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Oral history interview with Richard Misrach,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Richard Misrach on August 11-12, 2010. The interview took place in Emeryville, CA, and was conducted by Steven Hoelscher for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Oral Histories of American Photographers project.

Richard Misrach has reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets appended by initials. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

STEVEN HOELSCHER: This is Steve Hoelscher interviewing Richard Misrach at his studio in Emeryville, California, on August 11, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

The first thing I'd like to ask you is just about your early years. If you could tell me when and where you were born and describe your childhood and family background for us.

RICHARD MISRACH: I was born in Los Angeles, [CA,] July 11, 1949, and came from a middle-class family. Had a sister Leslie, father Robert, and mother Lucille. My father and grandfather were in the sporting goods business in Los Angeles [... - RM].

MR. HOELSCHER: Well, since we're talking about photography, was photography at all a part of your early years? Did your family do family snapshots, take slides, that sort of thing?

MR. MISRACH: Yes. My father was a pretty avid amateur, but mostly, when we went on family vacations, my father would stick the family movie camera in my hand a lot. So I think that was really important early on, just making me comfortable, not in any serious art kind of way, but just being comfortable around cameras.

And I do think that that turned out to be important later. I wasn't interested really in art or photography in the early days. And, in fact, when I went off to Berkeley [University Of California, Berkeley] for college in 1967, I went as a math major. So I was definitely more academically interested than anything else. But Berkeley in the '60s was completely in upheaval, and academics, as we know it, just was not happening. And, in fact, it was some of the antiwar demonstrations that I started photographing with a 35-millimeter camera, just to sort of record what was going on.

And I think that's when my interest really started to kick in. It didn't have anything to do with my childhood.

MR. HOELSCHER: Okay. Well, since you brought up Berkeley, that's certainly one of the things I'd like to talk to you about. I'd like to hear a little bit about your years at UC-Berkeley. Tell me what it was like and its impact on you.

MR. MISRACH: I think Berkeley was — I mean, it was so dramatic. It's hard for anyone that wasn't there at the time to realize just how major that force was. But I was involved with antiwar activities, and there were protests and demonstrations all the time and teargassings and all that kind of stuff. It was just kind of everywhere; it was omnipresent. Classes were broken up for teach-ins and education about social issues and war issues, political issues, things like that. So it was a very, very different time.

And in terms of, specifically, photography, what I think is very interesting for me, looking back on my own work, is that, on one hand, I had this sort of political tumult going on everywhere, and on the other I was seeing photographs by people like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, the great f/64 landscape photographers of the West Coast. Those I saw in books, and I think that was a really important combination of both the aesthetics of photography, falling in love with photography that way, and then also being exposed to this political environment.

And I think, if you look back at my work over the last 40 years, you can see this polarity, from one end to the other, from politics to the interest in photography — the aesthetics of photography itself. I've never been able to reconcile the two poles. But I think it's that tension between my interest in the beauty and greatness of the photographic medium, which just leaves me in awe, to trying to use it towards a social end. They've been very difficult to make work well together. Yes.

MR. HOELSCHER: This will be something that I'm very much interested in, this tension between aesthetics and

politics, and what's interesting to me is to hear you bring that up so early in our conversation. Do you attribute this tension to what you experienced in Berkeley? I mean, is Berkeley, the 1960s, partly responsible for this tension that you experienced in your —

MR. MISRACH: Yes, that's exactly my point, which is that in '67 when I came here — I should step back just a hair. In doing normal classes, my dorm roommate started throwing pottery — ceramic pottery - at a place called the ASUC [Associated Students of the University of California] studio on the Berkeley campus. It wasn't for class credit; it was like a hobby studio on the Berkeley campus, and there they had lithography, etchings, ceramics, and photography. It was there for students and faculty in a nonaccredited way. I don't know if most campuses even have that.

But he was throwing ceramics there. And I went there to, actually, make ceramic ashtrays, I think, you know, for my folks for Christmas or something, as a freshman, and I saw a small body of photographs by a photographer named Roger Minick on the back wall of the studio, probably 12, 15 photographs, probably eight by 10 [inches each] or something — really small exhibition. It had a tiny exhibition space that it allowed for the people working at the studio to exhibit there. And when I saw those, it was like a huge revelation. It was the first time I saw photography as an art, and got that this is something that I should be doing. It was a real epiphany.

And I think, going back to your earlier question, did anything in my earlier life sort of precondition me to be interested in photography: I think handling movie cameras and taking pictures with my dad's camera — just family outings, not thinking about art at all — made me sensitive to handling a camera. And then seeing Roger's photographs, suddenly I made a connection between that medium and making that kind of picture. I'd never seen art photographs before - in quotation marks. That was the moment.

And so I started then learning how to develop film and do all those kinds of things. I think in high school I did take a photography class, but it was like an elective, and I wasn't really interested, and I think I got a B. It was like any kind of, you know, elective class; it wasn't serious. But here I got serious, and I was learning, really learning how to develop film and process my own things, and print at the site on the campus. That's where I really got my training. But I got the fire from looking at Roger's photographs. So that was a really, really big turning point.

Roger was what we call a traditional landscape photographer, I would say — a social landscape photographer. And he was starting to exhibit; he got a National Book Award for a documentary he did on the Sacramento River Delta here. And he knew Ansel Adams and was invited to show in some events that Adams had going on at the Carmel Cultural Center.

And so it was through Roger and a few other people at the studio that I started seeing books — you know, Aperture books, Sierra Club books, the great fine art photography books that that had come out in the '60s — people like Paul Strand and Minor White and Ansel Adams and Paul Caponigro — what are considered pretty much traditional landscape photographers. That's why I fell in love with that aesthetic side of photography. So I wasn't —

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: — you know, in New York, looking at street photography of — whoever was doing street photography at the time —

MR. HOELSCHER: Right.

MR. MISRACH: — and exposed to the shows at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York City]. It was really through publications, and I think that —

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: — at that period, that was before there were Ph.D.s in photography, and there was very few photography graduate programs.

MR. HOELSCHER: And so your experience at Berkeley, again, was with this more informal club. It wasn't a class; it wasn't the arts department at Berkeley.

MR. MISRACH: That's right. And in fact, the guy you ran into at the front door, Paul Herzoff — he's my next-door neighbor — he was also another photographer there. He was on the staff of the studio. The ASUC studio had a photography lab that we used, as students, and there was the director, which would be Roger, and then three other students that ran the lab on a daily basis, when I first started there. And they were, basically, like glorified janitors. They cleaned up the darkroom after people used it; they set it up in the morning; they poured the chemicals out.

After a couple years I actually got a job there. And then I became on the staff there for a number of years, and that's how I supported myself for years — but we'll get to that in a minute — but going back to the basic things, so, I'm being exposed to Adams and Weston and Strand and all these great classical photographers. But while I'm falling in love with photography as a medium, politics are going on all around me — all kinds of violence and drama. And so the two sort of blossomed at the same time, simultaneously, but not connected at that time.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, yes. Historians love counterfactuals and hypotheticals. Would have it been different if you'd gone to UC-Santa Barbara [University of California, Santa Barbara], for instance, someplace closer to home, where maybe the politics were not quite as intense?

MR. MISRACH: Yes, I really think it would have. I actually continued to do photography, but I did do my academics. I did four years and then graduated, and then I was supposed to go on to graduate school in psychology.

MR. HOELSCHER: [Inaudible.]

MR. MISRACH: I ended up getting a degree in psychology.

MR. HOELSCHER: Okay.

MR. MISRACH: And that was sort of the plan. I decided to take off one year before going, you know, considering graduate schools. I don't think I even applied — I think I considered applying and maybe put that off; I don't remember exactly what happened there. But I decided that I just wanted to take off one year and do my photography, because I now had the job at the ASUC studio.

MR. HOELSCHER: And before we move on, could you tell me what exactly the acronym stands for? I want to make sure I've got that correct.

MR. MISRACH: Oh, it's the Associated Students of the University of California.

MR. HOELSCHER: Okay.

MR. MISRACH: It's a student union facility for students —

MR. HOELSCHER: Okay, thank you.

MR. MISRACH: — like a — you know, hobby or recreational area. But I actually became one of the staff, which meant I worked part-time, maybe four or five times a week, five hours a day; something like that — got minimum wage, and was able to use the facilities [off hours -RM] to do all my printing.

So I would actually print there all night long. The studio would close at 11 o'clock at night, and that's when I would print, from 11 o'clock to the next morning, till nine o'clock. But I got to use all the equipment for free; all the chemistry was free, because I was living on nothing at that point. In fact, I was at — either house-sitting; I actually rented somebody's garage for a while; sometimes I slept in the back of my van.

MR. HOELSCHER: [Laughs.]

MR. MISRACH: So I was finding a really inexpensive way — back then, you could live really, really cheaply, and — yes, so I lost my train of thought.

Did I answer your question?

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, about the acronym for the organization —

MR. MISRACH: Yes.

MR. HOELSCHER: — and that you were working there. The interim year that students take before graduate school — I assume lasted for more than one year?

MR. MISRACH: Yes, so I took off one year, and I never thought about it again.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: That was it. And I just fell in love with photography.

But I had just enough of a position and facilities at hand that I could continue doing what I wanted to do. If I'd gone to UC-Santa Barbara, I can't imagine that all those little things would have fallen into place.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: In other words, the practicality of not having a job, the fact that there would not have been an arts studio that was just like that, it was just right — and all these other photographers that were working there at the time were doing really good work. For a bunch of students, it was quite exceptional.

And again, there was no advanced — very few advanced degrees [other] than maybe New Mexico and a couple other places in the country. So it was very rare to have that kind of talent and energy.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: So I think that made a huge difference. It really just kicked in everything.

MR. HOELSCHER: Jumping way forward again, another counterfactual: could you have the same experience at Berkeley today? Presumably there is an art department that is interested in photography; students would come here perhaps to study or do photography. I know at my own university they do. It would have been a different situation, but could you imagine developing as you had in today's academic climate?

MR. MISRACH: No. There's no way to know for sure, but I don't think so. I think, first of all, every bright student is sort of pushed to go to graduate school these days. I think the economics is very different. I got out of school in 1971. In 1973, I got a NEA [National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship] grant for \$1,500, and I lived for a year and a half on \$1,500.

MR. HOELSCHER: [Laughs.]

MR. MISRACH: And, you know, everything's relative. Maybe today that would be like \$10,000. But the idea for living for a year and a half on it, it would — so economically, there's a lot of pressure now. So most people that are seriously interested in the arts do try to go into grad school to get at least a teaching credential so that they —

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: — can then teach if they can, because it's very hard to — you certainly can't count on getting a gallery and selling. You have to have a side of work.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes. That leads into my next question, and that is relationship with teachers or mentors. You did not receive a formal degree in photography; you don't have that sort of mentor. But are there other teachers that might have been important for you?

MR. MISRACH: I think Roger Minick really was phenomenally important to me and not just — I mean, it's funny because at the time we looked at him as this mature, you know, adult, and I think he was probably 24 —

MR. HOELSCHER: [Laughs.] Yes.

MR. MISRACH: — 23 at the time. It just amazes me. He had this sort of, you know, patriarchal presence. Everybody that worked there felt that way about him. He just had this sense of authority and knowledge and wisdom and conviction that was really amazing.

But he not only helped me, as somebody to look up to, but he literally — when I was working on my *Telegraph Avenue* pictures in 1972, I would show him the work, and he literally looked through probably thousands of 2 ¼[-inch-format] contact prints, and helped me edit the work. That was really helpful.

And then when I decided to do a book, he was right there, and he hand-held me all the way through, from editing for the book — he kind of lesson-taught me. Like I'd worked on it for maybe a year, a year and a half, and I was sick of it. When you work on a project like that, there's a certain point where you just get exhausted at the idea, and he said, "You know, you've got another six months," and I said, "I can't make another picture," and he said, "You have to." And I went back; I probably made another six or eight pictures during that last period, but those are the ones that put the project over the top in a sense.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: And that was a lesson that I've learned. I've used, you know, 14 book sets, whatever — 14 projects.

And then he helped me edit and lay out the book. He showed me how to — you make a book dummy and mock-up to go on press. He showed me how to communicate with printers, how to sit on the press and approve of sheets as they come off of the press. When *Telegraph Avenue* [*Telegraph 3 A.M.: The Street People of Telegraph*

Avenue, Berkeley, California: Photographs by Richard Misrach. Berkeley, CA: Cornucopia Press, 1974] was being run, he was there with me, and just walked, you know, he was there. Really incredibly selfless. And those lessons, to this day, are - I mean, that's everything.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: Those things come back into play over and over again. And it's interesting because he wasn't accredited, and it wasn't that kind of a place. It was a very informal atmosphere, but there was that kind of, I think, comrade — sort of the colleague, comradeship — whatever — that was really powerful.

MR. HOELSCHER: Have you been involved yourself as a teacher?

MR. MISRACH: I've taught — it's funny —

MR. HOELSCHER: Either formally or informally?

MR. MISRACH: Well, yes, and I worked at the studio for years, until 1978. You kind of take on that same role of critiquing work and things like that. And I actually taught at UC-Santa Barbara. So that's funny that you mentioned — so I know what that program's like.

MR. HOELSCHER: I just pulled that out of it — [inaudible].

MR. MISRACH: Yes, no, I thought that was good. So I taught there for a quarter; I taught at UC-Berkeley for a quarter; I taught at CalArts [California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA] for, like, a semester. And I love teaching, but I found that it took too much time from my own work. So I very, very purposefully try to avoid teaching because it just — it's like two passions. They would just destroy each other.

So learning from the studio, I think I do kind of informal critiques. So, people will call me — this has been going on for 35 years, actually — they'll call me out of the blue and say, "I'd like to show you my work," and I usually put up a little barricade. So I say — because I want to find out if they're serious - so I say, "Well, actually, that might be fine, but I'm going to be gone for two months; can you call me in two months when I return?" And then, if they call — and most of the time they do if they're serious — but if they don't call, then I know that I'd be wasting my time. But if they call, then I set up an hour where they bring their work here, and I'll do a critique.

There's been some people that have been bringing back their work for years, but it's been sort of my own informal way of giving back —

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: — and teaching without formally teaching.

MR. HOELSCHER: Is that something you enjoy?

MR. MISRACH: Yes. I mean, it feels like something I *should* do, but I enjoy it too. Yes, yes.

MR. HOELSCHER: You mentioned the *Telegraph Avenue at 3 A.M.* book.

MR. MISRACH: *Telegraph 3 A.M.*

MR. HOELSCHER: Can you tell me how that came about? That was your first published book, if I'm not mistaken.

MR. MISRACH: Yes, yes. And actually, that goes back to the earlier conversations, which was, when I first started photographing — and it wasn't very serious, but all the demonstrations, everything, were going on. So I had a 35-millimeter camera, and I just — I actually got even billy-clubbed, you know, when I was taking pictures, I mean, just once. I just got hit once, and I ran off.

But those pictures weren't that serious. My first serious pictures, I would say, were shot with a medium-format camera, a 2 ¼ Hasselblad — of the landscapes like the Oregon coast and places like that, along the lines of Ansel Adams and that whole group. In fact, I think I photographed — now that I think about it — like, the Snake River in Wyoming and along the Oregon coast, and they were very classical, West Coast landscape pictures in black and white.

So those are the first pictures that I did, and most of them are not particularly memorable. They're a little too imitative, but you kind of go through that process, I think. But it was then in around 1972, when I was working at the studio, and I was mostly making landscape pictures at that point, that I walked from my home, my apartment, to the Berkeley campus to work at the studio; I had to walk down Telegraph Avenue, and I was very intimidated by the street people. At that period of time, Telegraph Avenue, which had been the home to flower

children and hippies, it evolved. Cultures shifted, the counter-culture shifted from sweet, loving flower children and hippies, which were another level, and then street people had more of an edge, sort of pre-punk — at that edge. It was no longer easygoing, pot-smoking kids.

And I found myself intimidated. I thought about it; I said, “Well, I should photograph that.” It just hit me that one day. I don’t remember how it came to that — something about, like, photographing your fears or whatever; but I just thought that that was really interesting. I took the 2 ¼ camera and the tripod, and I went on the afternoon. Basically, for a couple years, either I photographed or processed film or printed every day, that material; I just focused on that and nothing else. And that’s how that series came out; that started in ’72, and I completed it in ’74.

MR. HOELSCHER: So tell me about how that went — the process, to go from shooting landscapes to shooting people who may not necessarily be happy to see you.

MR. MISRACH: Right. Well, I purposefully used a camera on a tripod, so it was not like a 35 millimeter where I was, you know, sneaking shots. I think that would have been —

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: — met very hostilely. I actually asked everybody’s permission to do a portrait of them.

MR. HOELSCHER: Okay.

MR. MISRACH: And most of them said yes; most of them liked the idea, and actually, at the beginning, I brought back pictures to the people that wanted them. I would do that, and that really made a difference. So I think that people appreciated that, and I became part of the Avenue. I became part of the scene.

MR. HOELSCHER: This guy with his camera at 3:00 a.m.

MR. MISRACH: Well, it’s wasn’t titled at that point. But, yes, first, it was during the day. I didn’t work at night until the end of it, actually, until I became very comfortable and confident.

But it wasn’t just that. I became very comfortable, and people let me into their worlds — some of their “cribs,” places with crash pads and things, where they — abandoned houses — they would take me back; then I’d photograph them. I ended up photographing them shooting heroin, and they let me into the inner world. I was 24 — 22, actually - when I started it. So I was pretty young. And I felt very comfortable, and I think in terms of influences, I’m starting to use a medium, high-quality camera with the landscapes, but I was also really struck by work like Dorothea Lange’s work.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: Bruce Davidson’s *East 100th Street* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970] had just come out.

MR. HOELSCHER: Right.

MR. MISRACH: Yes. He shot an eight — with eight by 10, and I *loved* that sort of formal presence. I think that work is just amazing. And so I think that the lightbulb went off; I said, “God, I” — you know. “Here I’ve got this — my neighborhood. This is what’s going on. Why am I not photographing it?” - right at home, I mean.

So I basically took my skills as a landscape photographer, which allowed technical things — in other words, making really proper exposures, getting good quality in negatives, understanding what light is, all those things - and then applying it to the street.

MR. HOELSCHER: And maybe this is a good time to talk about some of the photographers that have been influential to you. You just mentioned Dorothea Lange; you’ve talked about Ansel Adams. You also mentioned Bruce Davidson. Can you tell me about who some of the most important people have been? And then maybe a little bit later on, we’ll talk about current photographers.

MR. MISRACH: Okay.

MR. HOELSCHER: But what was it, for instance, about Dorothea Lange that struck you?

MR. MISRACH: Yes, that’s a good question, because I’ve thought about that a lot. At the time, everybody seemed to be in love with — from that same period, like Walker Evans.

MR. HOELSCHER: Absolutely. Yes.

MR. MISRACH: And his work didn't speak to me. It was too cool, intellectual — I love the heat of Dorothea Lange and also Bruce Davidson. I felt that it was basically a discredited humanist tradition, which has been written off, because it's just not, you know, cool enough — cool for school.

But basically, I didn't like that kind of detached, cool perspective on the world. So I found just that the Lange work, photographs, just really — I mean, it's hard to say why beyond that. I just felt they were really powerful. And Davidson's eight-by-10 work I thought was really important too.

Soon after that I got exposed to, like, the Winogrands [Garry Winogrand] and Friedlanders [Lee Friedlander]. And at first I thought Lee Friedlander was, like, the worst photographer ever. I didn't get it. I didn't get it at all. It took me about two years to finally get what he was doing. And now he's my hero. I mean, I really look up to him to this day. His work has held up. And he just amazes me. But it's so —

MR. HOELSCHER: So — sorry, go ahead.

MR. MISRACH: Oh, go on.

MR. HOELSCHER: Well, did his work change, or did your attitude or perception of his work change?

MR. MISRACH: I changed.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: I mean, that's what made him so powerful, and that's probably what the best art does, is that it grows *you*; it changes you to see things in a way that you've never seen before. And then when that happens, you can't help but appreciate it in a profound way. So, I mean, he changed my understanding.

And again, you have to understand that I was brought up on large-format, traditional photographic — that was my only exposure. So I didn't even know, really, of anything else that made any sense. And so coming from that perspective, it makes a lot of sense to me. But the breakthrough of both Winogrand and Friedlander — particularly Friedlander, in a way. I mean, I love Winogrand's work also, but Friedlander's was the one that was really challenging me — made me work and made me nuts to the point where I finally got it. And then it was a eureka moment.

MR. HOELSCHER: What is it about his work that took awhile for you to crack?

MR. MISRACH: Well, you know, he wasn't that interested in fetishistic print quality and, you know, high resolution and great detail and beautiful light. He caught this raw poetry of the world. And I had never seen that; I never understood, because I came from the other direction. So, yes.

MR. HOELSCHER: Have you incorporated some of his techniques in your own? Or is it more inspirational?

MR. MISRACH: It's interesting. Maybe you can tell me better. I'm a little close to the work. I don't see the obvious visual influence. In other words, if you look at my work and look at his, you wouldn't — I think can you look at one of my pictures and say, well, you can see more Stephen Shore or something.

But I work in color; most of my work has been eight by 10. He works in black and white, works in small format. He catches things on the fly; mine are more studied. All those things don't fit, and yet I think some of the formal ways that he organizes the world have taught me. But I'm using different tools, and they don't quite make sense. So I don't know. That'd be very interesting, so.

MR. HOELSCHER: You mentioned Stephen Shore. Were the New Topographics on your radar screen in the mid-'70s when they had this big show ["New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape," International Museum of Photography, Rochester, NY, 1975]?

MR. MISRACH: Yes. Most of that work I knew, bits and pieces. I maybe didn't know the Bechers [Bernd and Hilla Becher] at that point. The Shore color work was big, but Shore's another one. I didn't really think his work was that interesting. I thought it was really dry and cool. It didn't hit me.

[Joel] Meyerowitz's work — who was actually doing color, I think, before Shore and maybe even before [William] Eggleston, for that matter — his work was beautiful and pretty, but it was maybe a little too pretty. But I think he's someone that's been undervalued because he's been not quite cool enough, you know, detached enough. And I think that's really a shame.

But at the same time, that work didn't quite work for me. It wasn't until I saw Joel Sternfeld's work, *American Prospects* [1987], that the large-format color I saw for the first time - "Oh, my God, this is the language that I want to be using." So, you know, Sternfeld obviously came out of both Shore and Meyerowitz but did something

a little different, where — it was hot. The thing I didn't like about the New Topographics, I appreciated it, but all of them were too cool for me — that same old thing.

Shore was heavily influenced by Walker Evans. [Lewis] Baltz is really, really, dry and cool and intellectual. Robert Adams even, whose work I really admire, he's somebody I really, really, deeply admire. But the small black-and-white, quiet, contemplative pictures just felt a little too — I mean, they're full of passion, but it's a different way to it, and it's a little more removed than my interest.

But Sternfeld, for me, using color, hit it just right. There was irony; there was humor and wit and beauty and attention to light and yet real social, cultural implications in his pictures. They weren't just studies of forms in the landscape and the urban landscape and stuff. There was a narrative going on in the pictures, and I *really* liked that. So that was the first time that I — I'd already been shooting color, and I was shooting it at, like, at the Hawaiian jungles at night, like my Night Desert work. We're skipping around, but that's — we'll get back to that.

But I was using 2 ¼ at that point, and I was still experimenting with, you know, working with this language, this night language that I was really interested in. But once I saw the Sternfeld, that really triggered a rethinking. And then I started to work with eight-by-10 color.

MR. HOELSCHER: This question stems out of something that you just have been talking about. And that is the distinction between a cool, detached photograph and a photograph that is more hot. What is it that makes a photograph detached? What would be the opposite of detached — engaged, or passionate?

MR. MISRACH: Well, I'm sure Walker Evan was fully engaged — and by the way, I do love his work; I've grown to love his work. But it still doesn't — well, you know, all photographs are sort of a collection of facts, but the inflection is different. And this is one of the great mysteries of photography: how such a simple, dumb tool can, you know, bring so much to it.

And I think it's not just subject matter, because Evans could photograph the same — Evans and I could — or Shore and I could photograph the same subject matter, but it would look different. And so it's not just content. I don't know. It's just one of those X factors — a combination of light and combinations and the perspective and all the things that photography does. But there is a — what do you call it — a connection from one extreme to the other, a whole level of degrees from work that is very hot and to work that's very cool.

You could probably chart all these different photographers. And by the way, using color, as Shore did — I mean, that already warms up his pictures more than a lot of black and white. But the way he used it was in restraint. And that made a lot of sense at the time, too, because I think if he had done something more like Meyerowitz, he would not have been able to be included in the New Topographics.

The New Topographics, the whole premise, I think, was this idea of the photographer being anonymous. Letting the machine — even though that's an impossibility. But the notion that the pictures look like they could have been made by a machine, so that they're neutral, right? And basically presenting facts so that one can analyze them and deduce for yourself what you think.

With a photograph, when you put the content in there, and you juxtapose certain things - like a photograph over there, I have a simple landscape of a pool. There happened to be a car inside the pool. If you took the car out of the pool, it could be maybe a Stephen Shore photograph. But the car in the pool really changes that photograph. So it's not the style; it's not even the light. It's not the use of color. It's just a juxtaposition of facts within a frame. And that could be a lot of different things. It's sort of hard to come up with a formula.

MR. HOELSCHER: No, you've described that beautifully, I think. Color. Maybe we could talk about color, because that has been incredibly important to your work over the years. At what point did you decide to make the shift to color, and how has it impacted the way that you approach photography?

MR. MISRACH: Right. Well, color, clearly, is huge. I think it's really interesting because in the '70s there was still a lot of resistance to using it. I think my first interest in color, to be really accurate, wasn't Eggleston's work — again, another body of work I just didn't care for; I didn't get, wasn't that interested — but [it] was [John] Szarkowski's writing about color. It was his essay in the *Eggleston Guide* [*William Eggleston's Guide*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976; exhibition: May 24 — August 8, 1976] with that show; when I read that, that was — just like I said the Sternfeld pictures with the eight by 10 was the eureka moment in how to use an eight by 10, in a sense, it was the Szarkowski text that was just an epiphany for me.

MR. HOELSCHER: Do you remember what he said?

MR. MISRACH: No, not specifically. Mostly things, like, you know, the world is in color. [They laugh.] And that black and white is an abstraction just by definition. That was like a revelation, because up until that point, when we looked at black and white, we thought of black and white as a form of realism. Right?

And then just the idea that the world was in color, it just — right? Anyway, it seems self-evident to me now. But that was just a revelation. And you know, many other things that they talked about. It was suddenly like, “Oh, my God, why am I working in the Dark Ages?”

Also I think one of the key points, and Szarkowski points that out, but it’s just a fact that in the ’70s color materials were improved enough that you could use them.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: I think in earlier eras there were lots of limitations. They were crude; they were slow; they looked very garish and very, you know, like advertising. But suddenly there were materials that could be used. And again, I think, maybe Meyerowitz doesn’t get the credit for using eight-by-10 color early on, before anybody else, really went, you know, “Here, you can just take a picture of something, and it’s just beautiful because you can see the real world is in color with this incredible quality.” Earlier than that the materials were rough. They just weren’t good.

So I think the technological advances and Szarkowski’s argument for Eggleston’s work just rang bells.

And it’s interesting. The other thing is, right around that time — so around 1976, which is when the Eggleston show was — in ’77, I was completing my Night Desert work. I had been photographing in the desert at night with a strobe. I photographed at Stonehenge in 1976. And I was doing all that work. I was already taking my black-and-white photographs and split toning them. I was actually introducing color into black-and-white photographs already. It was one color at a time, but it was important. It was color nonetheless. And this was sort of experimental work that I was doing. But even before color was a viable medium, I was already thinking sort of sensitized to what color could do to an image.

So once the Eggleston came out, and the technology changed, in ’78 I shot my first color in Hawaii and Louisiana, actually, at night with the strobe.

MR. HOELSCHER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] And how has it changed how you approach photography today? In other words, if you were a black-and-white photographer, you would approach things different, presumably. Could you describe how color has influenced how you approach your work?

MR. MISRACH: That’s a little harder. It’s now, I think, in terms of the color language, so it’s unconscious at this point. It’s just a matter of, like, working and seeing. So I don’t really look at color; I don’t think about color, just like I didn’t — I mean, maybe black and white, because it was so abstract, you would think more about how it would look in black and white — but to me just black and white looks old-fashioned; it looks antiquated; it looks like a daguerreotype. So even with work that I love, like Friedlander and Robert Adams, for example, their work looks dated to me; it looks of a period. Where color doesn’t feel that way; color feels different.

And that said, for the first time ever, I’m actually sort of experimenting now with making some black-and-white pictures. Because everybody is doing color now, it just feels like, yes, it’s time to switch, which actually goes off your question a little bit. But what was so amazing back then - I think it’s hard to appreciate now - is when I first started shooting color and bringing it to my gallery [...-RM] — they didn’t want to have anything to do with it.

Color faded; there was — what was the word? Not renegade — “fugitive.” That color was fugitive. That was the expression; I don’t know if you know that. But basically because materials didn’t last very long, and there wasn’t a collectors’ base, and color was so different, I got a lot of pressure to go back to doing black and white. And so —

MR. HOELSCHER: From galleries?

MR. MISRACH: Yes.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, galleries. Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MISRACH: Yes, yes. Or maybe it was from collectors from the galleries, whatever; I don’t remember exactly where it came from. But just across the board [the galleries didn’t want to have color in their stable -RM]. I just think that was an interesting period because there really weren’t very many people doing color at the time. And it wasn’t that well received, but I think in the last decade or so it’s absolutely taken over not only the photography world, but I think it’s had a huge impact on the art world in general. It’s so hard to imagine where it was in the ’70s; it’s changed so much now.

MR. HOELSCHER: I’d like to talk a little bit about the process — your process. And this may be difficult because, presumably, it’s changed considerably over the years.

MR. MISRACH: Yes.

MR. HOELSCHER: So maybe we could focus on one aspect of your work process, and that's technical and equipment. I'd like to hear a little bit more — and you've alluded to some of this already — but I'd like to hear a little bit more about the sort of cameras that you used and how they've changed over the years.

MR. MISRACH: Okay. Yes. I think early on, probably because of the influence of the West Coast school of photography, in other words Roger Minick and the people at the studio — everyone was using a medium-format camera, basically a Hasselblad or a Rolleiflex, so there was already a taboo, in a sense, on using 35 millimeter. There were a few people there, but most of the serious people used what we'd call "medium format." And that's influenced, again, by Ansel Adams and the West Coast school, that you wanted a higher quality.

So I started pretty much seriously, even though I shot 35 millimeter for a little — my uncle loaned me a camera; I think I had a Leica Rangefinder to start with — soon I was just working with the medium-format Hasselblad. And I used that for my early landscape work, through the Telegraph work, my Night Desert work, even my early — my first color work — same camera, the Hasselblad. Until —

MR. HOELSCHER: What did it allow you to do that a 35 millimeter couldn't do?

MR. MISRACH: Just a larger negative. So it gives you better quality, better resolution — not that people were blowing up the prints larger, but even at the smaller-size prints, you just get a better-quality image. It's the more nuanced tonalities from light to dark, which is a very beautiful-capacity of photography. And then in '79, that's when I got my first eight by 10, and then I've basically been shooting that until, I'd say, 2006.

MR. HOELSCHER: The same camera?

MR. MISRACH: Yes. Well, I think I may have gone through a couple versions, or — basically it's a Deardorff camera — eight-by-10 view camera. I think one got beaten up, so I may have gotten a second one, but basically it's the exact same style of camera. And usually I use one lens, actually. For most of those years, until the end, I pretty much used just a normal lens on everything. So you know, not a lot of different lenses and things. For the Golden Gate series [Golden Gate Studies: The View from my Front Porch, 1997 — 2000], I did use a telephoto lens on [that project -RM]. But that's pretty much the exception.

And then - actually, I'll flesh out a little bit of the technical things. So for years — and this follows a long tradition, an on-the-road kind of tradition of West Coast both photography and maybe the poets, this whole, in San Francisco — I mean, I even think [Jack] Kerouac and [Allen] Ginsberg lived in Berkeley for a while. In the West Coast it was a really strong sense of the Beats and their on-the-road tradition.

So almost from the beginning I was using a Volkswagen bus, sleeping in the back, and throwing my equipment in the back of the camper, and just traveling around the west. Actually, I'm on my fifth Volkswagen camper in 40 years, so that gives you an idea. No, it's only been in the last couple years that I've stopped sleeping in the back of the van, just because it kills my back; that's an age thing.

MR. HOELSCHER: [Laughs.] Yes.

MR. MISRACH: [... -RM] One of the things about that, the van — and Roger said this about his car early on — but your car, when you're doing the kind of photography I do, your car becomes a key part of your equipment.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, yes. Well, that's — we'll talk about digital maybe in a little bit. Let's focus on the earlier years and the use of film. And before I get to fieldwork, just tell me a little bit more about the advantages of an eight-by-10 viewfinder camera for the sort of work that you do.

MR. MISRACH: Well, again, the larger the negative you have, the better quality that you get. So, for example, an eight-by-10 piece of film holds [the equivalent of -RM] 36 of 35-millimeter negatives. So one piece of film actually contains that many — you know, 36 of those. It's basically 36 times more surface area that's containing the information of light. So you get this seamless continuity of light and texture and detail that you can't get any other way.

So for me, because I work very large — and now I'm even printing eight-by-10-foot prints — there is no way that you could do this with a small - like, either 2 ¼[-inch] or 35-millimeter, or even four-by-five[-inch] - negative and retain the quality. If you look at even work like [Andreas] Gursky's work - and he's known for his large prints - I think a bunch of that must have been shot with a four by five or five by seven because a lot of the quality, it just breaks down with those large [prints -RM] — when you move in close, it just falls apart, and you get sort of digital artifacts.

That's the size of the negative. It's a just a sheer technical limitation. So it's remarkable what you can get out of a large negative. It definitely changes the overall feel of an image. There's a continuity that you just don't get with a raw 35 millimeter.

MR. HOELSCHER: Well, what about printing, then? Many of your prints are large. I know them as four by five feet, but now you're talking about — how large — eight by 10 feet?

MR. MISRACH: Eight by 10 feet, which is four times larger.

MR. HOELSCHER: That's really significant. I'd like to hear a little bit about your experience with printing over the years. You first printed on your own, but then you've had other people do it, and now you're printing again on your own - is that right? Maybe you could just explain that.

MR. MISRACH: Sure. Well, as I said also, when I first worked at the ASUC Studio, I learned how to print. I did my own printing by Telegraph Avenue — my black-and-white work I printed all myself. And I took a lot of pride in being a printmaker. There was a certain craft consciousness of photographers. And I think what happened then is, when I started doing color, I also started going larger.

In 1978 I actually started going larger with my night Hawaii pictures and had a show at the Corcoran Gallery ["American Images: New Work by Twenty Contemporary Photographers." Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, October 13 - December 2, 1979]. That was a show with Stephen Shore, Eggleston — trying to remember — [Nicholas] Nick Nixon, whole bunch of people. I showed my first — it was commissioned — and I did my first Night Jungle pictures. At that point I blew those up to be 30 by 40 [inches]. And I think they were — maybe the largest pictures in the show. At that time they seemed huge. That was big [then -RM]. Now they're diminutive.

But at that point I had to start using a commercial lab because they had these commercial processors - there's no way that I could either afford or even maintain, because they have to be maintained on a daily level. So I had to use a commercial lab and have them print my work. And basically, I would oversee the printing. I would work with the printer over time, develop a relationship, and then go in and approve of prints and mark up prints and let them fine-tune the printing. And with large color works, it just had to be that way.

And I did that for — basically after 1978 or '79, I stopped printing my own black and white. I'd done my own color contact printing at the beginning, but I stopped doing that. I'd just send that out to the labs. And for the next number of years I let the labs do all the printing, so that I could just focus on making images. Saved me a lot of time, allowed me to focus on new projects. I had a very prolific period there where I was able to do a lot of new work; it was really very exciting. So it freed me up, got me out of the darkroom.

But then around 2006, I think, I started printing my own pigment prints, with the new technology allowing us now to print them ourselves. And that was a revelation. And since then, actually, I've stopped printing at the labs and began making all my own prints, even as large as eight by 10 feet, all by myself. It's the new technology.

Again, this is going back to the argument in the '70s, where the advancement in color film allowed us to make color photographs, the advance in these new pigment printers, which are dry and not toxic, and you can do in your garage or in your bedroom even — because the prints come out in rolls; you don't have to have these big processors where they come out flat and everything. It's very freeing. I think students will be coming out of graduate schools being able to print themselves — and I think the labs are suffering because of that.

So I've been printing ever since then with this new freedom, and able to control the quality of the prints to my satisfaction. And experiment with scale in printing. All those skills that I learned in black-and-white printing have actually come back to help me here, so that I — I think I'm a very good printer because of that early discipline. So I haven't lost all that after 30 years or whatever it's been.

And it's fairly remarkable to be able to print my own — I feel like I'm discovering photography all over again because I'm — it's like I have all these tools, and some of my new work has been more experimental. That's, again, only because I'm now printing myself which allows me to play around and not worry about spending so much money on, you know, prints and things like that.

And on that note, I need to take a break for little —

[END DISC 1.]

MR. HOELSCHER: This is Steven Hoelscher interviewing Richard Misrach at his studio in Emeryville, California, on August 11, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number two.

I want to continue our conversation about printing. It's impressive to hear that you've gone into printing these extremely large prints and the way in which the eight-by-10 camera has made that really possible.

I'm curious, what happens when these same images are shrunk dramatically for a book or a computer screen or an iPod, which they might circulate around in? So the different directions from printing, when they're printed in

a book. Are you happy with how they've turned out and how they can be used and viewed?

MR. MISRACH: Well, it kind of depends on images and series. Some series translate better, say in the books or smaller versions. Others don't. So that's a problem.

I think one of the things that's become important to me is that the size of the print, the scale of a print, is really critical to the understanding. So I don't think it's so casual to go small to large. That said, a lot of the work that I'm blowing up now to eight by 10 feet, a lot of it's work that I did in the '80s, for example. It wasn't possible to print that large back then. It wasn't even a possibility.

And so again, the new technologies allow me to revisit earlier work and go to a scale that previously was unimaginable. And the ease with which I can go large — I mean, now I can actually afford to just do these things, whereas before, everything would have been so expensive.

But also, the materials have lend themselves to going large. So scale is really important. My *On the Beach* book [New York: Aperture, 2007], it's a really good example where we did a book that's considered oversized — it's about 16 by 20 — and the images are quite large for a book. But a lot of them, you can barely see the figures out at sea. You need to be looking at a six-by-10-foot print of somebody floating out to sea to see the expression on their face.

So what I've done in the book, for example, is I would take a detail and blow it up and put it next to the larger photograph, because otherwise, it's not even legible. It's not even a matter of having the same impact. You actually lose critical information sometimes in a smaller scale. So different bodies of work are different that way.

And the scale I'm working with now, I do find that there is an object quality, a presence to the larger photographs in some of these pictures. I mean, some of the pictures I'm doing, say, of [the effects of Hurricane] Katrina [2005] or the [1991] Oakland fire aftermath or some of these sort of — I'm working on a new project which I call *Post-Apocalypse Now* — it'll probably be a book.

And I'm going back through the last 30 years and looking at everything from the Dead Animal Pit [The Pit, Canto VI, 1987] to the Bravo 20 [The War (Bravo 20), Canto V, 1986] photographs to the Oakland Fire series, which I'll be showing next year for this first time ["1991: The Oakland — Berkeley Fire Aftermath: Photographs by Richard Misrach." Berkeley Art Museum and Oakland Museum of California, October 12, 2011 — February 12, 2012] — it's 20-year-old work that I put away — to Katrina, which I also put away; the Salton Sea Flood [The Flood, Canto III, 1983-85]; a number of these sort of post-apocalyptic motifs. I'm revisiting all that work.

And I'm scaling them up to these gigantic works. And they become — when they're smaller, they can be sort of excused as journalism or documentary. When they go to this other scale, they take on a monumental quality. They become iconic.

For me, they're much more like history paintings. These are not meant for people's couches, you know. I could see them in, like, a museum or a public site, where they hold the wall and speak to a period of time, our period of time, this historical moment, that when they're smaller and scaled down, they have a very, very different — they don't work like that.

So part of my work has always been trying to get to that work there. But the scale now actually is allowing me to get there faster, maybe more powerfully.

MR. HOELSCHER: Well, that leads into a question that I wanted to ask. And that is, some critics have described your photographs as painterly. They've used that adjective.

MR. MISRACH: Bastards. No, I'm kidding.

MR. HOELSCHER: [Laughs.] They claim that you're trying to connect to 20th-century painting. So my question for you is, does such a description ring true? Does it make sense?

MR. MISRACH: Am I trying to connect to painting? Not really. But I can see - I mean, the fact that it's colored, and it's large scale, and that there's beautiful light. A lot of the paintings, I guess, that you would compare them to are probably based on photographs, right? I mean, a lot of painters use photographs to model their images to create — to capture the light and the one-point perspective and all these different attributes.

So in the sense that paintings and the photographs are similar, I would say, it's — those are probably paintings that are more photographic.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, yes.

MR. MISRACH: So I'm not sure. There's certain pictures, like there's my scrub pictures, which are photographs of

vegetation, that look like Jackson Pollock paintings. And that's very, very conscious, you know, a play off the idea that you can photograph — find something in the real world that looks just like a Pollock painting.

Similarly to my Sky pictures [The Skies, Canto XVIII 1992-], which are abstractions where there's no horizon line; there's no star trails; there's no moon — there's no heavenly bodies. There's no clouds. There's no frame of reference. So it defies photography's one-point perspective. You have no perspective; it's just a flat field. It looks like a [Mark] Rothko or an Ad Reinhardt painting.

So in that sense, those are, in my series, conscious attempts to dialogue with photography and painting. And of course, I did a series called Pictures of Paintings [The Paintings, Canto XVI, 1991-95]. So obviously, those are very much about the relationship between photography and painting.

So, yes, in those cases. But the other ones, because they're colorful and large scale and sumptuous to look at, in many cases, yes, that does do what some kind of painting does, but that's where it stops, for me. I'm still very much a photographer. Ultimately, I love the photographic about everything that I do. I'm just really hung up on photography that way.

And painting — I've never wanted to be a painter, never — I'm not like somebody that tried painting and didn't like it or couldn't do it and said, "Go to photography." I've never been interested in painting. I mean, I enjoy looking at it like I enjoy listening to music, but it's never captivated me the way photography has.

Which maybe leads to a question you didn't ask, but I do think it's been really interesting the way, you know, for years — and especially when I started - photography was marginalized as sort of a B art, like a craft like ceramics or something, and not taken seriously as sort of a primary art form.

I think that's really changed, and I think it's still taking the art establishment a really long time to get around that and really get that. I think there's a lot of resistance in traditional art fields to really grasping how important photography has become in so many respects. People still say, it's photography and art. I just think it's become such a moot point, you know?

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes. Well, that leads to a question that we were discussing just a couple of minutes ago when we were not on tape, and that is the writing on photography. Is there good photography writing out there?

MR. MISRACH: There's not — no. I mean there's some. There's some. In fact, I mean, I think Szarkowski, years ago, was one really, really important first writer on photography. And there's some historical things. There's a great compilation of writings from [Louis-Jacques-Mandé] Daguerre to [Charles] Baudelaire to all kinds of things put together over the history of the medium.

But in terms of profound critical writing, there really isn't that much. Actually, Jeff Wall is somebody who I've been reading lately. One of his essays, I think, is just one of the best things I've read in a long time.

And there's actually a book that Charlotte Cotton just did. I don't know if you've read that, but I would recommend it. It's called *Words without Pictures* [Alex Klein, editor. New York: Aperture Ideas Books, 2010]. When she was a curator at LACMA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, [she] created sort of an ongoing series of dialogues and lectures and blogs by photographers writing about photography — and critics and historians writing about photography, but without the aid of pictures.

And then Aperture just this year published it. There's a lot of interesting thinking and writing in there. It's kind of a weird compilation, because it's got the good, the bad, the ugly, but there's some great stuff in there.

But it reminds me that we don't have the kind of deep, rigorous writing on photography. Michael Fried, for example, who's a really important writer on art and painting, recently wrote about photography [*Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008]. And it's just got to be one of the worst books written about photography ever. It just shockingly doesn't get it.

I would think, now that in the last 10 years photography has become so paramount in the art world, that you will see critical writing programs start putting out — pumping out, basically — photography writers that can really think and write about photography. I think we'll see that. I think a lot's going to be changing.

I think a couple decades ago, it was the artists — they were so very much separated, like artists who used photography versus the photographers who make art. And there were the two worlds, you know? So, Cindy Sherman, Ed Ruscha, or the Baldessarri [John Baldessari] or the Warhols [Andy Warhol], all these people that use photography, they were considered artists.

And then more recently, [Thomas] Struth and Gursky, Jeff Wall, these are people that have to be careful they're not labeled photographers, because that would kill what they do. But they are photographers.

And then there's all these photographers that have been sort of crossing over into the art world — you know, the diCorcias [Philip-Lorca diCorcia] and I don't know, maybe [Gregory] Crewdson — I'm not coming up with a number of people. But that whole thing is slowly breaking down that distinction, because it's totally arbitrary.

And basically, it's kind of embarrassing, actually, because it's maintained - *ArtForum* maintains it, certain institutions, certain galleries. And even [Larry] Gagosian [Gallery] now is trying to show photographers - which he does kicking and screaming. But that kind of thing is happening.

And so, advance forward 10, 20 years from now, I think that whole thing will have been sort of discredited as just ridiculously arbitrary. The work will be looked at on its own merits, which is the way it should be.

MR. HOELSCHER: Is the fact that there's also a documentary tradition a complicating factor? For instance, when [Susan] Sontag writes about photography, she's writing about documentary photography, typically. How would you consider her work, for instance, within this conversation of photography criticism?

MR. MISRACH: I think she did a great job. But she did come at it from a slightly different perspective. I think *On Photography* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977] is a great piece of writing. But that's like, what, 35 years old now? Forty years old? I mean, it's really old.

But I think what I was saying, this breakdown of these two distinctions, I really think that that's breaking down, and one of the things that will speed that up is some really smart writing about those critical things.

I think it's probably going to be the writers that actually can break that down, because the marketplace, the museums and places like *ArtForum* are still sort of stuck in these older, established things. But I think it's the writers that actually can make those arguments.

I think Jeff Wall's writing about conceptual art's use of photography is exactly the kind of thing I'm talking about. It's so smart, so brilliant, and so goes to the point of this kind of thing. That's just like a tip of the iceberg to be done.

MR. HOELSCHER: Speaking of reputations in the art world, I'd like to know a little bit more about how you cultivated contacts, and you built up your reputation as a photographer.

MR. MISRACH: Yes, I mean, basically how the career is sort of built?

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: It just kind of happened, because again, when I started, there wasn't anything to build up. I mean, it just didn't really exist. I'm trying to go back.

I remember when I first approached galleries in San Francisco. One of the galleries I went to, I was on my — literally on the floor, on my knees, showing works while he stood overhead eating a sandwich and talking to somebody else and just barely looking. I was so insulted. I was young, and I was really, really pissed off. I decided then I was never going to show my work in a gallery.

That was in the '70s — and then, actually, Jeff Fraenkel called me. At that time, he was just an intern — or, a young understudy at Grapestake Gallery in San Francisco. And he called me. I had had a show at the Oakland Museum [of California, Oakland, CA] of some of my Night Desert work and Stonehenge work. And he saw that, and just loved it.

He called me, and I was in the darkroom, printing. And he said he'd love for me to bring the work to the Grapestake Gallery [... RM]. And he asked if I had any representation. I said, "No, and I wasn't interested in any," you know, "Forget it." And he convinced me to come over. So I did take my work there, and he was great. And he represents my work today. He's this amazing —

MR. HOELSCHER: So how long have you been involved with him as —

MR. MISRACH: Well, first it was at Grapestake Gallery, and then he split off and started his own gallery. But I stayed on with Grapestake out of loyalty to the gallery that had brought me on. But when they closed in 1981, then I went over to Jeffrey's gallery. And I've been with him since then.

I think he is one of the great visionaries in our field, probably any field, as a gallerist. I mean, he's so special. He's got such passion and vision for the medium, such intellectual understanding. He's always done things right. I mean, he's got the loyalty. All of the artists that work with him just adore him and are loyal.

So he even has the estates of [Diane] Arbus, [Richard] Avedon, and you know. Normally, they would be in a New York gallery, but Fraenkel has Robert Adams's estate, Friedlander, Winogrand. Everybody who works with him,

they just — he is ethical, smart, passionate about the work. And it just oozes; he can't help himself. So he's really special that way. I think he's helped all their careers, and he's helped mine, you know, in terms of just, yes, doing shows.

I think I've had a lot of shows with him — now, that's in San Francisco. When I was young, I always thought I should go to New York if I wanted to seriously pursue a career. And I would go to New York, and I would spend a couple of weeks and look at work, and I would get really excited about what I saw there, but I couldn't stand the idea of living there.

So about 10 years, I'd go back and forth, and I'd keep thinking, "Oh, next year, maybe I'll move there." And I just finally decided at some point I wasn't going to do it. So I stayed here, and I think that actually slowed down my career for a long time. I think if I had moved there earlier, my career would have probably done a lot better.

But what it did do is it allowed me not to be distracted by New York, the gallery scene and all that stuff, and just work. And so I just worked. And over the years, things just sort of happened. I'm trying to think, there wasn't — really wasn't much more, just slowly over time — and I got a couple NEAs early on, which has helped me survive.

I think that was important. In '73, I got an NEA grant for \$1,500, and that supported me for a year and half, which was really important, so I could just work. In '77, I got another one. And I got a Guggenheim [Fellowship] in 1978.

And I would say to that point, I was working at the studio, making minimum wage, living out of my van, [house sitting -RM]. But those grants really got me to the next level. I think around '79 is when I started showing with Grapestake Gallery — '78, maybe — with Grapestake Gallery, and that Fraenkel started to have shows, to sell a few prints.

I don't know when it began, but there were print sales all along. But it wasn't probably until the '80s that I started to actually make a living at it. And then in the '90s, the art market's taking off, and in 2000, I mean, it's just — the photo world has gone from, you know, Ansel Adams not being able to sell a print for more than \$250 or Edward Weston selling a print for \$25 to, you know, crazy numbers.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes. How about the publishing of your work? You said the first publication of your work was *Telegraph Avenue*. I'd like to hear a little bit more about the role of publishing in your development as a photographer. And then along with that, maybe a second question: what role, if any, have commercial publications — *Sierra Club*, *National Geographic*, you know, *Time* magazine — have you published in any of those commercial venues?

MR. MISRACH: Right, right. All right, so two different questions.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: So this goes back also to your question about scale. I do think of photographs in terms of scale for an exhibition, for a gallery wall. And so the scale there is often much larger. The new book I've done, the prints are 11 by 15, They're actually relatively small, but in general, my prints were large.

The other thing is, I think about the work very differently for books. And so books are their own entity, and it's a very, very different presentation. So I really do think about them differently.

MR. HOELSCHER: So when you're in the field, you photograph with the image of a gallery piece or a book piece, or do you just create the image and then figure it out afterwards?

MR. MISRACH: Well, I create the image. At that point, I'm on automatic and just sort of interacting with the world. When I get back, I usually think in two terms: How would this work as a book, and how would this work on the wall? And that will define whether I go that size. For example, that picture over there [Mistrach points to a picture in his studio -RM] is going to not go larger than that, because that's the right size for what I'm trying to do for the gallery wall. And then this one is something I'm trying different for a gallery wall.

But for a book, I'll experiment with the way the book opens, the size of the book — some of the books are smaller; some are quite large. And I lay those out myself. I pretty much — yes, yes, I do all that myself. That's a really important part. So I sequence, scale, edit the book. It's very much part of my learning process, and it also — it's my feedback system. So I start laying out something; if it's not quite there, I get an idea of what I need to build out further with more shooting.

MR. HOELSCHER: How do you decide when to finish? I ask this because I was just reading two nights ago about Eugene Smith's epic disaster with *Pittsburgh* [Alan Tracktenberg. *Dream Street: W. Eugene Smith's Pittsburgh*

Project. New York: Norton, 2001]. And he was there to shoot a couple of hundred of photographs over two weeks. He ends up spending almost a year shooting 10,000 photographs; they were essentially never published during his lifetime; it bankrupts Magnum [Photos] — because he couldn't give up; you know, he couldn't give up on letting things go and stand as they were. He was — at least the account that I read — too much of a perfectionist. Do you have those tendencies in you? Or — obviously, you're able to complete projects.

MR. MISRACH: It's a really good question. I do have my sort of epic project, which is the Desert Cantos, and it's a structure that I've built. So that allows me to work on a project that is still ongoing; it's been over 30 years. And those are made up of a series of subseries. So that's actually allowing [me] to do sort of epic, unlimited, timeless — by definition, that series won't end until I die, because the subject matter is always going to be out there. My limitation is not the subject matter. So that's sort of the way I've solved the W. Eugene Smith problem.

But each one of those subseries, like, say, The Fires [Canto IV, 1983-85] or the space shuttle landing [The Event, Canto II, 1983] or the Salton Sea Flood, or the Dead Animal Pit, those do have very distinct beginnings and ends. And it is something more intuitive. The Event, which is the space shuttle landing, I think there's only eight pictures in that series, and I shot those over a three-day period. And that's it; it's defined; I don't need to do any more. The Dead Animal Pits, I shot over 450 images, and that lasted about a good year and a half. Other series - like The Terrain from that Desert Canto is something I started in 1979 and is still ongoing to this day, because by definition — [inaudible] — could go on.

So, most of them do have finite lives. I would say they average around two years, but I do know when they're done. And then when they're done — like the Golden Gate [Series -RM] I did from my front porch — the day I shot the last one [... -RM] — it was just done, you know?

Oh, but — do you want me to answer about the commercial magazines?

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, the other question, commercial magazines.

MR. MISRACH: Yes, so — no, I've not done much commercial editorial work. I did do a cover for *Time* magazine years ago on the drought. I tried a couple of projects for *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine, and I also did for *Frankfurter Allgemeine* magazine in Germany. I did three pieces on the Nile for them. That's when I photographed ["White Man Contemplating Pyramids," 1982 -RM].

But I did those, and that was it. There might be a couple other cases. And my work gets used. I'll be approached by somebody wanting to use an existing picture. That's different; that happens a lot. Depending on the situation, I would let it [be] used or not, if it's appropriate or not.

MR. HOELSCHER: So would you describe commissioned works as important for your photographic output?

MR. MISRACH: No. No, I've done a little bit of work on commissions — very little - and most of it is just a distraction, basically. So I don't really do that.

MR. HOELSCHER: And why is that?

MR. MISRACH: Because I just like being self-assigned, exactly what I want to do.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, yes.

MR. MISRACH: So — and for a period there, it was a form of income, which was good. And I got to try that. But I just found that in the end — actually, the *New York Times* commissioned me to do something, but they gave me one day to do it, the nuclear test site in Nevada. And I did that, and I went, "Oh, God, that — I'll never do that again." That was it — because there's just not enough time to take on a subject like that and do it right. Obviously, they have a limited amount of resources and time that they're going to do it. So all my self-assigned subjects, I could take two years on if I need to, or —

MR. HOELSCHER: Okay. I'd like to hear a little bit more, then, about your relationship with galleries and patrons. It seems as though that's been — more so than commission works or commercial periodicals — important for you. You mentioned the very positive relationship with the gallery owner who represents you in San Francisco. But what about patrons? Have you got to know many?

MR. MISRACH: No, I don't know any patrons.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes. Yes.

MR. MISRACH: It's an interesting concept. I mean, generally, what the galleries do — and I have three primary galleries right now: one is Pace/MacGill in New York; Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco; and Marc Selwyn Fine Arts in Los Angeles. They basically deal directly with the collectors, and they keep us apart. I don't know if that's

by method or what, but it's fine, because they end up selling work and doing all that stuff, and I get to just make the work.

MR. HOELSCHER: You don't find that collectors are anxious to meet the artist?

MR. MISRACH: Sometimes, you hear that, but it's generally not a good idea.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: I think it's tricky. And this may be, you know, not very diplomatic on my part, but I found over the years, to be really honest about it, that most collectors aren't that serious. There are some serious collectors out there that have a deep knowledge and understanding and passion for the history of photography and come to it like that. But a lot of collectors just don't have that deep understanding of the medium; they want something that looks beautiful or, you know —

And when you start to feel like this, you kind of have an idealistic notion that you're beyond the commercial component of the world. But in fact, the art world is very, very commercial. I mean, photography didn't used to be that way, because things have changed so much. But I would say, in the last 10, 15 years, because of the high stakes and money involved now, it's really changed a lot, for better and for worse. I mean, it's great because I can totally support myself now, no problem, but there's a downside of that too.

MR. HOELSCHER: Well, I'd like to hear a little bit more about that, how the market for photography has changed in your lifetime.

MR. MISRACH: Well, like I was saying earlier, in the '70s, if Ansel Adams sold the *Moonrise over Hernandez* [*Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, 1941], 16 by 20 [inches], for \$250, that was literally the going price back then. I remember calling my father. I went with Roger down to his house. And Bill Turnage, his [Ansel Adams' - RM] new business manager, showed us the beautiful prints, and, you know, "We're now going to sell these for \$250."

And I called my father - because I couldn't afford that at the time — and I called my father, and I thought he should buy this. I said that, you know, "It's really beautiful; I mean, it's really incredible; it's a masterpiece; it's magnificent; it's beautiful. And someday it'll probably double in value." And now that they just found this cache of early negatives, they just valued [them] at \$200 million.

I mean, contemporary photographers, some of them are now over a million dollars, you know? It's just a huge, huge difference. When things were sort of taking off in the early '80s with the market, if I was selling prints for \$250, I was thrilled. But now, my prices are now — the *On the Beach* are selling for [\$]85,000, you know? And some of the large ones — I forgot the price, but it's a whole new ballgame. And I don't think that's going to change anytime, and I think it's just going to keep going on.

MR. HOELSCHER: Well, you mentioned a good thing is that you can support yourself. But you also mentioned that there is a downside.

MR. MISRACH: Oh, the downside is just that there's tremendous commercial pressures. Students coming out of Yale [University, New Haven, CT] or, you know, they go into the galleries — I think it's really, really difficult. I think it's difficult for anybody to sustain a life's work, but I think that you'll see many, many one-trick ponies and people that just burn out. The pressure of trying to find a gallery and sell and — I don't know. I mean, it all shakes out in the end, but I think that that's a problem.

I think, then, you have people buying art for the wrong reasons. Just because they're prestige objects, you know, you have wealthy people buying them. And they don't know what they're buying, but they — that's the latest, hottest thing. You get this whole commodified component of the art world. And it's very real, and it could be pretty grotesque.

So that goes hand in hand. But the art world has had that for years. That's just part of it. Photography's been insulated from that, both for better and worse.

MR. HOELSCHER: Why did it change in photography and become more like the rest of the art world?

MR. MISRACH: I think once photographs went from black and white — nobody's ever talked about this as far as I know, and I don't know if there's any research about this; I think this would be a really great graduate study. But I think once photographs became color and could be scaled up, suddenly it did compete with painting on a lot of levels. It took it out of its sort of craft area.

And the strength of photography that had been there all along, which is the democratic component about them — everybody appreciates photographs, because we all take pictures of our mothers and our girlfriends and our

families and special events. So people have a built-in appreciation in the value of photography that, I think, just sort of all finally came together in this moment — again, with the technological advances. And suddenly, it is the art of our time, in a respect.

I think painting and sculpture, which are obviously incredibly — and video and installation — these are all really, really, really important things. But I think there's something still very basic about representation that people — despite that, again, it's kind of not hip right now - but I think people really love it, really appreciate and can really relate to it. And I think the older arts like painting and sculpture have actually — even though they're still sort of considered at this upper tier - I think people still have more and more trouble with it over time. It's a little bit more like poetry. It feels a little bit more like a removed form, maybe like early black-and-white photography.

So I think in some respects, its time has come, and I think even with the advances in digital innovations, it's not going to weaken photography; I think it's going to strengthen it. I think we've already seen it. Jeff Wall and Gursky alone have used digital capabilities in ways that have never been dreamed before. And it's certainly not negatively impacted their work.

And I have, too. My *On the Beach* period, I definitely used a number of digital interventions that I don't use in other work. And it makes sense; there's a logic to it and an expanding of the photographic vernacular in a way that wasn't possible. So all that just strengthens the medium.

MR. HOELSCHER: Could you talk about what you've done in terms of digital interventions? And is it just that one series that you've done that with?

MR. MISRACH: Yes, let me think about — oh, no, no, of course not, no. Well, the first series I did it in a big way [with] was the *On the Beach* pictures — in some cases, not all cases. And the problem you're talking about is, then you get a "Where's Waldo" thing — people look for it — [inaudible].

MR. HOELSCHER: [Laughs.]

MR. MISRACH: But basically, there's some cases where I actually removed figures in the frame that were just noise for me. Simple as that, but that's a huge, huge difference; I would've never considered that before, because I don't consider that work documentary, right? So it's just a non-issue.

But also, in a more recent work — the *Reverse* work — if you're familiar with that, but it's where I print the negative as opposed to the positive.

MR. HOELSCHER: Hm. [Negative.]

MR. MISRACH: Oh, okay. So that was a show I just had at PaceWildenstein in January [2010] and then Fraenkel Gallery last year and Marc Selwyn. And it's basically where I use Photoshop and digital tools to turn my positives into negative and show them as large negatives. I should show you a couple of these before you go.

Because of all of this new language, I'm looking at the color negative as an index. Like, the positive, the color — the traditional photograph — is an index to [the] real world. It records things and just sort of transcribes it onto film, and we've always looked at it as an index. Like a picture of your mom is a picture of your mom with her hair such and such and wearing that sweater and wearing those glasses. But this whole series is about the idea that the negative is the index to the positive. So it's very much about looking at the negative in its own right, both for the beauty and the formal components, but also the way it intervenes in all photographs. So that series is all about that.

Couldn't have done that in — I mean, I could've sort of done it, but it wouldn't have been nearly successful as with the tools I have from digital.

MR. HOELSCHER: Well, certainly, one of photography's great properties is its indexical quality. You take a photograph of your mother; we know it's your mother. But some people become anxious when we start to change her smile, or we turn her pink blouse into a yellow blouse. Is it really still a photograph of your mother? And you have no problem removing a person from the beach, because it's not documentary. Are there photographs that you've done which you'd be very hesitant to do that sort thing?

MR. MISRACH: Well, yes, my work ranges — again, this goes to my own polarities from the interest in the aesthetics of photography to the more social and political. But, for example, the *Katrina* pictures and my *Oakland Fire* pictures, I wouldn't touch anything in there. In theory, I could actually construct any one of those scenes in the studio here and photograph it, you know?

So in that sense, in the bigger philosophical sense — but I think it adds a sort of a critical interest to what photography is and how it works. There is a social contract involved there. And that is, that if I say it's not

imitated — constructed - then you can either believe it or not. But that's true with older photographs that we have in the past, when people were actually dropped — you know, removed people or added people in the photographs, or some FSA [Farm Security Administration] photographs have been — it's always been possible. Now it's just so easy, and it's more likely to be done and explored, that it problematizes the medium. But I find that that makes it greatly more interesting because of that — because it makes you think about all that. And I think that's really incredibly exciting.

So for me, the Katrina pictures or the Dead Animal pictures that I did years ago or the Salton Sea Flood, I don't really consider them documentary, but they're quasi-documentary. In other words, the details in the photographs are very, very — that they're representational and indexical is important.

Once I move into abstraction, it doesn't matter at all, because we're moving to a whole other level of symbolism that just — it's not about that anymore.

MR. HOELSCHER: Do you expect viewers to know the difference, that this is an abstraction versus this is semi-documentary?

MR. MISRACH: Well, I think in some of my work, you can see it. So that's a good question. I don't know. Probably with the On the Beach pictures, that would not be something they would know without me telling them that I removed people, for example. It could look — yes. Many of them, actually, are untouched. But now people go back, and they will see things there; like, in the sand, they'll see an area in the sand that looks like it's got a hole in the sand, and they think, "Oh, maybe he took a person out," when, in fact, it's just a hole in the sand.

But, again, having those questions being part of the visual dialogue, I like that, actually. The only difference now is people are more cautious when they're looking at it and say, "Is this manipulated or not?" - where in the past, things might have been manipulated, and they didn't know.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, yes. And this sort of goes back to the original point of this question, that is, the rise of photography within the art world today. And if I understand you correctly, it seems as though this question of representing reality, the way in which reality is manipulated, makes it a medium of our day. Would you agree with that?

MR. MISRACH: Yes. But it's dangerous because I think, then, there is this thing where — basically, I think the battle - "Is photography art?" - has been going back years and years and years because of the documentary mode of photography. You know, when something is abstract, it's easy to say, "Okay, that looks like art, okay." But documentary photography doesn't look like art. And I think a lot of painters, sculptors, people in other fields have always had trouble with that.

Now, I have no problem thinking of Walker Evans's work as art — and it's hardcore, cool, classic documentary. So there's still a lot of people that have to catch up with that idea that documentary photographs, just because they're documentary — I mean, everything is not art just because it's made with a medium. And we know, all painting is not art — or good art, let's put it that way. So I think the smartest, most intelligent documentary photography is art. Or — it doesn't matter if it's art, but it's of a level of discourse, I guess, that supersedes art, you know? But I think that people get hung up with it because of that; it's got that functional quality or something there.

But I think, over time, that will be more and more caught up to — I think it's easier to look at a Jeff Wall — and Jeff Wall has his problems, and people have this problem with Jeff Wall's work — some of the pictures where he just found them and photographed them — [inaudible] — documentary manner, people have a harder time with. Michael Fried can totally get it, that he puts all these things together and photographs it, and that's art because he *did* something to it. But Wall really isn't making that distinction. He's saying, these are two ways to approach something. And I think that that's really quite enlightened. And it really raises the issue well.

The fact that Wall's pictures have been manipulated, or Gursky's have been manipulated, allows people that don't know much about art to think of it as more art than photography — or the fact that Cindy Sherman poses herself, sets up the photograph, makes it more like art. But her work is very documentary, you know, of these things. And there's lots of precedent in photographic history anyway.

I think these are all sort of myths and stuff that will be broken down and worked out over time.

MR. HOELSCHER: Well, then, thinking of your own work, do you see yourself as a documentary photographer or a landscape photographer? Or do those distinctions matter?

MR. MISRACH: I think I see myself as a documentary photographer — a landscape photographer. Some of the work I do is so abstract, I think it may be more like conceptual photography, like my Sky series or my Pictures of Paintings. Even the new indexical [Reverse] pictures are — [inaudible] — the negatives. I mean, they're

landscape; they certainly wouldn't fall into a documentary.

But it's part of a continuum for me of just what photography does. And they dialogue with each other. I find that true with people like a Wall who — or people — there's a very strong movement in L.A. right now to do sort of what they call concrete photography. Basically, it's cameraless photography, and a lot of abstract and darkroom manipulation — Walead Beshty, do you know his work?

MR. HOELSCHER: Uh-uh. [Negative.]

MR. MISRACH: Very interesting photographer, very much harking back to Man Ray and that period of time, rayographs and, you know, sort of abstractions in the darkroom, but contemporary — really good.

And what they're doing is they're trying to separate themselves from traditional photographic representation, all that stuff. But, in fact, it always is in dialogue with photograph's basic function, which is recording — indexing the world. So no matter how abstract you get, how much manipulation you do, how much digital intervention you do, how much construction you do, it's always in reference to the original photograph. I mean, the democratic photographic snapshot, even. In fact, it's not even documentary tradition; it's the snapshot tradition. That thing of what you just — somebody takes a picture with no art pretense at all to record something in the world. That is so unbelievably powerful and revolutionary that everything is in dialogue with that. And so you can't get away from it.

So I don't see myself as a documentary photographer, a landscape photographer, an abstract photographer, or a fine art photographer. I'm just a photographer that is just exploring the medium in all its different permutations.

MR. HOELSCHER: Excellent.

Should we take a break? Or are you —

MR. MISRACH: Yes, I probably could use another liquid break.

[Audio Break.]

MR. HOELSCHER: Do you think about your viewers when you make a photograph?

MR. MISRACH: Not really. Actually, I was just reading something by Jeff Wall; I was paraphrasing it, but he was talking about that too. I think everybody has a viewer in mind, what you'd call an ideal viewer — somebody that looks at things critically and thinks about them. I think that's always there.

But I think you're kind of the stand-in — you know, I am the stand-in for that viewer. In other words, for me, it's got to be interesting to me. And that often has to do with whether it's both achieving what the image is supposed to be doing but also sort of contributing to what the medium can do. And I don't know how to explain that any more than that. So it's sort of an abstract viewer, I guess.

You shoot a lot, and you shoot sort of impulsively or instinctively. It's the editing that's really critical. And I've said [it] before, too, but it's amazing, after 40 years, when I shoot an eight-by-10 camera, I'll make a hundred exposures. And I do think that every time I expose the film, it should be a good photograph. When I come back, inevitably, there maybe is one or two out of the hundred that are good.

MR. HOELSCHER: [Laughs.]

MR. MISRACH: Now, you'd think after 40 years, I'd get my percentages better.

And I think this is probably true with most photographers. I don't know if anybody's - that would be a really interesting question. But I even looked through 30,000 Garry Winograd contact sheets at the Center for Creative Photography [University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ] a few years ago. And I was amazed at how many bad photographs that he made. But the good ones, they just pop out. You know right away which are the great ones.

And so why do you waste all that film? I mean, he should know better after all those years. I thought, maybe it has something to do with eight by 10 as opposed to, you know, small-format camera. But I think there's an X factor about photography, about what ends up working, what doesn't end up working. So when I — oh.

MR. HOELSCHER: No, no, please.

MR. MISRACH: No, I was just going to finish with — so when I go through and edit the pictures, it's then that the viewer, the external viewer, comes into play. It's got to jump off the page as having all these components that come together and critically make sense. I don't know. Yes. I'm sorry, what were you going to say?

MR. HOELSCHER: The digital revolution. You said to me a little while ago, before we started recording, that you are using a digital camera now. And, of course, with a digital camera, you can shoot an infinite number of photographs. How does that change how you make photographs?

MR. MISRACH: Actually, that number, a hundred to one — you know, one out of a hundred, one or two out of a hundred - has changed with digital, because you do shoot a lot more, because there's just so much more throwaways. It's still the same principle, though. You're not quite as conservative, but you still maybe get one to every 2[00] or 300 images that are keepers.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, yes. Well, since I brought that up, could you tell me a little bit about a shift towards digital photography? You're doing your own printing, and you showed me your computer upstairs where you manipulate and work with images. But you're also using digital cameras now. Is that right? Could you tell me about that?

MR. MISRACH: Yes. Yes. So the last major project I did with my view camera was in 2005 with Katrina. And October, November, December, I was in Louisiana photographing that, and I was carrying the camera around for about 12 to 14 hours a day. And I blew my back out really badly. I couldn't lift a camera for about 10 months and had to quit the — I was planning to work on that project for another year and a half, and I just had to stop it.

And after that, I started considering using a digital camera, medium format; somebody told me I could borrow one. And it's fortunate that the quality of the digital cameras just happened to get good enough right at that point in time when I was kind of desperate. And in fact, I went on a photographic trip where I was just going to take the digital camera along to just try it out, and it turned out I ended up using it for most of the trip, not using that big camera. And ever since then, I've been just shooting digital. I haven't shot film in, like, three years.

MR. HOELSCHER: And how does it change your approach?

MR. MISRACH: Oh, it's just radically different. You know, in the past, I would have to — with my eight-by-10 camera, I would shoot — I would basically have 30, maybe 25, film holders with 50 sheets of film. If I had a really good day of shooting, I could shoot all 50 sheets of film, which would mean that day in a Motel 6 or even the back of my van or a Motel 6 bathroom, I would be on the floor of the bathroom for an hour unloading the day's shoot and reloading. And I'd have to do that every day. And also, the film was expensive, very, very expensive, and the contact printing, all that. Getting the work processed took forever; to get it back from the labs could take — you go on a shoot; you wouldn't get work back after two or three months.

Now I go on a trip and with a digital card about — you know, an inch by inch in size - I can make 350 pictures all in, like, 10 minutes. I don't have to load and unload the film at night or even [load — RM] into the camera. I can come home from a trip, and I can drop the card into my computer. And in half an hour, all the images are downloaded, and I can be making final eight-by-10-foot prints within 24 hours of it — of coming back from a trip. It often saves me two, three, four months of time in terms of turnaround. It allows you to shoot many more images; I don't have to sit on the floor killing my back every single night. I literally did that every single night of just mindless, you know, loading and unloading film. Not to mention the expense. I mean, the initial expense of digital is quite hefty, but I figure, in about a year and a half, the money I've saved on film — and now there's no cost. So it's been a couple of years where I've not spent a penny on — you know, on tens of thousands of dollars' worth of film and processing that I do every year.

MR. HOELSCHER: I must say, this reminds me a little bit of 19th-century photographers making the shift from wet plate to dry plate. It took photographers quite awhile to decide to make that. I mean, people were using large-view cameras.

MR. MISRACH: Yes. Yes, I think there was a lot of resistance; it's amazing. And people were, you know, "Film is superior," this, that, and the other. But it's just like anything; it's just new. And the flexibility, the ease, the lack of expense that it's going to afford everybody, that will just —

Well, actually, the reception's a lot like color was. The color — there was so much resistance. I mean, no serious photographer would shoot color. They just thought it wasn't art — you know, all those silly arguments. Same thing with digital. It's just another tool. It's another, actually, language — expanding the photographic language.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, yes.

One of the things I forgot to ask you about when we were talking about publishing and galleries and commissions — this is not exactly a commission, but I do need to hear about the 2004 photograph of Pyramid Lake [near Reno, NV] at night [*Pyramid Lake (at night)*] that was chosen for the iPad wallpaper.

MR. MISRACH: Right, right.

MR. HOELSCHER: It might be the most viewed photograph in the world at this moment.

MR. MISRACH: I would argue that it has. When I took psychology at Berkeley, the professor was talking about the concept of “selective inattention.” And he lectured about this psychological process where you can be looking at things and not see them, but they’re right in your point of view. And he described this whole process psychologically for an hour. At the end of the lecture, he held his lecture notes up in front of his chin and asked the audience if anybody knew what color his tie was. People had been looking at him for an hour while he was lecturing, and nobody could answer what color his tie was because they just hadn’t noticed.

MR. HOELSCHER: [Laughs.]

MR. MISRACH: And that’s true with the iPad photograph, which is to say that it’s been everywhere. I’ve been keeping sort of an album of pictures that were done with - you know, *Saturday Night Live*, *Stephen Colbert [The Colbert Report]*, *[The Daily Show with] Jon Stewart*, every country when I was traveling in Europe, it was in the train stations, on billboards, everywhere. And yet, nobody really sees the photograph. They see the iPad, right, which was a sort of interesting phenomenon. So I found that really, really interesting.

So, yes, it’s been widely, widely seen. And basically, that was one of my last camping trips where — I actually hurt my back on that trip — but where I was sleeping in the back of my van. I made that photograph in 2004 on Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation in Nevada. That was a long night exposure, where the mountains were lit by the moon. And so you’d see the star trails going through it.

And earlier this year, Apple contacted me and said they were interested in licensing that photograph for not the iPad but just for possible use with other computers in the future.

Are we good?

MR. HOELSCHER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MISRACH: And so I said, “Fine,” and we negotiated some things, and it just sort of left. Actually, at a certain point, they dropped it and said, “Oh, we’re not going to be able to use it.” And then the night of my opening in New York for a show that I was doing, I got contacted by them. They actually wanted to renew that and, you know, revisit that and do it. And so we negotiated a price and — anyway, the short of it is they ended up using it.

MR. HOELSCHER: I’d like to hear a little bit about fieldwork. You mentioned that was one of the last camping trips, and you have alluded to this a little bit over the last couple of hours. But I’d like to hear about when you first started going into the field. You’re not a studio photographer; you photograph actual places and landscapes. And can you just tell me a little bit about your experiences doing this, how it came about? Do you study places and landscapes that you’re going to photograph before you go? Or do you do that afterwards? Do you make multiple trips? So just a little bit about your work as a photographer in the field.

MR. MISRACH: Right, right. I would say since the ‘60s with my first Volkswagen bus — and it was a fairly popular tradition already at that point in time for photographers; they’d go and camp in California, or the western United States. There’s a lot of places you can go that are not fenced off. You go to the middle or eastern part of the United States; you’ll find that most places are fenced off. You can’t get off on little dirt roads that go to nowhere. But in the western U.S., it’s really easy, and it’s fantastic; talk about constructing a place.

And so what I would do is basically — for, I would say, most of my career at this point — I would throw my camera and tripod in the van, lenses, a couple ice chests full of unexposed film and film holders, another ice chest of dry food, like, oh, fruits and vegetables and trail mix, things like that, just stuff where I didn’t have — I didn’t bother cooking. I didn’t bring anything to cook with; I just took things that — so I could just work.

And I would just take off for two to three weeks at a time and wander in the van and just find places and just camp wherever. I would avoid parks, national parks and stuff like that. I went to more remote places and would go down dirt roads and then see where I woke up. So there weren’t, necessarily, preordained destinations. I would be kind of chasing the light. Depending what time of year, if it was too hot, I would go to colder climates, higher elevations of desert; and if it was too cold, I would go to warmer, further south. And I would just kind of chase the light.

And normally, my day would be spent getting up before dawn and then just looking and sometimes driving for hours on end looking for pictures. Or sometimes I’d find things to work with where I was. But basically, I’d work from dawn to dusk. There were no cell phones back then, so — I mean, until recently.

So there wasn’t that kind of distraction. I would take a suitcase full of books, and I would be able to spend hours and hours reading. There were no phones anywhere, no payphones. I was really remote and by myself. And it was lot of exploring and thinking a lot. And that was it.

MR. HOELSCHER: Were you usually on your own? Did you have company?

MR. MISRACH: I'd say 95 percent I was on my own. Sometimes my wife would go with me, but after I took her to the dead animal pit and the bombing range, she lost the romance.

MR. HOELSCHER: [Laughs.] Yes, I understand.

MR. MISRACH: That did it — that did in the traveling together until I worked in Hawaii; then she came with me on all those trips.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, yes.

And do you still do the same sort of fieldwork? Do you still go out for a couple of weeks at a time on your own in the VW bus?

MR. MISRACH: Yeah — no. I think the last trip was in 2004. I worked in New Orleans; I actually stayed in the hospital. No, the first time I took my van, but then after that I got a four by four.

Let's take a break for a second.

[Audio Break.]

What were we — remind me what we were saying and —

MR. HOELSCHER: Oh, just more recent trips. The last was in 2004 when you went out on your own and camped. But you've been photographing places and landscapes since then, so how do you do it now?

MR. MISRACH: Yeah, I pretty much have stopped the camping. And so I'd either motel it or — you know, that kind of thing. It's too hard for my back and things like that. I'm getting a little older, and it's little harder to do that.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, okay.

[END DISC 2.]

This is Steve Hoelscher interviewing Richard Misrach at his studio in Emeryville, California, on August 12, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number three.

The first question I want to ask maybe requires a bit of explanation on my part. And I just want to tell you a little bit about the experience that I had yesterday with the book that you lent me, your forthcoming book, *Destroy This Memory* [New York: Aperture, 2010], of your immediate post-Katrina photographs. You recall, you lent it to me, and I walked several blocks up to — I forget the intersection — to catch the F bus back to Berkeley.

And I just missed the bus, so I had about a half-hour wait. And I sat down at the bus stop, and I thought, well, this is a good time to look through these photographs. And I opened the book, and I was looking through them. And the strangest thing happened: one by one, people who were either walking by or who were also waiting for the bus sat down, joined me, looked over my shoulder, looked at the photographs, commented on them. And it was the strangest experience to be the only white guy at this bus stop where, all told, probably a dozen people stopped by. And at any one given time, half a dozen people were joining me, looking at these photographs.

MR. MISRACH: Wow.

MR. HOELSCHER: And it really — it clearly piqued their curiosity. Some knew right away it was Katrina. Some thought, "What was that, Haiti?" And then I explained what it was, and they recognized it. And I was really taken by their incredible interest in this.

And so my first question is, what do you think about maybe your photographs in general, or maybe this series in particular might have elicited such a widespread interest?

[Side conversation about placement of microphone.]

MR. MISRACH: Well, that's a really difficult question for *me* to answer because I'm so close to the work, and I don't know what other people respond to. I think in this case, obviously, the subject matter of Katrina is clearly just something that you kind of have to have no emotional base whatsoever not to respond to. It's such a graphic and historic and national tragedy.

But again, I don't know if they're responding to the fact that it was Katrina or — I wasn't there, so I don't know if

they're responding to the pictures or the content. And I assume they were responding to the content.

MR. HOELSCHER: They were responding to the content, certainly. And we were looking at photographs of trees with cars on the top of them. And they knew what Katrina was all about, and they all had a very strong reaction to that.

But it was also the photographs, these beautifully produced, very large photographs that just drew each of these people directly into it. And they had different views. Some people would say, "Well, we may disagree about this, but here's what I think about Katrina." So it seemed as though it was a combination.

MR. MISRACH: Right. And again, without being there, I don't know for sure, but, one, I think that body of work was shot, actually, with a four-megapixel pocket camera. So that's interesting that they responded to the quality. I think the quality is beautiful, but it's not a much larger camera than an iPhone.

So compared to what I normally shoot, an eight by 10 — I had shot an eight by 10 when I was working in New Orleans. I made about a thousand eight-by-10 negatives. But I took a four-megapixel pocket camera — a [Sony Elf -RM], actually — along with me just to record street names that were down, like as a note-taker. It wasn't a serious camera, by any means, because it's supposed to have been really low quality, I mean just crude, but just for information.

And I made about 2,000 photographs with that, and it turns out that a lot of those photographs are very interesting to me because they are artless and in a way just sort of raw, unself-conscious, simple pictures. The light was beautiful, and there are certain things I pay attention to. And the reproductions are very good for a four-megapixel, but it's not — we're not talking, you know, a big, fancy camera.

So I'm not quite sure about that part of it. And the book, I think, is interesting because it's very different, but I don't know if the people that you met would even know that. All the photographs in the book are people's words, either the residents or the rescue workers, with spray paint; the writing on homes, cars, trees with spray paint.

And if somebody just saw a few pictures, they may not know that. But every single picture in the book is that way. There is no text; there's no essay; there's no title page; there's no page numbers, no titles — nothing, no titles — because I wanted to let people's words speak for themselves. I wanted my hand to be as low-key as possible.

So again, it's sort of interesting. If this was my eight-by-10 work of something more, I don't know, a different kind of body of work, it would be really interesting to try to imagine what they're responding to. But I can only imagine that they were just responding to this high-profile American tragedy. It generates a lot of that.

MR. HOELSCHER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Maybe just to stick with this project a little bit more, tell me about your decision to include words on the buildings, as opposed to including written text. That was definitely striking. It was the first thing — one of the first things that I noticed, is the highly textual nature of this.

And people that I was looking at the book with enjoyed reading the different captions: some were funny, some were tragic, almost all of them were angry. The words were very powerful. So maybe we could talk for a few moments about the relationship between words and images — generally — but maybe to begin that, the way in which words worked in this project.

MR. MISRACH: Right. Well, like I said, I think I made about 3,000 photographs altogether from this series. And what I did is, for this series, I isolated maybe about 200 photographs of people's messages and then edited it from that, and made the book and the exhibition. And what I had liked about that is, I was able to edit the pictures to create a narrative.

Even though it's not my words, the editing allows for a narrative to begin from beginning to end in the book. And the way the work is installed in museums when it's exhibited is in a very precise order, because you start with despair, like, "Help, help," or "Fuck, fuck," people writing on their homes, you could just feel this fear and despair.

And then you see that evolve slowly to defiance, where people say, you know, "I have a gun," "I will kill," or "Stay away," or "I've got a claw hammer," whatever it's going to be. So then there's this sort of defense and defiance sort of thing.

And then you move through to, actually, dead pets, which is a sort of a sub-theme, and then dead people. And then there's relief and hope as people are found, and people realize people have survived. And then there's anger at politicians; there's anger at the insurance companies; there's this sort of gallows humor, which I thought was really amazing. I saw it over and over again there.

And then the whole book ends on kind of an existential note, which is people writing, you know, “What now?” “Broken dreams,” “Destroy this memory,” which was — actually in the exhibition, that’s the final picture in the sequence.

So the book actually follows a narrative, all kinds of a range of emotions and responses. That was something that was really important, constructing a narrative in their words. Each one is almost like little haikus, because they’re so efficient with language. I mean, talk about economy of words — they’re so efficient with the words that some of them just are very, very powerful as a perfect use of words to communicate. So I thought they were kind of like found poems. That’s another thing I wanted to get across.

And another thing, which I thought was an amazing discovery for me, was that even the way people spray-painted or wrote with crayons or chalk or whatever they could find to write with — some people wrote in script; some people wrote in bold, strong letters. Some scratched out words.

It was almost very painterly the way people expressed these things — without trying to. Again, I think painters would be envious at the painterly expression going on here, because it was without any consciousness; it was just totally unself-conscious. I thought that that was a really, really powerful — and those are things that for me are really important — sort of underbelly of the actual disaster.

The last thing about that is, there has been a lot of work published on Katrina, lots of films and lots of media attention. And when I went to edit this work, it seemed like this body of work in particular, with people’s own words telling the story — I felt like, I haven’t really seen that, that it felt like a different chapter in the Katrina history. So I thought that was important to tell, too.

Isolating it like that - I’ve got thousands of pictures of cars on roofs, boats on roofs, cars up — cars upside down and homes upside down and all this stuff that we’ve seen over and over again. But to have this inclusion of just people’s words, I felt it gives it a different sort of perspective.

MR. HOELSCHER: I like what you said about the book being constructed as a narrative. You do get this clear sense of movement through time; time passes. You’re essentially telling a story.

And I’m wondering more generally, can photographs alone construct a narrative, or are words necessary, either in the photographs themselves or in captions, titles, or text that accompanies the photograph?

MR. MISRACH: That’s an interesting question, because over the years, I’ve gone back and forth. There’s times where I felt like you’ve got to anchor the meaning of a photograph with a title, for example, or extended essay or extended caption, something like that. And I’ve done that on certain works.

In other cases, I decided that, you know what, it arbitrarily pins down the meaning of the photograph. And what happens if you release the image to work? Then you actually can get many, many different meanings. And a lot of times, I control meaning by putting it in a book.

Destroy This Memory is a really good example. The sequence of images in the book creates a very clear narrative. It’s not even the words themselves; it’s actually the one image following the next. So sequence is as important as actually words for creating context, and where the work is shown and what kind of context there.

And a group show, if it’s about national disasters, that tells you one thing. In another show, it could be just the American landscape, and then you get a different meaning.

So there’s a lot of things that can move the meaning of photography around. And I’ve actually come to like that, in a way, because I also find that my own work changes for me over time. I did a series of Oakland Fire pictures in 1991. That was similar to Katrina in that it was a disaster, a tragedy where people lost their lives. There’s a lot of immediate tension.

And I didn’t want to be part of that. I felt like my work at that time, if it came out then, it would just be almost like photojournalism, some daily information that would be processed and thrown away quickly.

So I sat back on that. I kept it back, and I’m actually going to show that work for the first time on the 20-year anniversary — I waited — which is next year. And with Katrina, originally, I planned to wait for 20 years. But I’ve realized I was going to be getting very old by that point — [they laugh] — and I maybe didn’t have that luxury. So I decided to release it on the five-year anniversary.

But the delayed release is a really interesting thing. I thought about other tragedies of American history, like the Civil War. And I thought about all those Civil War photographs that were taken at the time, which I find incredibly precious. It defines a period of American history that nothing else does as well.

But I realized, when the pictures were taken, they were probably used at that moment —

the context they were used as, in a sense, like journalism or reporting, where people, brothers and fathers, were actually dying. Things were actually happening to people.

I imagine it was received very differently than it is today. And so I realized that I wanted the time. And I consider both Katrina and Oakland Fire to be kind of like Civil War photographs — at the time that they're made, they're more like journalism. But step them back 20 years or more, and they become documentaries. They shift from being sort of a daily record to a historical document. I like that, and that's different.

But the point is, is it's not even whether there's titles with it or anything like that. It's just time. Just the passage of time changes the meaning of photographs. And I think over time, the way meaning changes is really, really quite interesting and maybe more wise than, in the heat of the moment, trying to pin down the meaning.

And I've done that with some series, like my Dead Animal Pit series. I originally had a very specific extended caption that went with the work, which was very political. And I took a lot of what I call political liberties, like poetic liberties — I took political liberties with the work, because I was trying to make a point.

And over time, I felt like the text just isn't really that important anymore. It isn't that relevant. The pictures are. The pictures speak volumes. And I think it's better that people look at it and try to make sense of it themselves, because they're very hard. Are you familiar with that work?

MR. HOELSCHER: Oh, yes.

MR. MISRACH: Yes. So that work is really, really — in fact, I've got one of the big ones behind it. That's going to be in the Milan Triennial this October, in Italy. And you know, at eight by 10 feet, the Dead Animal Pits are really — it becomes like a history painting. It's a whole other read.

And so I do think that words tie things down, and maybe it can be problematic.

MR. HOELSCHER: Another area that I wanted to explore is the question of landscape. And maybe even before we get to landscape, you just showed me a copy of your first book, *Telegraph 3 A.M.*, which shows on the cover a landscape of Telegraph Avenue at 3 a.m. But looking through the book, I'm struck mostly by the portraits, the portraiture of the people who lived on Telegraph Avenue at that time.

And so your first book, although it has a landscape cover, is largely portraiture. But I've not seen as much portraiture in [your] work since then. So I'd like to hear, before we talk about landscape, your thoughts about portraiture, and if this is a shift that you've consciously made, or if it, essentially, naturally happened.

MR. MISRACH: Right, right. When I did the book, I was pretty young; I was 22 when I started the work, and I think the book came out when I was, like, 24. I was really young, but one of the things that I came away [with] after doing the book is, I kind of felt that photography, whatever the good intentions of the photographer are, actually can exploit people, and that 99 percent of portraiture actually is a very exploitive relationship from the photographer to the subject. And there —

MR. HOELSCHER: Could you explain what you mean by that?

MR. MISRACH: That there's a power relationship where the photographer controls the meaning and basically uses people for the photographer's own symbolic purposes. Now, sometimes it's to try to fix the world. When I was young, that's what I wanted to do. I figured *Telegraph 3 A.M.* would show people what was going on in the street, and then people would be outraged and then fix the world, you know. And then I realized it just became a coffee table book. And I was like, "Whoa, that's not what I expected."

But I was also aware, by going through that whole thing and making that, I realized the relationship with my sitter. And even though I was trying to do justice by them, it was all my power. I was using them for my own — again, my intentions were good, but I was still using them.

And I looked at Diane Arbus photographs at the time, Bruce Davidson, Richard Avedon portraits — whatever it is, all of them fell in that same category for me. So it wasn't that I didn't admire the work and love other people's work and think — you know Diane Arbus is just amazing to me. To this day, she holds up really, really well. But there's still no question in my mind that she exploited the hell out of those people. She used them for her own agenda. Her case is a really good example. A lot of times, she took ordinary people and really made embarrassing pictures of them.

Now, that was sort of once removed, so that it became sort of art and sort of a larger social statement, but those people were used in the process. And I had a lot of trouble with that.

So making that book made me aware that I was complicit in that. And so at that point, I just walked away from it. And I went directly into the desert after that and photographed in the landscape at night. I took things that I

learned in photographing at night on the street into the desert and started my whole Night series and focusing more just on landscape and sort of breaking out of that.

In later series, occasionally, there will be a person. But you won't see any portraits in my work. You might see people in the landscape, like *White Man Contemplating Pyramid* [Egypt, 1989 —91] or even in the On the Beach series — people that are maybe recognizable with a magnifying glass, very far away. I think that distance helps the problem, in terms of representing other people. But when you have a real likeness of somebody, I think it's a problem.

Now, I guess if you're collaborating with someone, there are exceptions to the rule. I can't think of any just offhand, but I know there are, where there's this real sense of collaboration or maybe self-portraiture, or, you know, there's certain kinds of places. But I just think by nature — by definition - photographic portraits have that problem.

That's why you won't see many people in my photographs from then on.

MR. HOELSCHER: Let's talk about landscape, then.

MR. MISRACH: Sure.

MR. HOELSCHER: It appears as a recurring theme, in the beginning, as you said, with the Night Desert landscapes. I guess I'd like to know, how do you define landscape?

MR. MISRACH: I don't know — that's too big of a question.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: Can you break it down a little bit more?

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes. Well, could a city be a landscape? Does it need to be in a natural space? Does it need to be outdoors? Can it be indoors? To what extent are the presence of people important or unimportant for a space to be a landscape?

MR. MISRACH: Yes. I think any and all of those could be landscapes; it really depends on kind of the picture. In the traditional sense, I guess landscape is considered more like a pristine, natural landscape. I don't really even think about it anymore. It's such an empty signifier.

I guess that's it. It's just such a big word that anything can be part of it. Like, I don't call myself a landscape photographer. I have lots of landscapes in my work, but it's like saying something's beautiful; it doesn't tell you enough about what it is. So I don't have a definition, I guess. To be really honest, I just don't know how to answer that.

MR. HOELSCHER: Well, I guess, maybe a way to try to get the same thing, you noted in a lecture, I believe in Miami [FL], that something happened at 9/11 that changed how you view landscape?

MR. MISRACH: Well, in that specific project — you know, landscape with a lower-case L. After 9/11, when I was working in Hawaii, I'd been there before, but at that period I saw people on the beaches in Hawaii. And instead of seeing them, you know, recreating, having fun, swimming and sunbathing and stuff, I saw them as being more vulnerable in the world. Instead of seeing them sunning and surfing and swimming, I saw them on the edge of Earth by this vast, sublime sea, which potentially could just destroy them.

So that was just a state of mind that temporarily kicked in. And that's what led to that whole series of taking people that were just having fun on the beach and looking at them from this other, sort of abstract sense.

MR. HOELSCHER: Okay. If you don't think of yourself as a landscape photographer, would you think of yourself as an environmental photographer?

MR. MISRACH: No.

MR. HOELSCHER: Okay. [They laugh.] I just wanted to note, I read that you were called the Environmental Messenger of the Year [2001] by the Environmental Grantmakers Association, specifically for your work documenting Cancer Alley in Louisiana. So my question was, do you think of yourself as an environmental photographer or, as they put it, an environmental messenger?

MR. MISRACH: No. I think some of my work — Bravo 20 certainly could be. It's very much about the environment. It touches on real, important environmental issues, the military and the environment. And I'm certainly interested in the environment, like everybody else, but — my Cancer Alley series [initial series commissioned by

the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, in 1998, for their Picturing the South exhibition series, and exhibited as "Cancer Alley" in 2000] definitely, and I'm working on that right now; I'm actually revisiting that body of work. But a lot of my work doesn't fit into that category. So I think that categories are just a problem for me.

MR. HOELSCHER: Just generally the category, though?

MR. MISRACH: Yeah, environmental photographer, landscape or portrait photographer — would you consider Diane Arbus a portrait photographer? I mean, if you want to be really literal-minded, but I would never — calling her that reduces down what she does to some really, really one-dimensional sort of thing.

People are in her photographs. Landscapes are in my photographs; environmental issues are in a lot of my work; political issues are in some of my work; social issues are in some of my work, economic issues — the Cancer Alley series, I think, is very much about economics. It gets a little too reductive.

MR. HOELSCHER: Mm-hm, mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MISRACH: Yeah.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes. No, I can see what you're saying. Well, tell me about the desert. I want to talk about a specific landscape, a specific place. You said that you first went to the desert to photograph after *Telegraph 3 A.M.* was published.

MR. MISRACH: Right.

MR. HOELSCHER: Was that the first time that you'd ever been to a desert in any sustained way?

MR. MISRACH: Right. When I was a kid, I lived in Los Angeles, so when the family would go skiing or something like that, we'd pass through the desert, and it was always a very, very, you know, scary, austere environment. And it was after *Telegraph 3 A.M.* that I — I mean, I think I might have gone to, like, Death Valley, a national park before *Telegraph 3 A.M.*, but it was only after that that I became interested in "desert-ness," what that was about.

Part of it was because I always thought about the United States as being — you think of the United States' identity being around, like, New York and certain big cities and things like that, and I realized a whole part of the American West was an important part of the identity. At that time nobody was really photographing the American desert. It's a huge part of the west. Arizona, California, New Mexico, Nevada, even parts of Texas and Utah. This is a major part of the real estate of the United States. The myth of the west, that's very much a part of our identity.

So I became interested in both its visual components — which were this severe, harsh thing, which were difficult to photograph — and also its iconic, its symbolic level as part of our identity. And, again, I don't want to go off on a tangent too much, but when we were briefly talking about landscape yesterday I was thinking that it's like [Jean] Baudrillard's idea of the precession of simulacra.

It's this idea — I'm not sure if this would be exactly the way he'd apply it — but I do think that when we think of America or this country or the west of America, but our American identity, it is a series of images, and many of them photographic, going from the Civil War to early photographs of the west, like by [Carleton E.] Watkins and [Timothy] O'Sullivan and [Eadweard] Muybridge and people like that — first pictures of Yosemite [National Park, CA] and Yellowstone [National Park, WY] and all that kind of stuff.

And so it seemed like there was a big gap in the last 30 years of photographing the American desert — or 40 years, actually, when I first started. So I was really interested in that, both in what the place was, what I saw as the reality of the place, and then these myths that had been created by a long history of photography — a precession of photographs, basically.

MR. HOELSCHER: Why do you think the desert has not been photographed to the same extent that other western landscapes have been?

MR. MISRACH: That's a good question. I don't know. A few photographers, like, say, Edward Weston or Ansel Adams, photographed the national parks, beautiful photographs of Death Valley [National Park, CA and NV]. I actually avoided the national parks for that reason. I didn't want to — not because of *them*, but because I thought these are the places that people knew. I wanted to see the deserts where people lived, you know? Like the Coachella Valleys [CA] and the border towns, and Salton Sea [CA] and Palm Desert [CA] and Barstow [CA], and ugly — what people consider ugly, which I found really beautiful — and these big expanses of space and light.

They're also difficult to photograph. It's just not very forgiving. There's not a lot of *there* there, you know? Photographing the streets of New York City, it's just loaded with content, or even a series like on Katrina. There's

a lot of pictures to be made there, if that makes sense. But the desert just — it's very simple, and it's hard to make interesting pictures of that.

MR. HOELSCHER: Has your relationship with the desert changed as you've gotten to know it?

MR. MISRACH: Oh, yeah. In the beginning it was very foreboding and very awkward and scary. And then, just like anything, you become familiar with it. And I came to love it.

MR. HOELSCHER: Mm-hm, mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MISRACH: Yes, really, for me, it's very magical. I think that's part of it too. Just being there is really, really pleasurable [sic] for me. You get stars like you just can't see in the city, and that certain heat, dry heat, that's just really powerful. I really enjoy that sensual aspect of being in the desert.

MR. HOELSCHER: Is the desert the place that you most enjoy photographing, in terms of the pleasure that you get as a photographer?

MR. MISRACH: Not really, because there's a lot of waiting for the light to get right. Whereas when I work in Hawaii, the light's always changing; it's always exciting. Or even when I was working in New Orleans in October, November, December of 2005, the light was amazing.

In the desert I have to go for three weeks at a time, because eventually the light will get good. But I can go for a week where I really can't take any pictures because there's just no clouds, and it's just harsh, and it makes it really hard to work. Once you have weather, atmosphere, it really allows the light to do its magic on a landscape.

Light is very, very important in all my work. Even with my Katrina pictures, the four-megapixel ones, even though it's on a really cheap, little tiny, nothing camera, it's always about the light. And I think that's what makes the pictures hold up — those pictures.

MR. HOELSCHER: This is related to the question of landscape, but it's maybe a little bit different, and it might be something that you'd like to think about a little bit, and that is the idea of a sense of place. When we view your photographs, it strikes me that one of the things that happens is we almost can feel what it's like to be there, whether it's a Nevada bomb site or a Louisiana bayou. And I'm curious at this sense of place. Is this something that you're actually trying to cultivate? Do you intentionally try to bring people and have them experience the place as you are through your photographs?

MR. MISRACH: I'm not sure how to answer that. I think — no. I don't think it's about, like, sharing a place so much. Although I do think of photography as being sort of a form of pointing, like where you say, "Okay, look at that"; you know, "look at that"; "look at that." So in that sense it's a simulation of what I saw. But I look at the pictures as "pictures," I guess, as opposed to a window to get into the place.

Now, that's part of the illusion, because obviously I go to great lengths to make it as realistic as possible. But obviously, the scale is different; there's a house there that's three by four feet, while the house in real life obviously is very different. So I'm screwing with people — I mean, it's just what you do as a photographer. So everything is really simulated to be in a picture.

It's not so much about experience of place as the thinking about what's going on. So if I understand your question correctly, it's not like sharing a place and showing people what it's like to be there at a certain place; it's really about creating a visual construct that makes you think about the issues involved. And that may be a very nuanced difference.

But I know that, in terms of when I edit the pictures, that's what I get excited about. I've got a million pictures that look like a place and, you know, would probably do that job equally well. Most of the rejects would do that job just as well as a good picture. So the question is: why does one stand out at the end, and the other 99 out of a hundred, you feel like you failed? It's really about the effectiveness of the picture. But it's not to transport you to the place, I don't think.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes. You also just said that it makes you think of the issues involved. That's what a good picture of a place does. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

MR. MISRACH: Well, again, every picture might have a different set of problems or issues that it's trying to address. But —

MR. HOELSCHER: Well, that strikes me as a huge difference between your work and the work of, let's call him a landscape photographer, Ansel Adams. Maybe what Adams is trying to do, perhaps, is the issue of preserving this pristine landscape. But typically, it seems to me, it's about appreciation of this landscape, whereas what

you're doing, it seems to me, is help people be aware of the issues involved, as you just said.

MR. MISRACH: Yes.

MR. HOELSCHER: Would that be a fair characterization of the difference between your work and the more traditional landscape work of Ansel Adams or Eliot Porter?

MR. MISRACH: Yeah. At the risk of really oversimplifying, when I was a really young photographer, one of the things that affected me the most by Ansel Adams was a letter that I read — I was just reading a newspaper; I don't know where I was, maybe Sacramento or in the desert, somewhere — and I read a letter to the editor. He wrote about saving certain pristine wilderness. And that was sort of my first environmental wake-up call.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: So even though Ansel is thought of as making beautiful pictures of gorgeous landscapes, in fact, he was an early environmentalist. And once I was aware of that, I actually looked at his pictures differently. So even though his pictures don't have that content in them — and I think he's been a foil that people have been pushing against for years. So the New Topographics and a lot of landscape photography that has followed has been a response to the romantic, beautiful nature of the Eliot Porters and the Ansel Adams.

But I wouldn't want to go as far as to say that they're more interested in, say, environmental issues than Adams. They may have pictured things that have to do with the environmental issues or social issues. I mean, a lot of Robert Adams's work maybe isn't necessarily — some of it is, but some of it's not about environmental issues; it might be about social issues or, you know, other kinds of issues.

But I think of my work — there's a whole range. And I think there's a certain amount of romantic beauty in a lot of my pictures that are very akin to Adams in that sense. It's just they bring to it, you know, color, a lot of times more explicit content; I mean, if it's a bombing range or dead animal pit, I can't imagine Adams photographing that, especially not in color. [They laugh.]

So there's a dialogue that I have with that history of that work, too, because I come out of that tradition. Obviously, I'm still using a large format like he did, and quality was really important, and attention to light. And I do think that a lot of my landscapes, even some of the Bravo 20, whether it's a bombing range or — not the dead animals so much — but other landscapes I did that are challenged, like even the Cancer Alley, which is the Mississippi River corridor, there's still beauty of the landscape that comes through.

And so you have this tension, this sort of collision between the beauty of the natural world and the ugliness of what we've done to it. So it's not even like there's not beauty in the photographs of the landscape in those kinds of pictures. But there is a dialogue. And I think, again, without oversimplifying a message, because I think that would be a really big mistake, you can see that sort of pitting, you know, our stewardship against the beauty of what exists there.

But again, reducing things down to messages like that, then suddenly you become an environmental photographer or a landscape photographer, and I just think it's a little one-dimensional, because I think there's a lot of environmental journalism, for example, that's very specific about doing that. And I think the work that I'm doing is trying to sort of step back and look at these as sort of tableaux about this moment in American history that need to be thought of in the bigger picture as opposed to just, you know, here's a record of what bad things we're doing.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: It's sort of like the Gettysburg — the Civil War photographs. I guess they're war photographs; you could certainly call them war photographs. But I think of them as profound cultural, social, historical artifacts that deal with the way people looked and the way people dressed back then, what uniforms looked like. They're not just specifically about the South and the North fighting, if that makes any sense.

I see the landscapes, these pictures, as more like looking at our moment — this historical moment in time, and I think there's things that people will look at, hopefully, 20 or 30 years from now, that people today don't even see, because we're just attending to the fact that, in that case Katrina, there's a house that's upside down [Mistrach points to a picture on the wall -RM]. And to me that could be a Richard Serra sculpture, the way that house happens to be pressing very perfectly against that fence and that pole. There's a certain sort of balance — or a reference to *The Wizard of Oz*, that, you know, takes it again out of a strictly environmental statement or Katrina statement and puts it in the realm of literature and other art to think about other issues.

I could see an artist today, a sculptor today, building that house, putting it in a gallery, you know, just configuring that and calling it a piece of art. So the fact that he can even think about it that way is what's

important to me, as well as the fact that this was, in fact, a documented detail from Katrina. And again, I may be getting off your message.

But I was thinking also, if you think about Marina Abramovic's — it's not installation work — it's performances. Do you know her work? She has a show at MoMA right now. She's, you know, a very, very famous performance artist, has been doing it for years. She has a big retrospective. It's like the first time MoMA has put a performance artist in — given them main play like that, so it's sort of a historical moment for them.

And a number of the works that she did, she did for film or video. In other words, she created these performance artworks, but did them so that they could be videoed and documented — and a lot of conceptual artists, the same thing. A lot of art requires photography, whether it's photographic film or stills, to exist. And that's something that's been invisible for all these years. But I think it's so fascinating that everything is mediated by photography. And to recognize that as part of the communication, I think, is really important.

So all of my references, you know, to, say, Richard Serra or *Wizard of Oz*, or things like that — these are things that most people aren't going to even look at when they look at that picture. But it's in the photographs. They're being mediated by the photographic medium, which is why I think the medium is still so powerful. We don't all quite understand just how much that affects everything we think about and do.

Sorry, I got off on a rant.

MR. HOELSCHER: No, no, that's great. I want to follow up on that and ask explicitly, is political and social commentary necessary in your work? Another way to put it is: is political and social commentary part of all of your work? It clearly is with *Bravo 20*.

MR. MISRACH: Yes, I think different projects — from my earliest *Desert Cantos* project, there's now 30, actually, I think that are pretty much complete or in advanced stages. And each Canto, *Desert Canto* — I probably should explain what those are.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, please.

MR. MISRACH: I think that'd be helpful. So I began these in 1979, when I started using the eight by 10. And I didn't name it for a few years, because I was just starting to work on it. But it eventually came together.

And the idea is, the Canto was taking on — based on Ezra Pound's 50-year-long poem, the *Cantos*. And what I liked about that — and also sort of the dictionary definition of the canto is that it's a subsection of a long poem. So, like a chapter in a novel, you know, you have these chapters, but all the chapters build to one end.

And the *Cantos* — each Canto is a separate series, but that's tied together to create an epic project. So at this point, I have 30 of them. And each one can stand alone to a degree, but then put together, they become stronger and become this long, stronger superstructure.

Some of the *Desert Cantos*, some of the first ones, were more metaphorical in nature, so like *The Event*, *The Terrain*, *The Fires* and *The Flood*, which was the first book [*Desert Cantos*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1987], are almost biblical. They almost talk about the four elements.

When I got to *Bravo 20*, that was the fifth Canto, that was more explicitly political. So there's a couple — *Violent Legacies* [: *Three Cantos*. New York: Aperture, 1992], *Bravo 20*[: *The Bombing of the American West*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990], some of the other ones are more — very specifically intended as political documents.

Others, like *Pictures of Paintings* [New York: PowerHouse Books, 2002] or my Sky series [*The Sky Book*. Santa Fe, NM: Arena Editions, 2000; contains *The Clouds*, Canto XII, n.d.; *Heavenly Bodies*, Canto XXI, 1995- ; and *Night Clouds*, Canto XXII, 1994-], are more theoretical, of conceptual nature. I'm coming at it from a different strategy. So not only do the different *Cantos* have different content at times, but they also have different photographic strategies. And then together, they sort of work on each other in, I find, a really exciting way.

So to answer your question, yes, I'd say *Bravo 20* is maybe one of the more — most - explicit political documents, in a sense. The *Cancer Alley* series I'm doing now, which is not a Canto - that's not from the desert; that's just a completely independent project. But that's about the petrochemical companies in the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and that, basically, they're poisoning the American landscape there. It's a major exposé on that, but using, you know, quote, unquote, fine art photography to look at that.

So those are more explicitly political. But again, I get really uncomfortable to be called a political photographer or anything because it gets one-dimensional. And I've thought about that a lot, because it comes up a lot. People really love to do that.

But in our lives, you know, we have different sides. We might be involved in environmental movements, but we also have personal lives and we have families. And we enjoy entertainment. Maybe we read novels. You don't just characterize one's life by one aspect of one's life.

And I think that's true with the work. There's a whole range of interests that I have, from the political to just the more aesthetically pleasurable aspects of photography.

MR. HOELSCHER: That leads very nicely into a question that I have that I'm actually going to cite the curator Anne [Wilkes] Tucker, who has described your work as one that engages with what she called in the title of her essay "The Problem of Beauty" [in *Crimes and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach*. Boston: Little, Brown, in association with Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1996]. And this is the question that she asks, and I guess this is my question for you.

MR. MISRACH: Sure.

MR. HOELSCHER: "How can one combine formal beauty with subjects and issues considered too grave to associate with pleasure?"

MR. MISRACH: Right, right.

MR. HOELSCHER: It's a big question.

MR. MISRACH: I've been asked that a lot, and basically, the question has been [put] a little more crudely: Have I been aestheticizing the Holocaust with the pictures? I think there's a long tradition in art, whether it's [Pablo] Picasso's *Guernica* or in literature — I mean, if you think about [William] Shakespeare, he talks about tragedy in the most beautiful language.

And I think language is — and I've said this before — a conveyer of difficult ideas. The beauty, actually, is a really powerful — and also humor and beauty, both, are really important ways that human beings can share things and deal with things.

Even in the Katrina pictures, I thought that the humor that the people showed — you know, "Elvis has left the house," or "The Wicked Witch," or "Yard sale, 50 percent off" —

MR. HOELSCHER: [Laughs.] Yes.

MR. MISRACH: — wow. I mean, to me, that was a perfect use of humor to sort of get at the tragedy in a different way. So I don't think it cheapens it at all. And the same thing with beauty. Again, the language of Shakespeare, I think, is a really — I mean, who conveys tragedy better? And in the history of art, I think certain things have been beautifully presented and yet really complicated themes.

So, some of my favorite pictures of my own are, like, the Dead Animal Pit photographs, I think they're extraordinarily beautiful, and I can look at them for years. I mean, at first they were hard to look at just because of the content, but then you get by that. And I think the beauty of the delivery system in a way allows reviewing and further contemplation.

So that's been my argument, but that's, again, a question for the viewer.

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes. Why — to put yourself in the shoes of the critics — why is this something the critics get hung up on?

MR. MISRACH: That I don't know. I mean, I can understand it. I think [Theodor] Adorno said that after the Holocaust - not just the metaphorical, the real Holocaust - he said, "How can people write poetry after that, after that kind of horror?"

I think there can be the concern that by making something beautiful, it prettifies something or trivializes something. And I'm basically making these pictures for the long haul. I want people, 20, 30, 50 years from now, to look at these things and want to view them and come away understanding — looking at things, considering things that were going on in this period - because I think they'll be very different, or maybe not, I don't know.

So I don't know. What do you think? Has that been something that you've looked at them, and these pictures are just too pretty; they hit the wrong note or something?

MR. HOELSCHER: No, I am totally on your page on this. I think the idea of making them exquisitely rendered makes them more interesting and draws the viewer in. I believe it makes people wonder, "Why *are* we bombing the American West?" when one looks at this photograph. And furthermore, I was just talking about your photographs with some friends last night on Telegraph Avenue. And I presented the argument, and their

response was, "Well, that's bullshit." [Laughs.]

So in other —

MR. MISRACH: That was — yeah, right.

MR. HOELSCHER: So they very much agree with what you said.

MR. MISRACH: Yeah. I would be curious for somebody to sort of make the argument — nobody's ever gone into detail trying to critically look at the work and sort of say, "Okay, here's the problem with the work, because they're so beautiful, and this is why."

I would love for somebody to actually — but nobody's ever done that. It's mostly just been that sort of knee-jerk reaction. Like, I remember the first time it came up, I was in London lecturing on the Bravo 20 and on that red crater. And they thought it was just too pretty of a symbol, that red, bloody-looking wound in the earth, too convenient, you know.

And I can kind of get what they're saying, but I've gone back and looked at that photograph, and it still speaks volumes to me, both on the literal reading of what you're looking at, which is a hole in the earth and bombs all around and a destroyed convoy, and then this sort of bloody, red, oozing wound that's, you know, shifted heavily over to the metaphorical or symbolic.

And it's consistent with what I'm getting across. The light's beautiful, and it's sort of a stunning picture to look at. But the question is, why is that a problem? And that's something, again, because I'm making the pictures, I'm too close.

So there may be a good argument, I would love to hear it.

MR. HOELSCHER: It would be interesting to pursue it further with some of the critics who have made that charge. It's not something I personally understand either. And I think your response of [the comparison to] literature is entirely appropriate. What makes it acceptable for literature to be beautiful, where photography is possibly suspect?

MR. MISRACH: Yes, or music. John Adams, a contemporary composer, lives here in Berkeley. He wrote a symphony based on 9/11 that was performed by the New York Philharmonic on the first-year anniversary. And it's very beautiful and disturbing. It's a dirge. It's mourning, you know. But it's music — they're making beauty out of that. Isn't that exactly — isn't it these beautiful things that stick with us over time and reverberate in our consciousness?

When somebody's making art, or trying to make art, I think that's what they're trying to do: get something that transcends the moment. I've made this statement before, too, so it's probably a little redundant, but a lot of these pictures that I did of, say, Bravo 20 could have been black-and-white photographs put on the front page of a newspaper with a journalistic story and then would have been looked at and thrown away the next day.

By making these things, making them monumental, it monumentalizes the moment — not the good of making things bad, you know, of doing horrific things to the world, but of, in a sense, creating a permanent reminder, as opposed to a throwaway, which is what journalism can be considered, for better or for worse. But I think it functions that way in the world.

When you make it — turn something like that into art - it declares its permanence, or desire to be permanent, at least. And actually, the Bravo, especially with what we're doing in Afghanistan now and we've done in Iraq, a lot of those pictures look prescient. At the time I made them, that was not a big issue for people. None of this stuff was an issue.

And what we've been doing to the landscapes all over the world since then, we continue to do it. We were doing it on the home front, but it's also a practice that goes on with military practice globally with all major powers, and then also in terms of the kinds of war we do.

It's not irrelevant. It hasn't lost its relevance. It's still pushing on it. So anyway, that's the hope.

MR. HOELSCHER: Should we take a minute or two break?

MR. MISRACH: Sure, absolutely. Do you want to —

[Audio Break.]

MR. HOELSCHER: Okay, let's look at a couple of these photographs here.

MR. MISRACH: So what these are is, I've got an idea. I don't even know if it's going to manifest in anything, but this is what I'm working on now.

I've decided to go back through my work over the last, you know, 30 years and re-edit it and look at works that — well, the working title of the book is *Post-Apocalypse Now*, and these are the pictures — from eight-by-10 negatives — that I'm going to blow up to eight by 10 feet. And I want to do sort of an oversized book. So these prints actually are the prints I'm making upstairs with my little printer, but it's about the size that I want the book to be. So it's not a huge book, but it's quite a bit larger than most books. So this is actually the image size for the book.

MR. HOELSCHER: And what size is this?

MR. MISRACH: This is probably 12 and a half by 15 inches, something like that. This is my working process, where I'm printing these out quickly now to see, before I start doing the final editing. So these are just rough pictures. And this includes not only new pictures nobody's ever seen from Katrina or the Oakland Fire, but also pictures from The Flood, Bravo 20, The Fires. So I'm just beginning to print and edit these. But I'll show you some.

Some have been seen before; many have not. So this is actually from Bravo 20. I don't know — I don't know if that's been in the book.

MR. HOELSCHER: I think it is.

MR. MISRACH: It might be. This one probably won't make it; the text isn't sharp, but I thought it would be one of those sort of — I just printed this yesterday, but it's one of those "messages of the world" kind of thing.

MR. HOELSCHER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MISRACH: It's actually a truck that's just been scrawled all over. Bravo 20 again.

MR. HOELSCHER: Oh, this is in the book, for sure.

MR. MISRACH: Yes, that's a really well done one, from the early '80s, garbage as far as the eye can see. This is from the Oakland fire about 20 years ago. It's a melted bicycle. This is from Katrina, so it's sort of an orange bush in a post-apocalyptic landscape. This is a small print of the big diving board, which is behind there.

MR. HOELSCHER: Oh, that was — yes.

MR. MISRACH: So this is a diving board from Katrina. Actually, this is the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This is a playground —

[Side conversation.]

That's a car on the roof. This is a house that's on one corner. These are two sets of cars that are piggybacked — Katrina. [Mr. Hoelscher laughs.] This is the burning palm trees from the Fire series. Another car in the house — I haven't edited - these are just — this is the *Desert Fire 249*. This is actually Mississippi Gulf Coast debris.

MR. HOELSCHER: Was there any event that triggered this, or is this —

MR. MISRACH: No, this is Katrina.

MR. HOELSCHER: Oh, yes, this is Katrina.

MR. MISRACH: This was the ground zero of Katrina. This is actually where it hit on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. That's — [inaudible] — also Katrina. That's another Fire. That's a bomb from Bravo 20, convoy — so just very early stages — another Fire picture, *Smoke on the Road*. And they're not final prints yet; they're just sort of testing.

MR. HOELSCHER: Are they working prints for you to — do you decide the layout and —

MR. MISRACH: Yes, I work in prints — yes, start with these, then I color-correct, then I edit down and then — you know, and there's probably another 60 I'll print like this, and then I'll sit down and do a really rigorous editing and do a book.

MR. HOELSCHER: And will you have text with the book?

MR. MISRACH: I don't know yet. Probably not. I don't know.

[Audio Break.]

MR. HOELSCHER: Let's see, I wanted to talk just a little bit more about the geography. Your work is incredibly geographical, whether you call it landscape photography or not. The sense of place definitely emerges. And I'm wondering if you've had any formal connections with geography. The geography department here at Berkeley at the time that you were studying was renowned, and there are some very good geographers working in Berkeley today. Have you had interaction with geographers or geographical publishers?

MR. MISRACH: [... -RM] Richard Walker, who's a friend, he wrote the text for the *Golden Gate* [New York: Aperture, 2005; 2012] book. So that was great, but that's really the only time.

MR. HOELSCHER: I note that you published *Bravo 20* with George Thompson [Project Editor].

MR. MISRACH: Yes.

MR. HOELSCHER: You know, George Thompson is a — maybe not a professional geographer — he publishes many geographical works.

MR. MISRACH: Right, right.

MR. HOELSCHER: What was it like to work with him?

MR. MISRACH: Oh, he was great. That was really good. I didn't really know him as a geographer. I'm trying to remember how that started, but he decided to start this publishing company. Actually I should go back a little bit. Reyner Banham wrote for one of my early books [*Desert Cantos*], and J. B. Jackson — was that his name?

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes.

MR. MISRACH: Great geographer — he was somebody that we were considering at the time writing, but we ended up going with Banham. So, yes, so just touched on that. And Thompson was great. But basically, he was sort of the editor on the book.

MR. HOELSCHER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Have you had much collaborative efforts?

MR. MISRACH: No. Oh, in general?

MR. HOELSCHER: Yes, just in general.

MR. MISRACH: No. Right now I'm doing my first major collaboration, and it's with a landscape architecture team. They're called SCAPE. We were working on the Cancer Alley project together. It's with a woman named Kate Orff and her teams. They're based out of New York. She worked with Rem Koolhaas for a while and teaches at Columbia [University, New York City] now. In fact, SCAPE just had an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York for a commission they did on Manhattan. So these guys are great —

[Audio Break.]

— and we've been working on this now for about eight months. We're going to be meeting next week again in New Orleans, and then in 2012 we're doing a book together [*Petrochemical America*. New York: Aperture, 2012] and probably an exhibition ["Revisiting the South: Richard Misrach's Cancer Alley." High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, June 2 — October 7, 2012, and travelling] on Cancer Alley series.

MR. HOELSHER: And so you'll be doing, obviously, the photography of Cancer Alley, and what will the firm be doing?

MR. MISRACH: Oh, okay. So, yes, it's really an interesting project. I did the primary photographs of Cancer Alley, which is the Mississippi River corridor — industrial corridor — and dealing with the petrochemical plants that have been poisoning it. I did those pictures in 1998, and then this year we're actually revisiting those; I'm making a few more pictures. But basically, Kate's team is taking a number of key pictures that I made and unpacking them. Basically using my photographs as starting points for mapping everything from cancer rates, how cancer affects our body, what kind of petrochemical products are in our homes. It's a major, major exposé on all of these issues of that industry in this country.

But she's starting with the photographs. So it's going to be two books. Book one will be my photographs with several extended captions to sort of flesh out the narrative about what's going on on the ground. And then book two — and they'll be slip-cased together — book two will be a series of what she calls sightlines, which are a series of maps and graphs that are just beautifully rendered that go deep into all the repercussions of this practice in the United States and looking back in history and projecting into the future with, hopefully, some

directions of what we call “change scenarios,” where if we take different kinds of directions as a society, we actually can improve things.

So for example, it’s probably easier to understand — what she did with MoMA is they commissioned her to look at Manhattan in the future, when climate change has caused water tables to rise, and the island of Manhattan would be inundated with water. She was one of five landscape groups that were commissioned to look at that problem in the future. So she looked back in time; she goes back in history, looks at the way the land was used, and then extrapolates and looks forward in time and tries to come up with solutions.

So she discovered that oysters used to be abundant in Manhattan and that she could actually propose creating these oyster reefs, that she actually created techniques to reproduce them, like one to a thousand, very, very quickly. The oyster reefs would keep the water table down, would clean up water — because oysters are really good at cleaning up toxins out of the water, would service that purpose — and then would be edible as well, once they became clean. So she had photographs actually — where today you have hot dog stands, in the old days they used to have oyster stands.

MR. HOELSHER: [Laughs.] Mm-hm, mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MISRACH: Yes. So they were quite abundant. You don’t see those today. So anyways, quite a brilliant approach. And it’s just beautifully done and just really, really smart. So they’re working with me on the Cancer Alley. So that’s the only collaboration that I’ve ever done.

MR. HOELSHER: Mm-hm, mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Let’s see. One of my last questions is just probably the broadest — the largest scale.

MR. MISRACH: Why? [They laugh.]

MR. HOELSHER: Why save it for the end? I’d just like you to discuss a little bit about your views and the importance of photography as a means of expression.

MR. MISRACH: The problem with that, again, is just that, to me, it’s just a way of life. I don’t think I can even narrow it down to a means of expression. I grew up into a period where [the] photographic medium, that sort of visual component of the world, just really resonated early on. I mean, I’ve been doing it for about 40 years.

And it’s one of those X factors. You don’t know why — for me it’s just, there’s nothing I enjoy doing more, the process of making pictures, of sort of mediating the real world — the visual world. I think it’s incredibly meaningful on so many levels. It’s become everything from a diary to me — the way I know my life, for better and for worse - Susan Sontag would have a ball with that — but for better or for worse, I know my life through the pictures that I’ve made. And I really remember things via — it’s my memory. The photographs I make are my memory.

Of course, there’s other memories in there. There’s other photographs, like snapshots of family. But my own pictures, each one is like a performance, an act in life, you know. I think for me it takes on meaning because of how much I enjoy the process, how much it’s intellectually stimulating, how much it’s emotionally gratifying, how it feels affecting in the world. You can feel the kind of impact that photographs can have on people. And books — I love making books as much as I love making the photographs. It’s very much part of the artistic process.

It’s not like choosing, you know, being a doctor or a lawyer exactly. It’s very metaphysical, the whole thing. I’m never not thinking about it. It’s not nuts-and-bolts thinking about, you know, what does that mean, and why is that so important? It does seem to me that photographs — and it can be also in film or video, too, or TV, whatever — but the photographic image has become such a cultural artifact, and yet it’s like breathing or light or something. It’s so important as just part of existence at this point for me.

So, yes, and then I think there’s something about the creative rush in working on those problems. I think the reason photography’s remained vital in spite of all the sort of issues that are coming up from being sort of a B art to, I think, now I would call it a B-plus or A-minus art — it’s working its way to becoming considered an A art — but I think the vitality of the medium is the reason for that. It’s just such a mysterious, amazing, complex form of language that we’ve come to utilize. It would be like living and not speaking for me at this point. I try not to talk too much; it’s really hard. [They laugh.]

MR. HOELSHER: Are there specific limitations of the medium?

MR. MISRACH: Oh, there’s tons of limitations. I mean, you can’t smell them; you can’t hear them; they are really hard to pin down, which is both its strength and its weakness. They look like they’re concrete facts that you should be able to just read and understand. But what’s so amazing about them is there isn’t a single one that

[couldn't] be read as its — almost as its opposite. You could actually just re-spin things, if you will, or reinterpret, rethink things, and they change meaning. They're very much like that.

MR. HOELSHER: Okay. Is there anything else that you might like to add? We've covered many topics. And I want to give you a chance, if there's anything else on your mind.

MR. MISRACH: No. I feel like we covered a lot. Of course, I probably can go on forever. But I have to follow your lead on that.

MR. HOELSHER: Okay. What I'm going to do is turn this off now. But I'll leave it on the table. If anything occurs to us, we can turn it back on.

MR. MISRACH: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]