

PHANTOMS IN THE DIRT

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2014

HAROLD MENDEZ

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Mixed-media on canvas, black silicon carbide, industrial ink, gel medium, neutral pH adhesive, natural dyes and extracts, variant mordents, and marking beads
Courtesy of the artist

This guide serves as a viewer supplement to the exhibition *Phantoms in the Dirt* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, and classroom activities. You may download this guide from the museum's website at mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php. A PDF with images that can be projected for classroom use can also be found there. To schedule a free docent-led tour, please complete the form here: <http://www.mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php>

Phantoms in the Dirt was guest curated for the MoCP by Karsten Lund, Curatorial Assistant, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

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PHANTOMS IN THE DIRT

The artists featured in this exhibition present an array of physical remnants and elusive traces, ranging from cryptic objects and elemental matter to more tenuous signs of life in rugged landscapes. At least initially, their works tend to have an enigmatic quality, so one might start with more essential questions: what are you seeing here, and what do you make of it? From there one might start to sense the underlying outlooks or methods that these sometimes very different artworks have in common. Searching for phantoms in the dirt, so to speak, these artists reckon with the facts of matter, the mutability of photographic imagery, and the forces (sometimes invisible) that leave their mark on our surroundings. While they often present their subjects matter-of-factly, their photographs and sculptures are also steeped in an ineffable quality or a sense of atmosphere that seems to radiate from the material world itself. It's an unusual combination, this sensitivity to both the substantial and the ephemeral, to the immediacy of physical things and to the ways that visual evidence can also point to what isn't so easily perceived or deciphered. Something is a stake here, whether it's how we look at the world—both its material and immaterial aspects—or how we try to apprehend what happens around us, though it's rarely a question of ghosts.

—Karsten Lund

JEREMY BOLEN

American, b. 1978, Lives and works in Chicago

For the past few years Jeremy Bolen has regularly buried film in a forest preserve near Argonne National Laboratory, just outside of Chicago. Radioactive remains from the Manhattan Project are found at certain locations there but these leftovers aren't necessarily visible. The world's first working nuclear reactor is encased in cement beneath a clearing know as Site A. Nearby, six stones demarcate an area (Plot M) where nuclear waste is hidden underground. Bolen's works integrate photographic representations and dirt samples from these sites, but also unexposed frames from his unearthed film, which reveal chromatic anomalies and other residual markings that are potentially formed by radiation.

In 2013, Jeremy Bolen traveled to the salt flats near Wendover, Utah, to visit a former Air Force base where bomber pilots were trained during World War II—among them, notably, the men who flew to Japan in 1945 to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Bolen's photographs of the largely abandoned site depict craters with strange pieces of concrete at their center; these turn out to be the remains from training runs that used cement-filled bomb casings rather than actual warheads. Bolen also buried rolls of film to see what they would register, continuing his search for ghostly evidence of invisible forces in the ground.



JEREMY BOLEN

Plot M #2 (Print from film exposed and buried at Plot M above waste from the first nuclear reactor. The film was unearthed by an anonymous force.), 2014

Archival pigment print created from buried film, dirt from site
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago



The untitled photograph by Bolen (1st floor, east gallery, south wall) isn't specified as a particular place, in contrast to the importance of location to his other works appearing elsewhere in *Phantoms in the Dirt*. Instead, this strip of film is emblematic of an effort to represent a particular place in various ways—to try to know it on both visual and material terms. In one frame, a lake is depicted photographically. At the other end of the film strip, the celluloid has been dipped in the lake's salty water, which leaves its mark palpably. In between are empty frames, their blackness hinting at the limits of vision or the existence of aspects that elude documentation altogether.

JEREMY BOLEN

Unidentified Bomb Test Site Excavation #1, near Wendover, UT, 2014
Archival pigment print created from buried film, dirt from site
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago

MATTHEW BRANDT

American, b. 1982, Lives and works in Los Angeles

For an ongoing series of works, Matthew Brandt photographs lakes and reservoirs around the country and then soaks the individual prints in water from the specific lake depicted—in this case, Grays Lake in Idaho. As the water slowly wears away at the emulsion on the photographic paper it yields striking colors and other evocative distortions, such as this cataclysmic cloud of red that appears to wash over the landscape in the work. These sensational effects are by-products of the interaction of photographic materials and organic matter—a straightforward process with suggestive results—though one could also describe it as the discordant meeting of an image and the elements.



MATTHEW BRANDT

Gray Lake, ID 7, 2013
Chromogenic development print soaked in water from Grays Lake
Collection of John MacMahon, Chicago



SHANNON EBNER
Untitled Blank No. 3, 2008
 Chromogenic development print
 Courtesy of Wallspace, New York

SHANNON EBNER

American, b. 1971, Lives and works in Los Angeles

The tracts of dirt in Shannon Ebner's photographs are not the focal point, per se, though all three works notably depict similar terrain: rough and empty places, cut through by a dusty road or lines left behind by tires. It's not clear where these locations are, but these are the kind of places people drive right through without pausing to look around. The real crux of these works is the bright white rectangle appearing halfway to the distance. A blank spot in the photographic image, this inexplicable presence also seems to exist out there in the rugged world itself, a glitch or a cipher just wandering these roads.

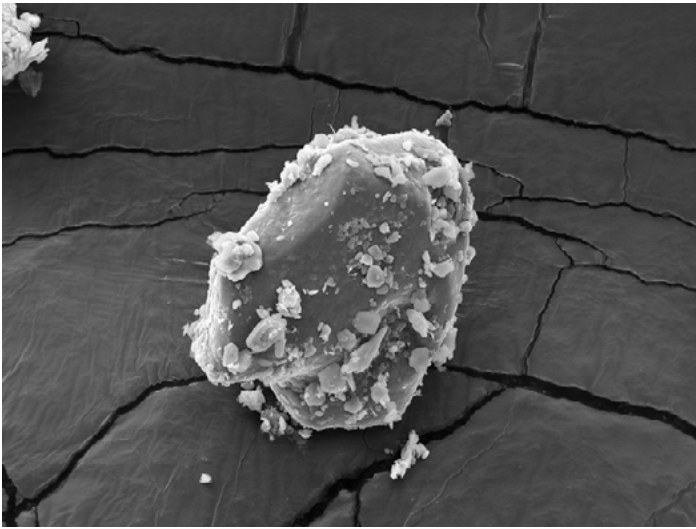
ASSAF EVRON

Israeli, b. 1977, Lives and works in Chicago and Tel Aviv

Assaf Evron's sepia-colored photograph is a reproduction of an image from a book about the French colonies, published in the 1930s. Locusts fill the air over a mountain range in Morocco, but the image is only legible from just the right distance. Printed at an enlarged scale and as a cheap laser print, the appropriated photograph breaks down at close range, the printed dot pattern becoming visible. From a greater much distance the dramatic swarm becomes merely an ambiguous disruption at the surface of the image. Appropriating this ambiguous vestige of a colonial history book, Evron lets the photograph loose on its own, potentially to be reinterpreted, trailed invisibly by its origins.



ASSAF EVRON
Untitled (French Colonies, Maroc), c.1930/2014
 Inkjet print on rice paper with oak frame
 Courtesy of the artist



ANYA GALLACCIO
As the Moon Turns in Space (detail), 2011
 Five archival pigment prints on rag paper
 Courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

ANYA GALLACCIO

Scottish, b. 1963, Lives and works in San Diego

In her group of photographs *As the Moon Turns in Space*, Anya Gallaccio looks literally at the ground beneath her feet, examining dirt particles in unsparing detail by harnessing the empirical powers of a scan microscope. And yet, while borrowing advanced technology more commonly used in scientific fields, Gallaccio effectively presents the surface of these minute particles as lunar landscapes. The title of her work points upward to the moon, inviting a potential moment of suggestive misperception as one looks at the modest stuff of the earth—an effect that is helped along by the colorless quality of a black-and-white photograph.



JAY HEIKES
Morality's Reef, 2009
 Iron, bronze, and rust
 Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

JAY HEIKES

American, b. 1975, Lives and works in Minneapolis

For his *Civilians* photographs, Jay Heikes conjured up human-like forms from pile of sticks, a bee's nest, an old shirt, and other detritus, as if to hint at a kind of inanimate life in the most elementary kinds of matter. To make large palladium prints such as these is itself a highly material process, which involves mixing chemicals and coating the paper by hand, before toning each print one by one. Heikes's arching sculpture, *Morality's Reef*, is another organic form, cast from an unusual combination of bronze and iron; these two metals oxidize at different rates and respond differently to their environmental conditions, giving the sculpture a live volatility of its own.



JOACHIM KOESTER
The Barker Ranch, 2008
 Selenium toned silver gelatin prints
 Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

JOACHIM KOESTER

Joachim Koester's photographs of the deserted Barker Ranch depict a cluster of rugged buildings from multiple angles, yet there's only so much to see. The indiscernible history of this place ties it to a bleak American saga: in the late 1960s, Charles Manson and his followers retreated there in the wake of their infamous killing spree. After their capture, prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi took his own photographs of the ranch—which he described as a “secluded, rock-strewn hideout from civilization on the shadowy perimeters of Death Valley”—to use as circumstantial evidence. Inspired by Bugliosi's redolent description, Koester produced his own equivocal evidence of this place, decades after the trial.

EILEEN MUELLER

American, b. 1987, Lives and works in Chicago

Eileen Mueller's two photographs of a subtropical forest are filled with various traces but no figures appear within the scene, suggesting a negotiation between different forms of presence and absence. One image centers on a Bolex movie camera standing in an empty grove of trees, an apparatus without an operator. The other photograph flips the viewpoint, looking out at the forest, while an otherworldly band of white creeps down from the top edge of the frame. The spectral presence in the latter photograph isn't a ghost so much as a glitch in the machine, a photomechanical aberration that potentially resembles the movement of the film through the running movie camera (a fleeting event in itself).



EILEEN MUELLER
As the film passes through the gate, 2011
 Archival pigment print
 Courtesy of the artist



HAROLD MENDEZ

Let the shadows in to play their part, 2012/2014

Eucalyptus bark, black silicon carbide, water-soluble ink, marking chalk, spray enamel, and latex paint

(MoCP installation view)

Courtesy of the artist

HAROLD MENDEZ

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Courtesy of the artist



HAROLD MENDEZ

American, b. 1977, Lives and works in Houston and Chicago

Harold Mendez gathered the eucalyptus bark for his wall installation, *Let the shadows in to play their part*, while staying in the Marin Headlands in California this summer. This highly tactile work evokes a shadowy place through its own tangible remainders—innumerable pieces of bark picked up off the forest floor and re-concentrated to cover a single large wall at the museum. Mendez treats the eucalyptus bark with ink and black silicon carbide, a dark abrasive that partially absorbs the light; this subtle alteration of his found material helps to echo the experience of standing in a dense grove of trees at night.

To create his atmospheric painting of a hazy grave site, Harold Mendez used pigments made from gritty materials such as ground up beetles from Mexico, industrial abrasives, and minute glass beads more commonly used in reflective highway paint. The tactility of the work's materials contrast with the scene's ethereal atmosphere. The mural has a photorealistic quality from afar, but up close its rougher qualities become highly evident, eliciting a shift in awareness from what the work depicts to what it's made of. The small sculpture presented nearby is an iron object the artist dug out of the ground in California, a found artifact with the look of a miniature ruin.

RICHARD MOSSE

Irish, b. 1980, Lives and works in Berlin

Richard Mosse photographs in the Democratic Republic of Congo with an infrared film stock that was originally designed by the U.S. military as a means to find soldiers in camouflage. While this film simply responds to a different spectrum of light, the visual results are immediately strange and arresting: Mosse's photographs record these hills with a vivid pink complexion, rather than in the typical shades of green. A complex and brutal war continues unabated in the Congo to this day but it leaves very few traces in the landscape itself, which adds an allegorical layer to Mosse's choice of using of an infrared film stock that was originally produced to see the invisible.



RICHARD MOSSE

Beaucoups of Blues, North Kivu, Eastern Congo, November 2012, 2012

Chromogenic development print

Private Collection



ARTHUR OU

American, b. 1974, Lives and works in New York

Arthur Ou's photograph *Untitled (Mountain)* plainly depicts what the matter-of-fact title says it does. These peaks, however, are rather evidently just piles of dirt on a metal table, spilling over onto the floor. An illusion prevails—an alpine vista conjured up by the camera—even if these precarious mounds of earth have none of the permanency of solid rock nor the grand scale of a real cordillera. The refined black and white photograph becomes a conundrum of sorts, a meditation on the difference between image and substance. Keeping its mountains at arm's length the photograph precludes the chance to plunge one's hands into the soil to break the spell.

ARTHUR OU

Untitled (Mountain), 2007

Archival pigment print on rag paper

Courtesy of the artist Brennan & Griffin, New York



ALISON ROSSITER

Kodak Azo F No.4, expired February 1, 1992, processed in 2011 (#1 Mold)
Unique gelatin silver print

Courtesy of Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

ALISON ROSSITER

American, b. 1953, Lives and works in New York City

Alison Rossiter's works begin with expired photographic paper, sometimes more than a century old—in the case of the five pieces here, the paper dates from the 1920s and '30's. Her process is intentionally simple: in the darkroom she dips these small sheets of paper in developer, submerging them partway. The results resemble ominous landscapes. The smoke, or clouds, on the horizon are latent in the old paper itself, produced by mold that found its way into the box of materials. The invasive residues of the outside world are what give Rossiter's prints their atmospheric qualities, while giving shape to moody environments that never really existed.



ADAM SCHREIBER

Black Cement, 2011
Chromogenic development print

Courtesy of the artist and Sasha Wolf Gallery, New York

ADAM SCHREIBER

American, b. 1976, Lives and works in Chicago

Adam Schreiber's photographs are plainspoken in certain ways and sphinx-like in others. At their heart are rudimentary objects or nondescript settings, which Schreiber examines in great detail with a large-format camera. At the same time, these ordinary things often hint at something more extraordinary that is never fully revealed. How to explain the iridescent shine on the piece of black cement, for instance? For Schreiber, each photograph embodies an intense act of looking, a process that Schreiber invites the viewer to share through methods such as off-center framing. In the work *Remains* the middle of the photograph is apparently empty, calling into question which element in the image is the real point of interest.

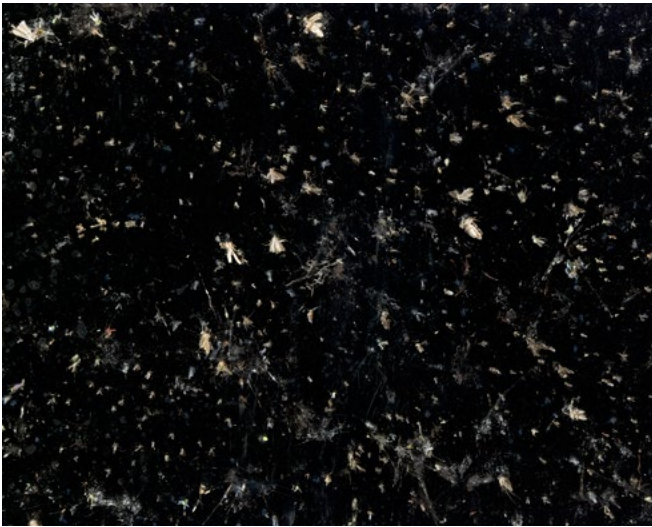


DANIEL SHEA
O'Gara #12 Coal Tipple, Muddy, IL, 2012
Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago

DANIEL SHEA

American, b. 1985, Lives and works in New York City

Many of Daniel Shea's photographs and sculptures exist in the orbit of the artist's long-term project about a single fading Rust Belt town. This place happens to be fictional, but Shea brings it into view allusively through an ongoing accumulation of photographs he makes in other places in the region, often based on real events. The works Shea produced for *Phantoms in the Dirt* are especially attuned to the act of sifting through the material traces of a place, whether it's a coal mining operation or an old factory, as if one might weigh these objects or relics to extract whatever grain of truth they might contain.



GREG STIMAC
Santa Fe to Billings, 2009
 Archival inkjet print
 Collection of Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2009.347



GREG STIMAC
Old Faithful Inversion, 2012
 16mm film loop (presented in gallery)
 and digital video loop (presented in MoCP
 Cornerstone Gallery)
 Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago

GREG STIMAC

American, b. 1976, Lives and works in Los Angeles

In 2009, Greg Stimac took a number of long driving journeys across different parts of the United States. Rather than making photographs along the way in the classic tradition of the American road trip, he affixed a sheet of Plexiglas to the front of his car and scanned the bugs and grit that piled up on each stretch of road that he drove. Each photograph in the series essentially records the full duration of a journey—in this case Santa Fe, NM to Billings, MT—while also generating an evocative image in the process: at a glance, all these dead bugs strongly resemble a starry sky, the heavens taking shape through countless collisions with the base matter of the world.

Greg Stimac found the source material for *Old Faithful Inversion* on YouTube: a basic tourist's video recording the eruption of Old Faithful, the famous geyser in Yellowstone National Park. By inverting the colors and making it an endless loop, Stimac transforms the familiar icon into a more inscrutable event that never ends. Notably, the work exists into two forms at once: a digital video and a 16mm film, both of which are presented in this exhibition.

The film version accumulates dust and scratches as it plays on a mechanical projector, while the digital copy has a more frictionless life, though one marked by the pixelated traces of its initial compression.



SHANE WARD
Barrel, 2014
 Steel, cast aluminum
 (MoCP installation view. *Barrel* is at right)
 Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago



SHANE WARD
Souvenir, 2013
 Steel, bronze, aluminum, rust, resin, brass, and plinths
 (MoCP installation view)
 Courtesy of the artist

SHANE WARD

American, b. 1978, Lives and works in Chicago

Shane Ward's sculpture *Barrel* began its life as a rusty object sitting not far from his childhood home, something he passed by innumerable times before he finally claimed it as his own. This work is primarily comprised of a found remnant, which sat untouched for many years, and bears the mark of its time spent out in the open. The pool of silvery metal appearing in its indentation, however, is clearly a more recent arrival—an inexplicable addition like a mercurial lake appearing in the barrel's topography.

The wide array of metal objects spread out in Shane Ward's *Souvenir* are enigmatic tokens of some sort. Many have a layer of rust like they've spent years in the ground and a few look like the kind of relic one might dig up on a battlefield, but most are of ambiguous origin, their purpose hard to pinpoint. This collection could be the making of a rogue taxonomy or a cryptic catalogue of remnants. To complicate things further, some objects appear just as the artist found them, while others Ward has transformed significantly. Even the rust—potentially a mark of authenticity—isn't always what it seems to be.

Phantoms in the Dirt: Questions for Looking and Discussion

- 1. Before you read the curator's essay for the show or the descriptions of each artist's work, spend time in the MoCP galleries observing the work.**
 - Describe what you see or notice as you encounter the work. What pulls your attention? Why?
 - What does it look like or remind you of?
 - What is the mood or feeling of the work? How is that conveyed?
 - What can you tell about how the artist made this work? What do you notice about the materials, surfaces, scale, and composition?
 - What questions do you have about this work?
 - What is suggested beyond what we see or notice?
 - What do you think this work is about? Why?
- 2. Read the curatorial essay for the show and the information provided on the artists. Read the titles of the work. What do you notice about those titles?**
 - How do they impact or add to your understanding of the work?
 - Is the additional information provided in wall labels an integral part of understanding each piece?
- 3. In connection to Jeremy Bolen's work, *Phantoms in the Dirt* curator Karsten Lund says "...this strip of film is emblematic of an effort to represent a particular place in various ways—to try to know it in both visual and material terms."**
 - In what ways does Bolen show the visual and material aspects of the sites he represents? Are there aspects that remain unseen or unknown?
 - How do other artists in this show attempt to know, represent, or evoke place in their work?
 - Toward this end, many of the artists in this exhibition experiment with and use alternative or hybrid processes to create their work.
 - What processes and materials do they use? How?
 - What are the characteristics, including strengths and limitations, of each of the media they employed?
 - What do you think they were hoping to achieve?
- 4. To create the image *Untitled (Mountain)*, 2007, Arthur Ou piled dirt onto three small tables and photographed his creation.**
 - Why do you think Ou ultimately decided to create and exhibit the photograph of the "mountain" rather than the sculpture itself?
 - How does this relate to other works in this show?
- 5. Some of the works in this show allude to bigger issues such as war, economics, environmental contamination, and in the case of Joachim Koester, mass murder. What issues inform the work of Richard Mosse, Jeremy Bolen, Daniel Shea, and Joachim Koester?**
 - How are these issues referenced or present in the work?
 - What is not shown or said?
 - What do these works say about the physical and metaphoric ways a place can be marked by events and people?
 - Have you seen the issues addressed by these artists visually represented in other artworks or in mass media? How do artworks in this exhibition compare to other depictions of war, economics, environmental contamination, or mass murder that you are familiar with?

6. What relationships do the words trace, remnant, evidence, and memory have to the individual bodies of work in this show?
7. What might the word “phantoms” in the show’s title refer to?
8. In his writing on this show curator Karsten Lund states that some of the subjects and possible meanings of the works in this show are matter-of-fact or simple while others are enigmatic or puzzling. He cites the following text by writer Rebecca Solnit as an influence:

“I have been fascinated by trying to map the ways we think and talk, the unsorted experience wherein one can start by complaining about politics and end confessing about passions, the ease with which we can get to any point from any other point. Such conversation is often described as being ‘all over the place’, which is another way of saying it connects everything back up. The straight line of conventional narrative is too often an elevated freeway permitting no unplanned encounters or necessary detours. It is not how thoughts travel, nor does it allow us to map the whole world rather than one streamlined trajectory across it.”

 - How does this statement relate to how you see this exhibition as a whole?
 - What parts of the artworks on view here or the exhibition as a whole are clear to you? What is enigmatic or puzzling?
9. What if any connections do you see between the artist and artworks in this exhibition and other contemporary landscape traditions in art such as New Topographics photographers including Robert Adams and Frank Gohlke and Land Art (or earthworks) artists such as Robert Smithson and Jarek Tylicki? (If you unfamiliar with these artists and traditions, read up on them.)
 - What other possible influences do you notice in these works?

Activity: Evoking Place

1. What is a place or location that is important to you? Why? What are the sights, sounds, smells and textures that evoke that place for you?
2. What events happened there? What people do you associate with that place? Did any of those people or events leave a tangible mark on that place? If so how? How else might that place be “marked?”
3. If you were to create an art work that would evoke that place—what would you create? What specific elements would you want to convey in your work? What materials might you use? For inspiration consider the work of artists in this exhibition including Harold Mendez and Shane Ward. Write out a plan for what you would create and if possible, create that piece.

National Content Area Standards Addressed in This Guide

CCSS (www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy)

*CC.K-12.R.R.6 Craft and Structure: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

*CC.K-12.R.R.9 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

K-12 R R.2 CC.K-12.R.R.2 Key Ideas and Details: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.