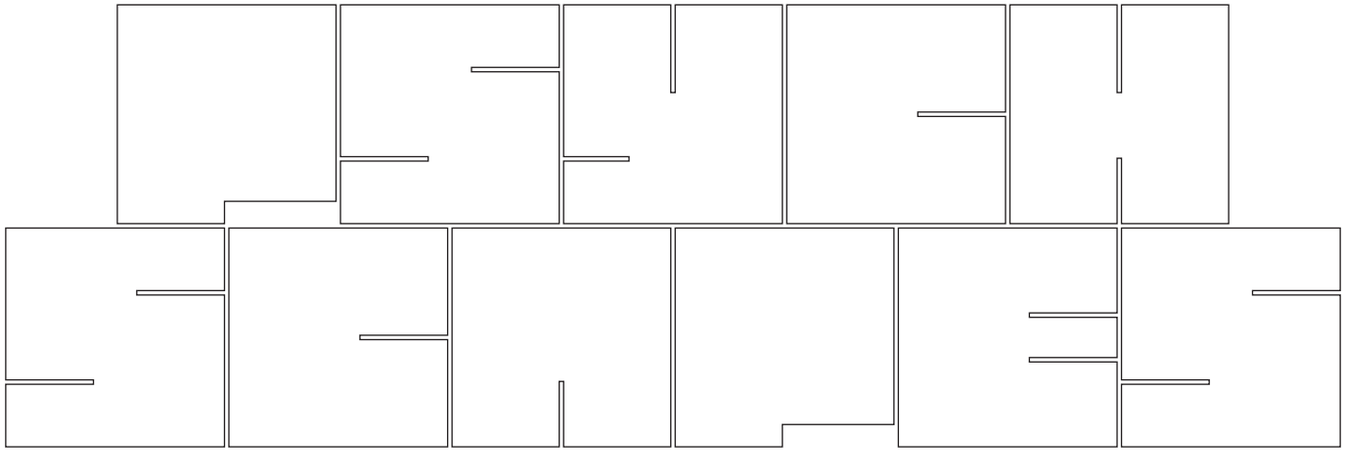


TERRI LOEWENTHAL

CULT

aimee friberg exhibitions

Curatorial Statement
Aimee Friberg
February 2018

Terri Loewenthal investigates the sublime expanse of land and sky romanticized in the still-potent mythology of Utopian California with her new series *Psychscapes*. Using the California landscape, she continues her exploration of the medium of photography, specifically drawing attention to the relationship between illusion and materiality. These single-exposure, in-camera compositions utilize optics developed by the artist, to compress space instead of time. The results are complex evocative environments of saturated colors and a disorienting configuration of foreground and background, that reference the history of romantic landscapes while peering into the psychology of perception.

California has long been a subject for landscape photographers such as Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Eadweard Muybridge, Edward Weston and countless others. The granite domes, pine forests, expansive desert hills and gushing streams have drawn creatives and intellectuals with an appreciation for wild spaces and a penchant for the mysterious unknown. Prior to the more obvious cultural explosion of the 1960s, bohemian Californians were cultivating an alternative lifestyle in reverence of Nature's wildness, that would come to influence later ecological movements and the culture at large.

Immersion in nature, and an appreciation for the free spirit, have consistently been a catalyst in Terri Loewenthal's work. Prior to this series, the artist was known for her serendipitous images portraying her own community of contemporary bohemians in intimate spaces and in the landscape. *Psychscapes* brings the artist full circle to where her photography practice began— inhabiting wild spaces. In this current era of disappearing and threatened lands, Loewenthal ventures into the vastness of California's parks and summits, examining the captivating hold of this terrain and its complex ideology.

Standing in front of the works, one is brought to the sensation of beholding a vista in all its glory. Her capture of daylight's theater of light against a

geometry of mountain vista alludes to a hallucinogenic or kaleidoscopic viewing of landscape. Through this technique, Loewenthal showcases an elemental spirit of California. Beyond celebrating the simple beauty of the state's landscape, the artist pushes the imagery into deeper realms of an apparition, positing an aesthetic notion of Arcadia. The perceived idealism of these surreal environments nods to both aura photography and the distorted experience of psychedelia, long-associated with California. The images reside at the nexus of fantasy and a heightened sense of familiarity, as viewers are met with distorted perspectives of the landscapes. The artist shares these images with the intent to inspire deeper awareness and appreciation for the preservation of the untamed.

Psychscape 18 (Banner Ridge, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
42 x 56 inches

Filtering Utopia: Terri Loewenthal's Magical Realism

Monica Westin

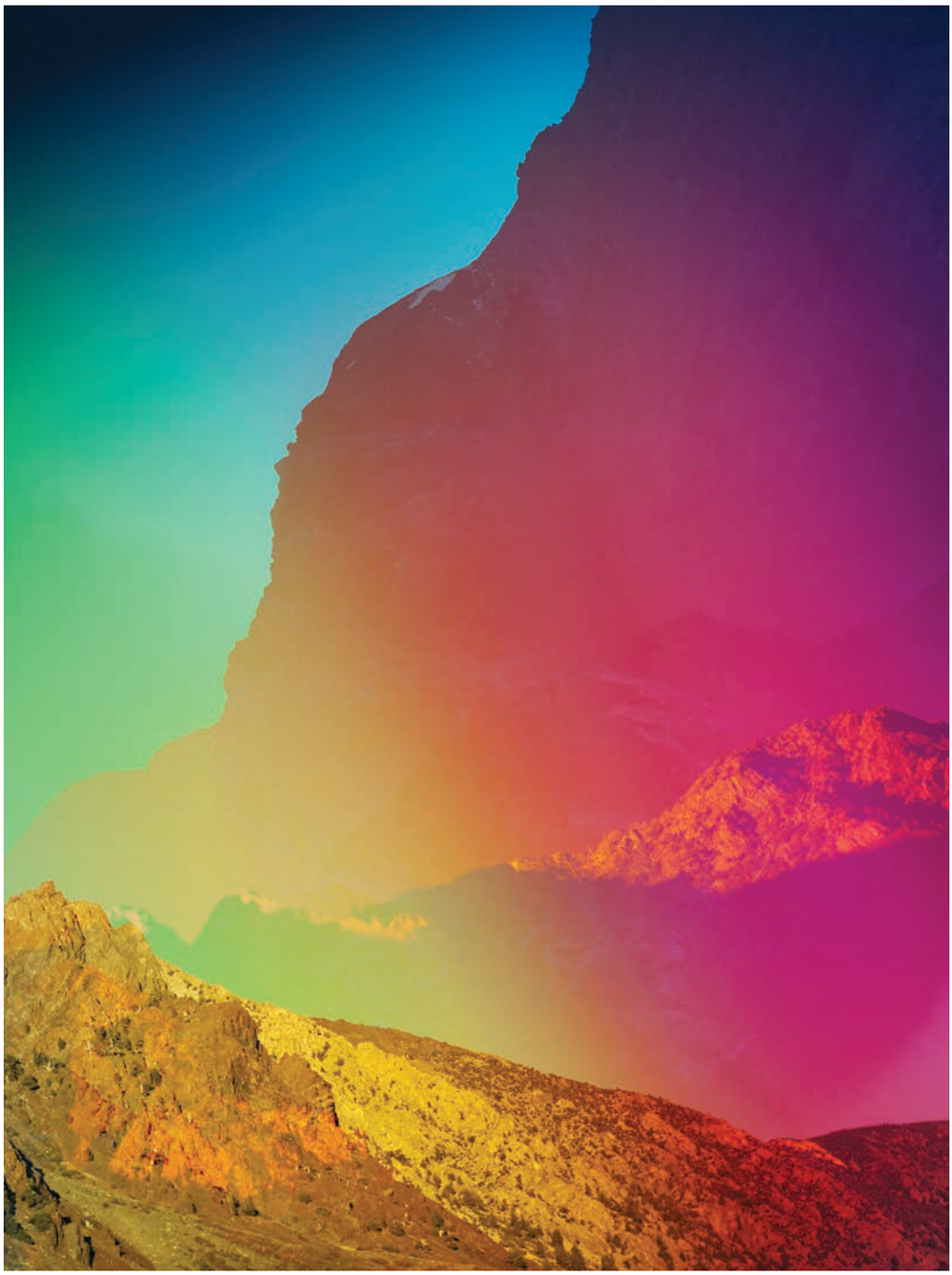
Terri Loewenthal's post-photography landscapes of California combine formal elements of a Romantic sublime with a distinct psychedelic aesthetic. The photographs in *Psychscapes* deploy psychedelic art's visual language of dissolving shapes, ever-morphing collages of subjects, and bright, contrasting colors that—when given enough space and volume in the mind—create optical drones enabling an expansion of consciousness. Loewenthal works within and out of the Bay Area's history both as a place where many have traveled to try to widen their minds beyond provincial ideas about our place in things, and as a hub for art designed to get us out of our own heads.

California encompasses a set of ideas and myths about possibility that come with deeply problematic erasures, and it is also a real site of concrete histories. Terri Loewenthal captures both these registers of California with *Psychscape's* single-exposure photographs that collapse and condense images of the land, and then filter them through impossible colors to create candy-colored dreamscapes. Yet her subjects remain legible, recognizably real places, her final prints an index of where she has stood and pointed. Still, Loewenthal is interested in using her cameras as more than an apparatus of mere literalism. *Psychscapes* operates as a visual experiment in magical realism as defined by critic Franz Roh, for whom the genre is similar to but different than surrealism. Surrealism operates in the realm of fantasy, Roh argues, whereas magical realism, like hard science fiction, is interested in real materialities and their effects on real bodies, whether in a naturalistic or phantasmagorical realm. By evoking Surrealistic scenes (which also utilized layers of images to create uncanny, constructed scenes) but rejecting Surrealism's commitment to pure reverie, Loewenthal's experiments in perceiving California are tied to its real contingencies as a place.

A dominant timbre of our current relationship to California is increasingly one of nostalgia about different Californias, now in the past (if they ever

existed), that were themselves always oriented towards future possibility. Present California often feeds off this hope and vision while also feeling parasitical to it. Loewenthal concretizes this wistful paradox about time into visual tableaus that are both recognizable and unattainable as physical possibilities. Between the tangerine flora and pink water of her landscapes, the air must feel different inside our lungs. The trees might dissolve away at our touch, if we could reach them at all. The sites Loewenthal creates through her layered and filtered process are literally utopias in that they are non-places. They are sensual and dazzling, places where we would like to live, but she flattens and compresses them until there is nowhere for an actual human figure to inhabit. Spatially we cannot locate ourselves as subjects. The closest we can come is to imagine ourselves airborne, somehow hovering around these real trees, these mountains we remember from car windows. Loewenthal disorients. She literally floats a promise of utopia while complicating our image of it as a site of possibility.

Yet here we are. In America, our myths go, we travel west to get free, to move towards our idea of the future, and to make that future real. We go west to find it, whatever it is, and once we reach west, there's nowhere else to go (and of course we never really arrive); so we have to expand up and out into the landscape of our minds, and develop in different dimensions and directions. Loewenthal suggests that we ought to linger where we have found ourselves when we get to the end of the road, looking at it through new eyes. When her shifted colors of the natural world wash over us, she both defamiliarizes the landscapes we think we know and suggests that new states of consciousness are needed to meet the intersections between our imaginations, the real places where we live, and the utopias we yearn for.



Psychscape 41 (Lundy Canyon, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 30 inches

Trip the Light Fantastic
Chris Jennings

"Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet."

—Paul Cézanne

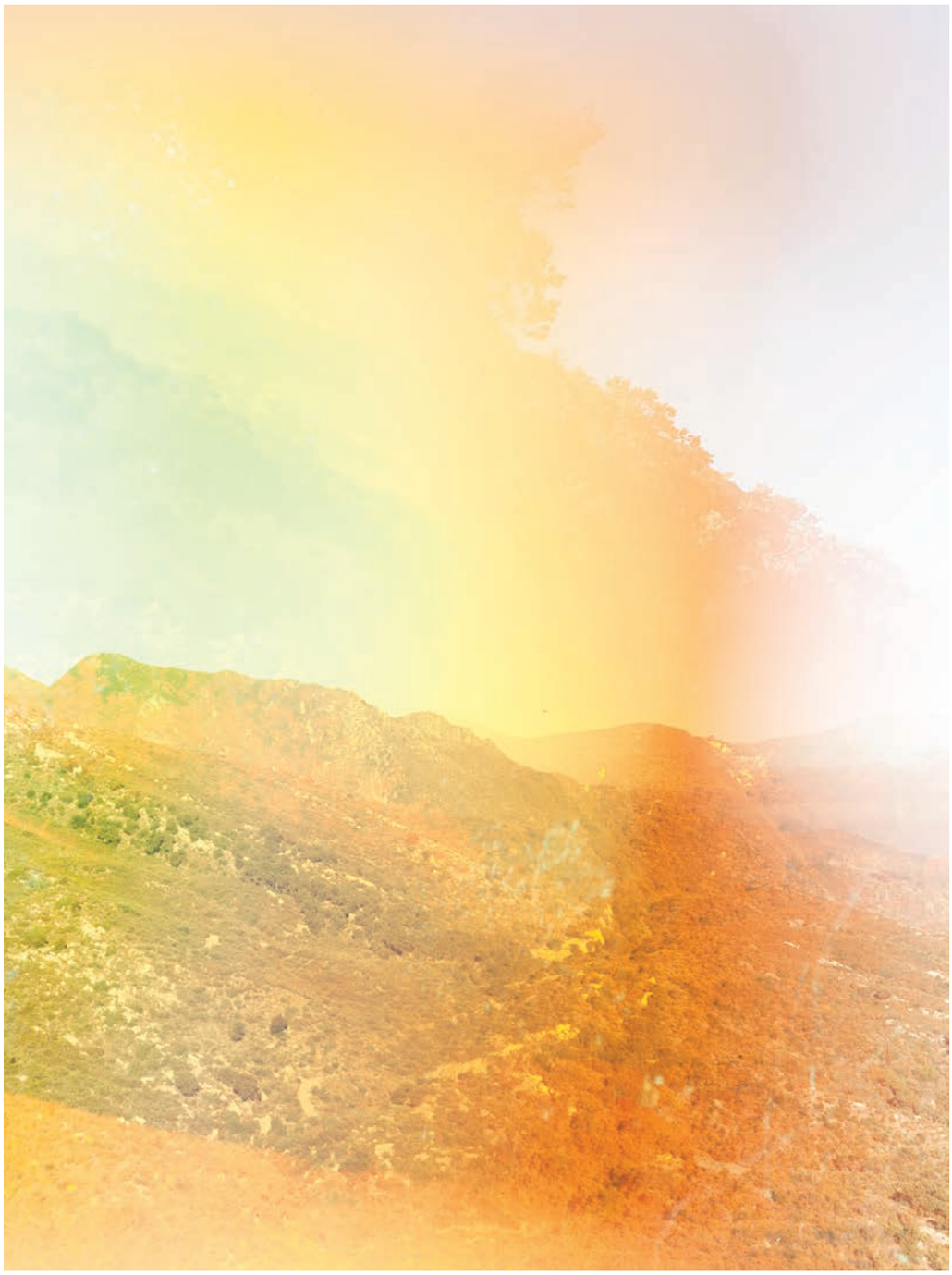
From the San Francisco Bay, you have to drive east to get to the West. Heading in that direction, the Sierra Nevada rises in a long, gentle slope from the prairie-flat Central Valley up to the glacier-scrubbed peaks. On the far side, the mountains take an abrupt plunge from their snowy heights down into the dry trough of the Owens Valley. Viewed from the East, the state of California seems walled off from the rest of the continent by a high, granite rampart. The mountains intercept most of the clouds that blow in from the coast, leaving the eastern side of the Sierra an arid expanse of saltbush, sage, and uninterrupted views. The changing moods of afternoon light sliding up and down the rim-rock are often the liveliest part of the petrified landscape. This lunar world—a country of stone, space, and light—forms the backdrop of Terri Loewenthal's *Pyschscapes*.

The desolate grandeur of the high desert plays tricks on our habits of perception, which have been calibrated for greener, busier scenery. Vistas are immense and hard to gauge. Heat rises in tremulous, light-bending waves. The feeling of gazing into this landscape—the sense of confronting something changeless and absolute—echoes the promise of the psychedelic or visionary experience: the idea that the right sort of disorientation can reorient you. It is no mystery why this sort of place has always been a natural domain of revelation and transcendence, from Moses to Zabriskie Point. Even the dazzling clarity of the light suggests inner illumination.

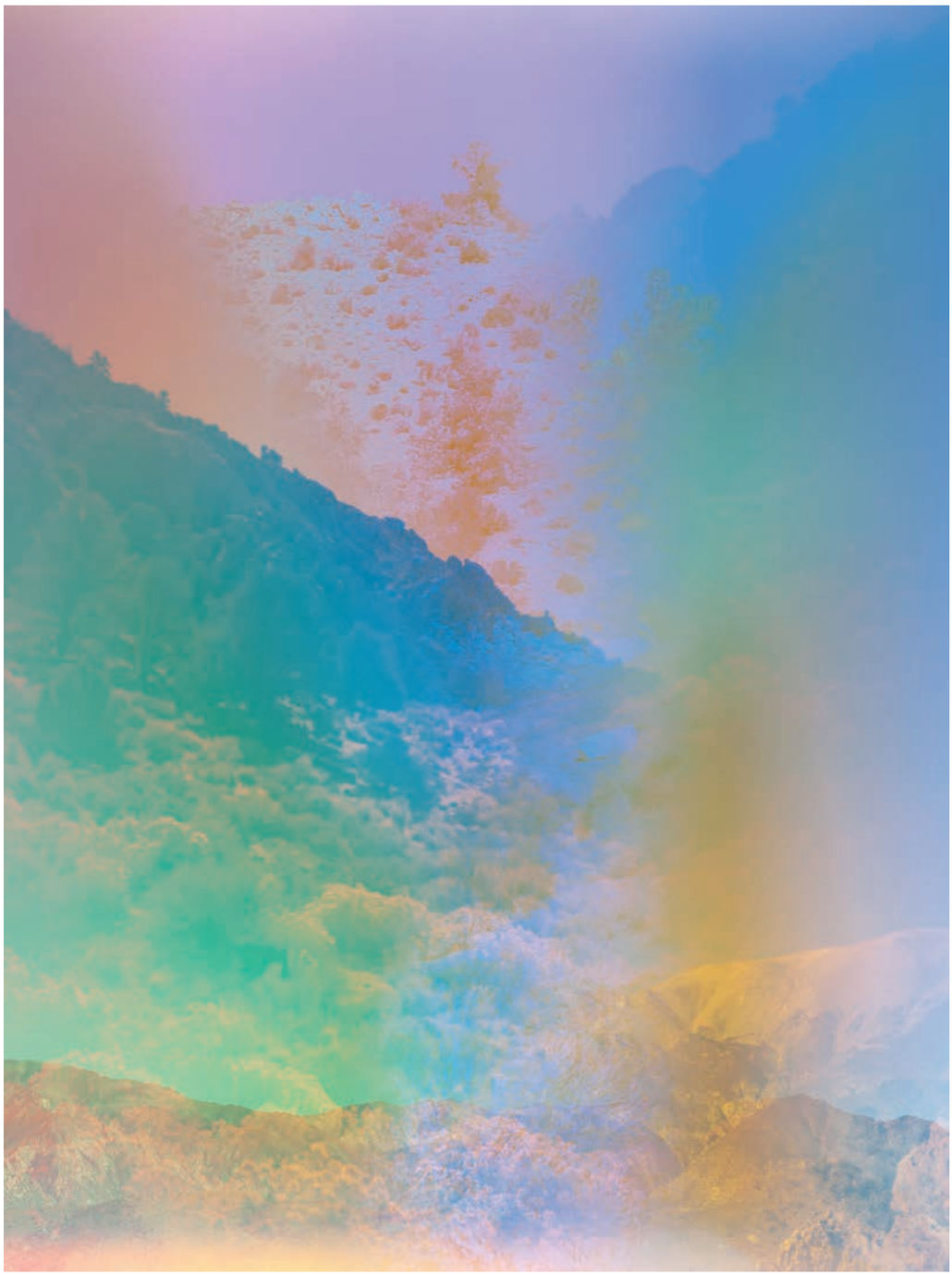
Loewenthal's layered, dreamlike images of the high desert are flooded with a lysergic alpenglow—the work of analog gadgetry deployed on the spot and in the moment. The most iconic images of the West attempt to capture the unbound, inhuman magnitude of land and sky. By contrast, these photographs suggest the strange instability of looking out across such immensity. They seem to breathe a bit, rising and collapsing between two and three dimensions, blurring the line between landscape photography and holographic dispatches from some

elevated consciousness. The rainbow-hazed world they depict hangs somewhere between the dusty scree fields into which the artist has schlepped her Mamiya, and the private terrain where we ascend to our own higher latitudes.

Loewenthal says that she wanted to make images of how it feels to see. Indeed, these are not photographs of the West; they are photographs of being in the West. You can almost feel the warmth stored up in the rocks. Not a trace of human life is visible, but the efflorescence of color swelling in from all sides attests to the presence of a mind being gently blown, somewhere just outside the frame.



Psychscape 26 (Rock Garden, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 30 inches



Psychscape 48 (Lookout Mountain, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 30 inches

Just Deserts
Max Goldberg

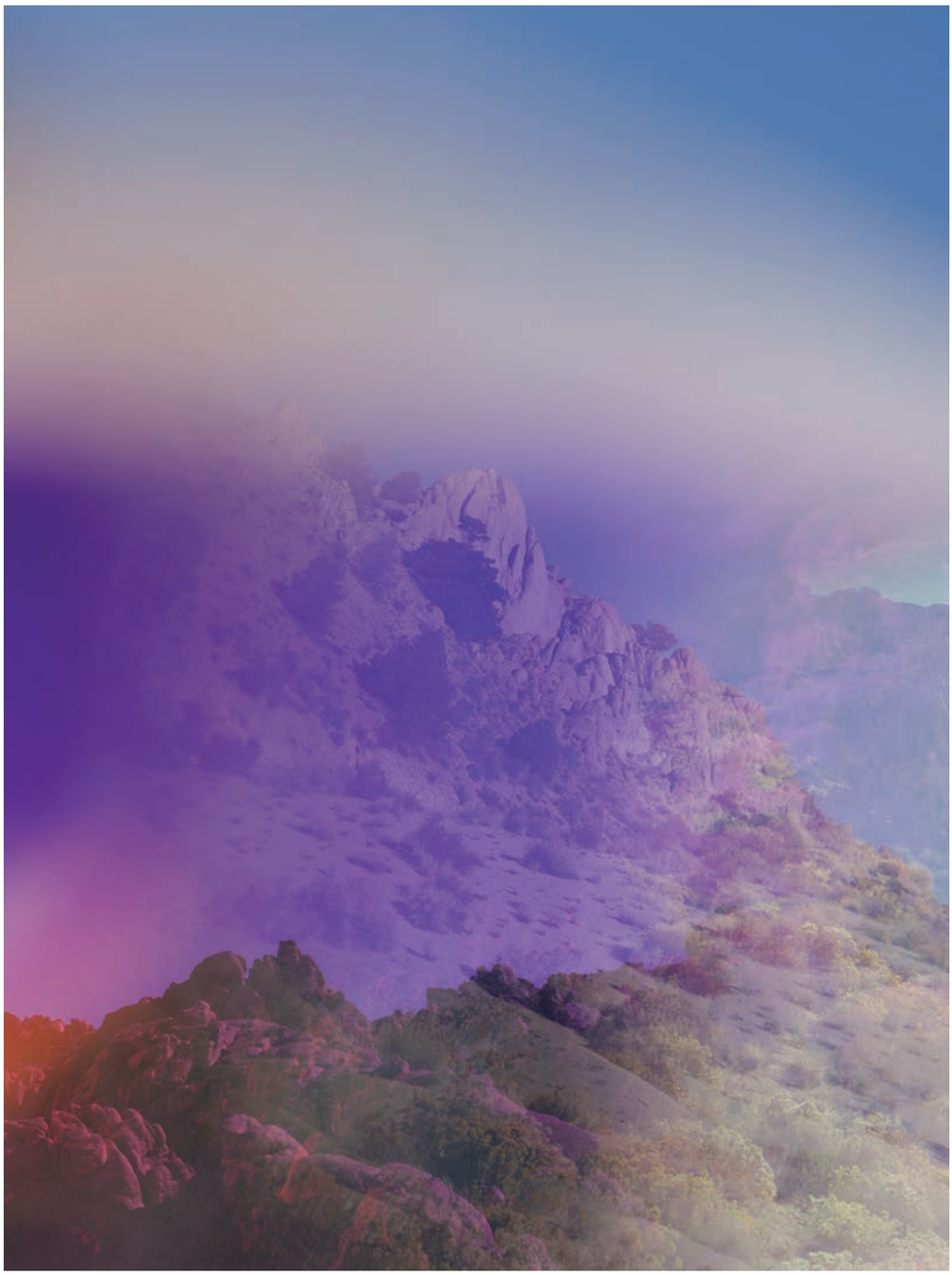
After looking for a long spell, I wrote to Terri to say that I found these pictures a little mystifying and was curious to know more about how they were made. She replied, tactfully, "They are single exposures made on location." Respecting the mystery being prerequisite to seeing it in the first place. Still, Terri's matter-of-factness got me thinking of those spooky 19th century city scenes for which the photograph's exposure time was sufficiently lengthy to empty the streets of life. What if these pictures could be seen, by extension, as portraits of everyone who ever had a vision in the California desert? All that tremendous psychic activity reduced to a wave of color rather than a ghostly blur. A century ago, Mary Austin, describing the same neighborhood in her book *The Land of Little Rain,* wrote: "The palpable sense of mystery in the desert air breeds fables, chiefly of lost treasure." So maybe I have it the wrong way around, and the desert air precedes the visions. Or maybe each vision connects to and fulfills the last in a transpersonal chain. Regardless, Terri's photographs turn flips in the "palpable sense of mystery."

That the pictures confuse air and rock accords with the geologic record. "For an extremely large percentage of the history of the world, there was no California," John McPhee writes in *Assembling California.* Now that he has your attention, McPhee goes on to detail the process by which successive collisions and slides forged mountains where there was previously only ocean—a story to compare with the most fantastical myths. This all becomes especially striking in view of the layering of Terri's photographs and, more particularly, their way of consistently suggesting water where there isn't any. The landscapes pictured here are composed of rocks from wildly various locales and epochs. The technical term for this confusion is "unconformity." As in, "The Great Sierra Nevada Unconformity." As in, here is a place to touch the world as it is being made.

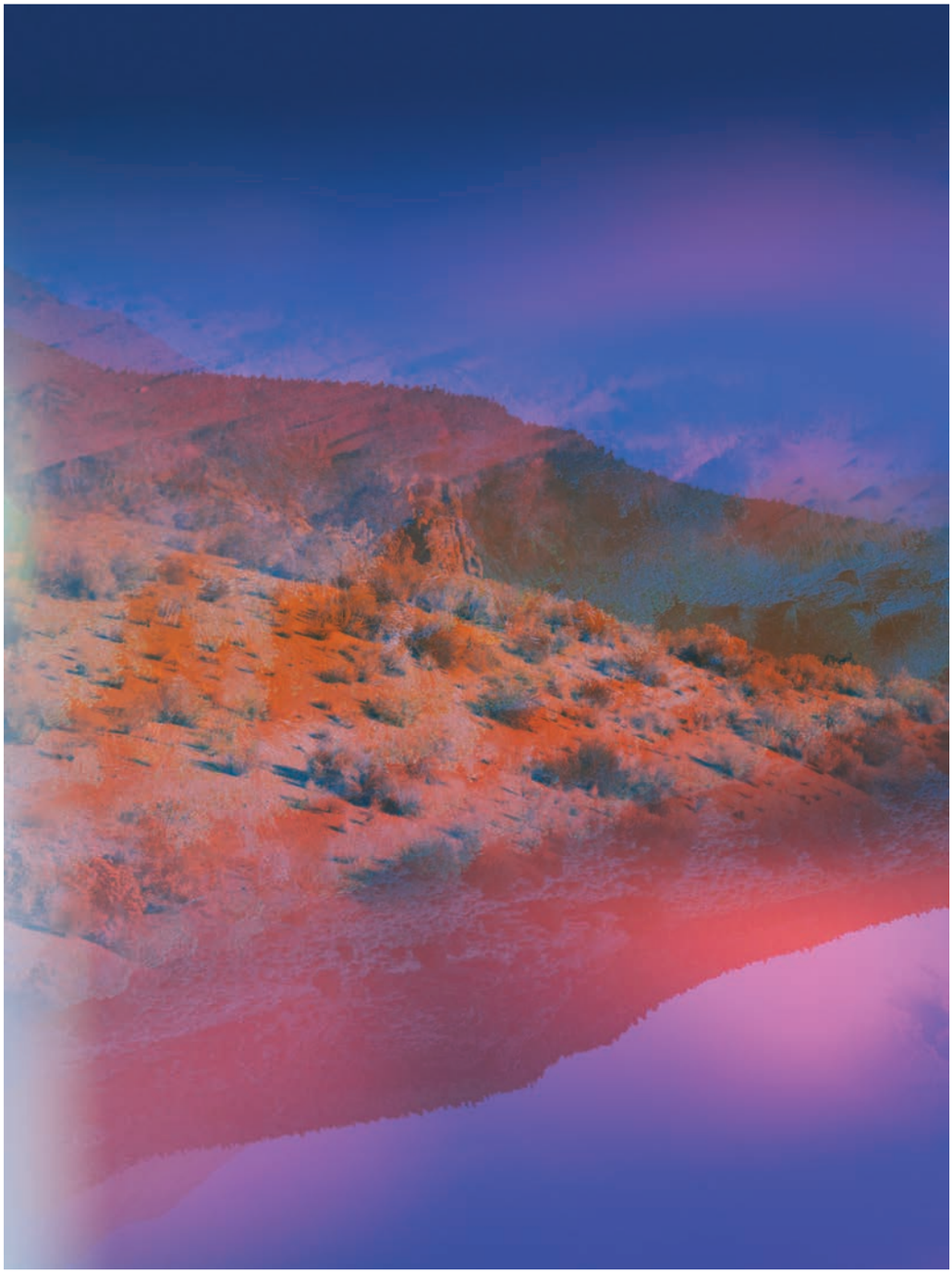
I remember a night west of Death Valley, an unremarkable yet beautiful campground across the road from a bar and grill. As the sun went down,

I noticed our neighbors: two German guys inspecting their bikes, doing their *Easy Rider* thing. (As Hollywood's early boosters understood, California's unbelievable light made all kinds of things believable.) I asked what brought them such a long way from home, and the more talkative of the two spread his hand across the landscape and exclaimed, "Space!" He then asked if we had any extra blankets, as they hadn't realized how cold the desert got at night. We didn't, being amateurs ourselves. He said that was okay and goodnight. I looked over a little later and saw the two of them sleeping out, curled up beneath their leather jackets. They were gone in the morning, and I'm sure they would have recognized what they were after in Terri's photographs.

There are times in life when you want to walk under cover of trees and times when you want to walk the ridge. Exposed to the elements, Terri's photographs go one better than superimposition, with a technique bearing patience into the present. The sparkling moment of perception, that rarified spot on no map that says, "You are here."



Psychscape 73 (Downs, Mount, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 30 inches



Psychscape 78 (Obsidian Dome, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 30 inches

A Conversation with the Artist

JASON LIBSCH: You've been altering cameras adjusting the way a particular camera makes an image for a long time. Would you say more about how and why you first altered a camera, a Polaroid, fifteen years ago?

TERRI LOEWENTHAL: A polaroid is so simple and straightforward, there's not a lot of technical skill required. I wanted to play with the medium. An image taken with a polaroid is immediate, right? But I figured out how to rig it so that the photo would stay inside the camera. Then I did a series of double-exposure polaroids with friends and acquaintances, asking them to interact with "themselves." It's playful, the idea of people hanging out with themselves in the photographs. I love the idea of making an "impossible" image.

JL: You were trying to capture something not literal.

TL: I've always been envious of painters' ability to create another world. With these newer images, I wanted to do something similar, to create a world that was familiar but also wild, otherworldly. In my mind, the colors were shifted. The skies were pink, the leaves were blue.

JL: What about the notion of westward expansion or frontier? How does that play into the particular utopia of these images?

TL: You head west, you head west, you head west, and then you reach the coast. How do you expand from there? Mind expansion is all that's left. That's what California promises. I was referring to these images as psychedelic before I even made them. To have a psychedelic experience is to free your mind from the constraints it's normally under. In my mind, when I had the idea for the images, I was able to shift the colors of the natural world.

JL: How much do you have a built-in vision of what you want to take a picture of ahead of time, and how much is it exploration?

TL: It's a marriage of calculation and spontaneity. I have a toolkit and I have a sense of what might happen, but at the same time, it's a surprise.

What actually happens is a product of the playful moment. I'm making these images in-camera and on-location, so it's as much about the experience as it is about the photograph. Not only do I not know what the image is ahead of time, but even as I'm doing it, it's fleeting. If I don't take the picture the moment the magic happens, I lose it and can't remake it.

JL: People initially think the images are composites or multiple exposures, and that's not true. You can tell looking closely at them because the color wash is independent of the images being overlaid. Can you talk about the role of color? Normally the colors in a photograph are rooted in the thing you're taking a picture of, but not in these images.

TL: Some palettes seem to work in certain contexts and not in others. When there's a lot of foliage, and orange and yellow is dappled inside of the foliage, you see a ton of contrast and then it works to use those colors. But I've tried yellow and orange in dunes and just wound up with a big field of orange. Softer landscapes lend themselves to a softer palette, though I don't know that I'm calculating that ahead of time. It's just something I'm finding through the process of discovery. When I'm thinking about where to shoot, it's very much about using the shapes of the land as a paint brush—for example, the swoop of a dune, and another dune overlapping it, to create a sloping shape.

JL: That's very different from how people tend to think about landscape photographs. Ansel Adams schlepped his stuff out there, set up his zone system, and didn't press the button until he had it exactly right. You're not calcifying a moment forever. You're participating. You could say that Ansel Adams' images are "cold." There's always a big open sky that shows you how magnificent and large something is. In your work, with all of these overlapping colors, you never get an expanse. Instead of perfection, there's chaos.

TL: There's something about perfection, especially now that photographs are so ubiquitous, that is a deterrent for me. The pristine nature of the imagery that bombards the commercial world is exhausting. It all looks the same—perfection is the easy thing now. Isn't "perfect" supposed to be unusual? It makes me think of an

article I read about Rebecca Solnit's trips with photographers Byron Wolfe and Mark Klett to rephotograph sites originally photographed by Adams. And Klett, talking about the classic Adams-type image you are referring to, describes it as "This is nature. And it's beautiful because you're not there." It's so cold, it's a slice of perfect, and it's perfect because you're not there. That's such a contrast to my work. With each of my images there is a sense of physicality. I'm extending an invitation, not to view untouchable, pristine places from a distance, but rather to step inside and move beyond the confines of our everyday perceptions. It's real, but it also describes a possibility: there's a story and it could never really happen but then it did.

About the artist

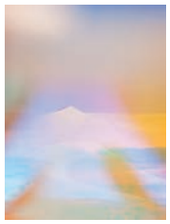
Terri Loewenthal has exhibited at diverse venues including Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco, CA), Minnesota Street Projects (San Francisco, CA) and Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (Berkeley, CA). Her work is included in many private collections. She is also founder of *The Chetwood,* a residency program that provides housing for artists visiting the Bay Area, allowing them to create lasting community with supportive peer networks outside of typical art-making structures. Loewenthal is a frequent collaborator with many Bay Area arts organizations including Creative Growth (Oakland, CA) and has been an active musician for over a decade; her bands Call and Response, Rubies and Shock have performed extensively nationally and internationally. Terri has a Bachelor of Arts from Rice University in Houston, Texas and is originally from Washington, D.C. and South Florida.

About the gallery

CULT | Aimee Friberg Exhibitions is a international gallery showcasing cutting-edge work by emerging and established artists who bridge formal, conceptual and process based investigations exploring the human condition. Founded by Aimee Friberg in 2013, CULT engages viewers inside and out of the formal white space, with experiential programming including: talks, dinners, art tours and nomadic exhibitions. CULT is housed in a shared design and art space in the NOPA neighborhood of San Francisco.

Exhibition Index

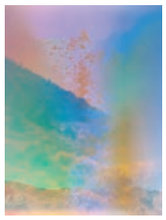
Psychscape 18 (Banner Ridge, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
42 x 56 inches



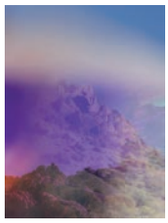
Psychscape 69 (Tonopah, NV), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
56 x 42 inches

Psychscape 41 (Lundy Canyon, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 30 inches

Psychscape 26 (Rock Garden, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 30 inches



Psychscape 48 (Lookout Mountain, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 30 inches



Psychscape 73 (Downs, Mount, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 30 inches

Psychscape 78 (Obsidian Dome, CA), 2017
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 30 inches