a longer history of natural exploitation. According to Misrach:

People were living side by side with these great industrial behemoths. I'd always thought of industrial sites as sacrifice zones, in that they would be off in an isolated area, like in Nevada with the nuclear test site in the middle of nowhere. It never occurred to me that people would live within feet of these toxic environments. I was really shocked to see that in the United States.¹⁴

The narrative of toxicity outlined here goes beyond one of corporate misappropriation and pollution. In fact, the proximity between human habitation and 'industrial behemoths' signals a violent intrusion of the industrial into the private; an intrusion inscribed into the landscape itself. This is partly what is tempered by the enforced distance between Misrach's camera and the scene photographed even when it is designed to draw us back into the realm of human comprehension and compassion. Again, one of the ways in which the photographs do so is by being recast as a distinct scene, in other words, a picturesque view. If Section II works discernibly towards something more immersive by giving the reader/viewer material to digest and apply, Section I provides a different vantage point by stressing that what we see as outsiders in the photograph may not be the whole picture.

¹⁴ <https://aperture.org/blog/richard-misrach-and-kate-orff-in-conversation/>

Misrach's oil pipes and endless highways are thus often presented as objects that, like a series of views or pictures in a gallery, can be faced squarely and with a certain sense of uniformity. In *Petrochemical America*, Misrach does not suddenly shift his perspectival framing from the ground to the air or from middle distance to a close up of some mass produced architectural feature; he chooses instead to hover somewhere between a bird's eye view and one made possible by a bystander or observer at some distance in the landscape. The effect of this is that, as observers, we are situated vis-à-vis the images in ways that are similar to an exhibition in an art gallery. Not only does this add to a rarified sense of the photographs as art objects, it allows the picturesque qualities of the landscapes to indicate the intrusion of something polluting into an otherwise aesthetically pleasing scene.

For the critic Mark Feldman, this is an inherent part of images of polluted sites. As he argues in his review of *Petrochemical America*:

sublime large-scale color photographs of the sites of resource extraction, transport, processing, consumption and waste — might in fact harden and inure us to the presence of environmental damage. Too often such works prompt fleeting twinges of conscience but encourage little sustained response, because ultimately the images — no matter how extraordinary or sensational or troubling — provide only partial information.¹⁵

¹⁵ Mark Feldman, as quoted in: <https://placesjournal.org/article/illuminating-the-petrochemical-landscape/>

In *Petrochemical America*, however, Section II with its explanatory data and superimposed images appears precisely to counter such an accusation by providing more than ‘partial information’. Even though the photographs rarely show any of the actual labour involved in the ‘extraction, transport, processing, and consumption’ of resources, the unseen presence and consequences of toxic materials is reiterated in the “proof” offered in Section II’s throughlines. An example can be found in Chapter IV “Displacement” a case study of ‘Regional Displacement Over Time’. In Fig. 5 the Mississippi is shown from above as a sinewy artery winding itself through various communities, whose inhabitants have all been displaced through harassment, legal action, buyouts and payoffs by major chemical plants. The drawn symbols superimposed onto Misrach’s photograph show – amongst other things - the cemeteries, churches and freedman’s towns of the reconstruction era that are no longer present. The throughline in this instance adds the human data and the historical markers of previous lives and communities to the photographs in order to provide a more palpable sense of loss. Even in this part though, the sites and places documented are notably void of human figures, as though they are visions of a state of nature put on hold (not dissimilar to nineteenth century photographs of American vistas) rather than a region contaminated by too much human activity. Again, a link can be made to the mapping of America during previous centuries in which indigenous settlements were rarely marked as present in order to accentuate the ‘virgin’ nature of the land. In this context, the involuntary migratory patterns of local inhabitants in the twentieth and twenty-first century mimic that of native populations originally displaced through genocide and colonial aggression, putting the large oil corporations on a par with earlier ruthless forms of expansionism. For Orff these historical similarities are

unmistakeable. As she puts it: ‘On a regional scale, the African and Cajun diasporas are simply repeated’.¹⁶

Within *Petrochemical America*, the repeated nature of American colonisation as internal, domestic and primarily economically motivated allows the throughlines to operate as geographical proof of an expansionist ideology set in place centuries ago and now continued by the energy industry. Pollution itself becomes a substrata that may be invisible to the eye of the photographer, but nonetheless visible to the reader once it has been unpacked. In other words, a particular subterranean narrative unfolds or is made visible through the throughlines:

The idea of unpacking really came from Richard’s narrative-rich photographs, where I could see phantom stories within every image, which is sort of an aesthetic reading, but I wanted to know more in terms of understanding the complex web of industrial and ecological and human stories that may have given shape to that image.¹⁷

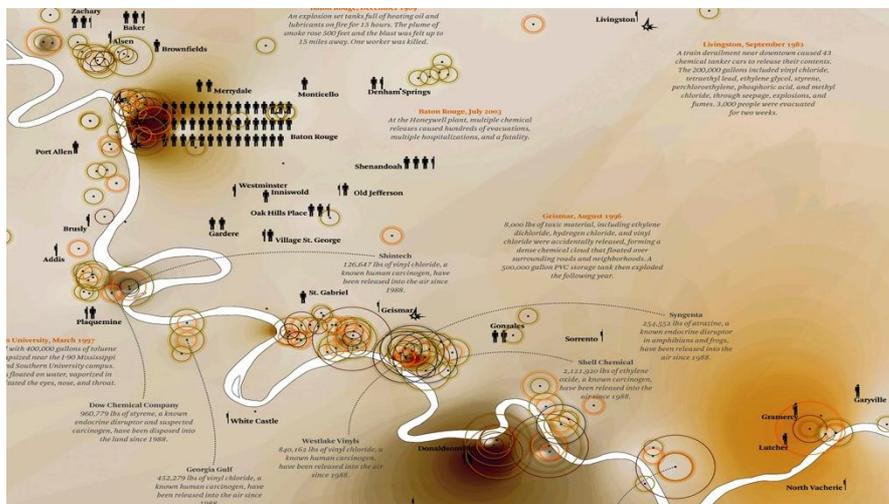
For Orff, the throughline functions as a process of photo-textual narration rather than a fixed concept; a process capable of tracing change across time as well as a way to reuse existing aesthetic models in cartographic terms. Referring again to the chapter entitled ‘Displacements’, the throughline is described as something that disrupts the static nature of the photograph, mimicking instead the fluidity of time passing and of the Mississippi itself:

¹⁶ Misrach and Orff, *Petrochemical America*, p. 161.

¹⁷ <https://aperture.org/blog/richard-misrach-and-kate-orff-in-conversation/>

The second drawing in that series, the map at river scale, was one of the last drawings in the entire book to be completed ... seeking to understand and compile stories of buyouts and displacement from probably thirty different sources ... We overlaid those stories with information ... so it becomes a portrait of a certain scale and type of community fabric and relationships being replaced by a different scale of industrial fabrics, scales, and material relationships.¹⁸

By combining archival data with a visual guide to the flow of the river the course of regional history is aligned with that of the Mississippi itself. The line of the river carrying the historical baggage of the region itself as a source of power and mechanisation, as well as a transportation route for slaves and produce.



Insert Fig. 5 Here.

Kate Orff, Toxic Release Mapping, 2012. © SCAPE/Landscape Architecture PLLC.

¹⁸ <https://aperture.org/blog/richard-misrach-and-kate-orff-in-conversation/>

The combination of archival data and the visual rendition of the river's flow becomes a continuous stream of information both literally and figuratively; a stream that connects a wider historical perspective with the actual 'material relationships' outlined by Orff. At the same time, an interesting counterpoint is established between Misrach's more static vistas in Section I and the flow of information in Section II. In seeking, as Orff puts it, to render unseen 'histories' of displacement intrinsic to the region, Section II is charged with the not inconsiderable task of creating a "portrait of a certain scale and type of community fabric". The inhabitants of those communities may no longer be visible in the photographs but the throughlines signal their absence nonetheless.

If the methodical and more systematic use of information, grids, statistics and other forms of data allows Misrach's photographs to function as backdrops for the environmental agenda, the throughlines facilitate the presence of the picturesque despite their apparent role as predominantly factual and informative. What they do is enable *Petrochemical America's* more neutral gaze to accommodate the picturesque as something both inherent in the framing of the landscapes, and as something indicative of a longer history of American photography's relationship with its own environment. For instance, Misrach's interest in industrial architecture and the fact that so many of the images in the book appear to be fairly unspoiled by that architecture and yet deeply marked by its effects, is fundamental to the book's aesthetic and political charge. In this respect, the images of industrial sights both beautiful and horrific mark an inherent contradiction, a contradiction at its most palpable when it is most under risk of extinction. Misrach in fact uses various structures themselves as staging areas for these contradictions; sites where an idea of

national character based on consumption persist despite the visual proof of its harmful effects on the environment.

Petrochemical America as Activist Photo-Text

For Stephanie LeMenager, our society's continued psychological and economic reliance on oil offers a short-hand for grasping a network of power and control that plays out on a multitude of platforms – photography included. However, as LeMenager argues, the risk in such readings is often that our reliance on oil becomes something so overwhelming and insurmountable it prevents any potential for change.¹⁹ Granted, in many of Misrach's more oblique photographs of polluted environments, it can similarly be difficult to glean what the actual effects of various forms of toxic waste are. To counter this potential obliqueness, many of these images rely in unexpected ways on both pre-existing historical knowledge and the reader's ability to literally read between the lines of the image. In fig. 6 for instance, Misrach shows the irony of the juxtaposition between a particular type of Southern heritage in the form of an antebellum mansion, which upon closer inspection is now too polluted to enter. The image of an abandoned Southern mansion, previously a tourist site but now closed is a double reminder of both past and present crimes; the home financed by slave labor and now destroyed by the effects of another form of ruthless capitalism.

¹⁹ Stephanie LeMenager, 'Oil! The Aesthetics of Petroleum after Oil!' in *American Literary History*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Sustainability in America (Oxford University Press, Spring 2012), pp. 59-86.



Insert Fig. 6. Here – Richard Misrach, Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation, Acquired by Shell Chemical, Geismar, Louisiana, 1998. © Richard Misrach, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

The issue of how a continuum of experience can imply both a history and a sense of immanence is crucial, partly because it touches on an idea of timeliness that incorporates both historical and social dimensions similar to Roberts’s definition of documentary photography. As Orff puts it: ‘Richard’s photographs capture a specific moment in time and space, but if you think about time as a continuum – of past-present-future-relative to the photographs ... one photograph can touch so many different issues and situations.’²⁰

The sense of immanence in Misrach’s photographs become a way to impart information on multiple levels and it allows Orff to describe the political efficacy of the image in transcendent rather than purely documentary terms. In Orff’s throughline, ‘time as a continuum’ is not antithetical to the photograph as a form of art that captures static, still moments; it is simply another way to synthesise that particular vision into a wider political process. Orff describes this process as a way to

²⁰ <https://aperture.org/blog/richard-misrach-and-kate-orff-in-conversation/>

conceptualise “the local environment ... understanding the mutual and systemic connections between people and the earth, between landscapes and communities ... synthesizing these disparate factors into a cohesive set of systems.”²¹

The throughline’s process of layering also bears crucial similarities to a more tangible layering; namely that of various geographical strata. Orff’s ‘synthesizing of these disparate factors into a cohesive set of systems’ is accentuated in the very last section of *Petrochemical America* where another ‘layer’ a “Glossary of Terms & Solutions for a Post-Petrochemical Culture” is added: a listing of concepts, organisations, scientific, sociological and ethnographic terms (originally a 24-page pamphlet nestled into a pocket inside the back cover). On the one hand, the glossary reinforces Orff’s belief in the importance of grassroots’ ventures. On the other hand, it also somewhat at odds with Misrach’s more melancholy photographs. One of the reasons for this disjunction between the first two sections and the glossary as a form of post-script lies within the nature of the cartographic practice itself. While the varied set of discourses within *Petrochemical America* reflect the selective and partial process of cartographic practice, it also signals the on-going pollution and the impossibility of dealing with it comprehensibly. Ultimately what is not mapped, what remains uncharted, underground, and unexplained is as crucial as that seen and measured in the book.

This sense of both the limitations and advantages of mapping and the issue of what constitutes knowledge, containment and control within that process, is one of *Petrochemical America*’s strengths. The cartography of *Petrochemical America* inevitably has to participate in a rather synoptic view of American power, even if it is

²¹ Robert Misrach and Kate Orff, *Petrochemical America*, (New York: Aperture, 2012), p. 21.

designed to illuminate the nature of the relationship between local life and global economics. It seems telling in this context that Misrach's photographs often shy away from taking an overt bird's eye perspective on the landscape even as it uses a slightly heightened vantage point to provide a sense of the vastness of the territory. Rather than facilitate a form of "objective" knowledge production, the distancing effect of the photographs becomes an oblique reminder that the pollution charted is both underground and above ground, not always visible or even containable in terms of its actual visualisation.

Conclusion

Petrochemical America – aside from its political and ideological message– is also about the problems inherent to the process of mapping itself: the difficulty in reconciling a map's inherent abstractions against concrete areas and locations, the ability to abstract and synthesize things that cannot be seen so readily. In this sense, Misrach's photographs are both problematized and redeemed by the cartographic aesthetics of Section II because it is here that it becomes most clear that the process of mapping is not about reproducing 'real' landscapes or concrete areas per se. In order to establish the throughlines in Section II, the superimposed drawings necessarily reduce and simplify, they spatialize particular relationships in order to classify the region using the same mechanisms that all maps necessarily do, namely the manipulation of distance and scale. In this sense, Section II's use of superimposition also provides *Petrochemical America* the opportunity to navigate the ghostly presence of an earlier colonial gaze and to acknowledge that it is not circumvented quite as easily as one might wish.

In political terms, an argument can be made of course that the drastically changing landscape of the Mississippi Delta demands a more dynamic, less static form of representation and that the use of the throughlines is simply an attempt to creatively unseat and possibly remap a long lineage of previous cartographic practices. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the alignments that exist between Misrach's fascination with the effects of the post-industrial era and the nineteenth century cartographer's fascination with the beginnings of the industrial revolution. For both, the search for unmarked territory (its possibilities as well as impossibilities) is a necessary starting point for a distinctly American type of cartography. Within the melancholy and picturesque aspects of Misrach's photographs, the embodiment of industry and infrastructure in the US South may even carry an involuntary tinge of nostalgia, or at the very least, a desire to synthesize what appears to be undeveloped scenery with scenery irrevocably marked by development. Thus, while the photographs on a first viewing appear resolute in their determination to eschew the picturesque in favour of a direct, matter-of-fact descriptiveness, their particular sense of the picturesque, situated in parking lots and vacated housing developments, is emotive and arresting all the same. One of the points of the interaction between the two Sections in *Petrochemical America* is to illuminate how - like the vanishing wildlife and nature - the region can never be entirely recuperated. Similarly, the rich culture - intimated through the remnants of the picturesque in Misrach's photos - can never be regenerated. In this sense the book functions as a remarkable photo-textual enterprise not merely because Section II adds the necessary data for an understanding of the loss witnessed in Section I, but because the photographs in Section I function so adeptly as the staging areas for the later material. Our knowledge, in other words, of what used to be on the site(s) photographed is fundamental to the ways in which we

read the photographs as images of displacement, both economically, environmentally and emotionally.

To understand *Petrochemical America's* aesthetic charge, one has to accept that at the heart of environmental photography lies an oftentimes paradoxical desire: to stage both the beauty and horror of irreversible change. Orff's throughlines are ways to reconstitute, to refashion the landscape through the design and over-layering of things that used to be there but which now are gone. At the same time, the lyrical charge of the material added on to the photographs presumes a sense of what used to be there and a certain understanding of the biochemical, ecological, and human effects of its disappearance. The use of pollution as spectacle is not a new thing within topographic practice but in *Petrochemical America* the aesthetic quality of its environmental photography resides partly in accepting this. At the same time, the book is savvy enough to know that what is 'moral' or 'ethical' cannot so readily be mapped in a post-industrial world. In the end, *Petrochemical America* is a book of photographs that are unwilling to speak for themselves; there is no "safe," if increasingly embattled, aesthetics of form in this respect. To avoid the charge that it is simply reproducing a picturesque version of the spectacle of our own fall into oil dependency, *Petrochemical America* has to walk the thin line between a vision of what has been lost and what can be recuperated; a vision enabled not by a descent into a form of ethnographic cartography alone but through the use of particular aspects of the picturesque. The history of aesthetic responses to landscape representation tells us that it remains for better or for worse a part of a much longer tradition of representation, of mapping and of cartography in general. The question is not whether this compromises the politics of *Petrochemical America*, but how this particular

photo-text's ecological agenda manages to coexist with its own inevitable picturesque qualities.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Richard Misrach, *Night Releases, Mississippi River Corridor, Louisiana*, 1998.

© Richard Misrach, Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Fig. 2. Richard Misrach, *New Housing Construction, Paulina, Louisiana*, 2010.

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Fig 3. Kate Orff, 'Bigger, Farther, Filled with More Stuff', 2012. ©

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Fig. 4. Kate Orff, 'From Pipe to Plastic Bag', 2012. © SCAPE/Landscape

Architecture PLLC.

Fig. 5. Kate Orff, 'Toxic Release Mapping', 2012. © SCAPE/Landscape Architecture

PLLC.

Fig. 6. Richard Misrach, *Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation, Acquired by Shell*

Chemical, Geismar, Louisiana, 1998. © Richard Misrach, Courtesy of Fraenkel

Gallery, San Francisco.

Author Bio

Caroline Blinder is Reader in American Literature and Culture at Goldsmiths University. Her most recent book *The American Photo-Text 1930-1960*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2019) focuses on the interaction between image and text in 20th century documentary work. She is the editor of *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and has written extensively on 20th century photography including essays on Walker Evans's Polaroids, Art and Artefact in Wright Morris' Photo-texts, Municipal Chairs in the Photography of Doisneau and Kertész, Brassai in Breton's *Mad Love*, Representations of Harlem in Roy DeCarava and articles on Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Weegee, and Robert Frank amongst others. Dr. Blinder is currently the Terra Foundation Visiting Professor of Art History at Doshisha and Kobe Universities in Japan. Her first book was *A Self-Made Surrealist: Ideology and Politics in the Work of Henry Miller* (2000).