

Series Number Two
Desert & Clay Mounds: 1983-1986

Fifteen Photographs
Michael Nye

Desert & Clay Mounds – 1983-1986



Desert #2

Virginia Wolfe, an English writer, and one of the foremost modernists of the twentieth century wrote to her nephew: “Nothing happens until it has been described in words. Don’t let a day pass by without recording it.” What Wolfe is suggesting is that reflection matters. There are hours and moments worth remembering each day.

Photographs are also about reflection. A second look illuminates memory. Every photographer understands that you can never go back and photograph the same thing in the same way twice. There is so much more to know.

Big Bend National Park is located along the Texas-Mexico border. The Rio Grande River defines its southern boundary. Big Bend was established as a national park in 1935, preserving the largest tracts of Chihuahuan Desert topography and ecology in the United States - making the Park larger than the state of Rhode Island.

It’s stunning to drive west from San Antonio and watch the slow spinning and rising of landscape. In a blink of a moment, eight hours, you are some place wild. The desert has an honest reputation. Desert experience can intensify attention and reshuffle priorities. Sky, water and

shade become important - evidence of melting mountains and the slow heartbeat of erosion and petrified bones. When hiking and camping alone - the boundary line is not found on a map or survey, but has to do with risk. History is the song the desert knows best.

Driving into Big Bend National Park from Alpine – passing Terlingua and Study Butte – on highway 118 just less than a ¼ of a mile into the entrance of the Park – (before the first steep hill and sharp left turn.) I saw tucked away in the distance a glowing clay and sandstone mound with stripes of purple and reddish bands in full sunlight. I pulled the car over and begin walking. My large format view camera and tripod on one shoulder and on the other – a bag of film plates, light meter, filters, water and a notebook. I remember thinking – “Be careful.” (See Desert #1.) I hiked to the top of a small hill overlooking the clay dune. Within an hour I watched the shadow of myself, camera/tripod and hill rise up against the desert floor. The clay dune changed in intensity from a light brown to a glowing fire white. The sky darkened as the dune brightened. Then suddenly, it all changed back to gray and dark.



Desert #1

In this Series – “Desert & Clay Mounds”, I photographed the eroding clay hills interacting with light and dark. The desert has a intelligent imagination. The clay hills and mounds were the first chameleons. The light from the sun and moon don’t go unnoticed in these lonely spaces. Over the next years I returned to the exact same place – hiking and photographing each time within a three or four miles circumference -- several times camping far off the road in the desert alone. Over 90 dinosaur species have been found in the exact area that I hiked and camped: plant



Desert #3

eating “duckbilled hadrosaurs,” – “thunder lizards” weighting up to 30 tons, large flying creatures, giant clams, sea turtles, petrified trees and a complexity of pre-historic flora and fauna. Geologists have suggested that “for a period of some 300 million years, in the Paleozoic Era, a deep-ocean trough extended into the Big Bend region. The rich sandstone and clay hills and mounds were formed by different volcanic eruptions and changing climate patterns.”

The poet Charles Simic said what many writers have said. “I write to find out.” All the arts are related to this notion. What we set in motion can lead to understanding. The series of work was mostly about the act of returning. Repetition is an expression of reflection, each time an act is replicated it becomes more visible.

Journal entries -

June 6, 1983

*These clay mounds are like loaves of bread – hot from the oven – the smell of clay and sandstone
- heat rising -- the light does not reflect off the mounds but glows from within, outward –*



Desert #4

August 5, 1984

Outside at 1:00 pm is 112 degrees. I think how thirsty the desert must be. The sugar is stuck to the glass container and refuses to come out. The ice in the glass melted immediately. Everyone is moving slowly. Even the voices behind me seem heavy and dreamy. I keep thinking of clay dune lines and earth lines at twilight.

November 2, 1984:

Hiked out five miles past the original white dune area. The wind started blowing mid-morning and finally drove me back to the car. I saw four possible negatives – plan to return tomorrow early depending on the wind. The area from the ridge might be possible to photograph in late evening. There will still be time to return to the car by dark. I can see the long shadows and peaks glowing at last light.



Desert #5

November 4:

Up early this morning, very cold – ice on the windshield. At breakfast in Study Butte a story was circulating -- that a Mexican national came over the border and raped a women in Terlingua. He was arrested and returned to Mexico just over the border for prosecution. That night a group broke into the jail - the man was found hanging from a tree outside Alpine.



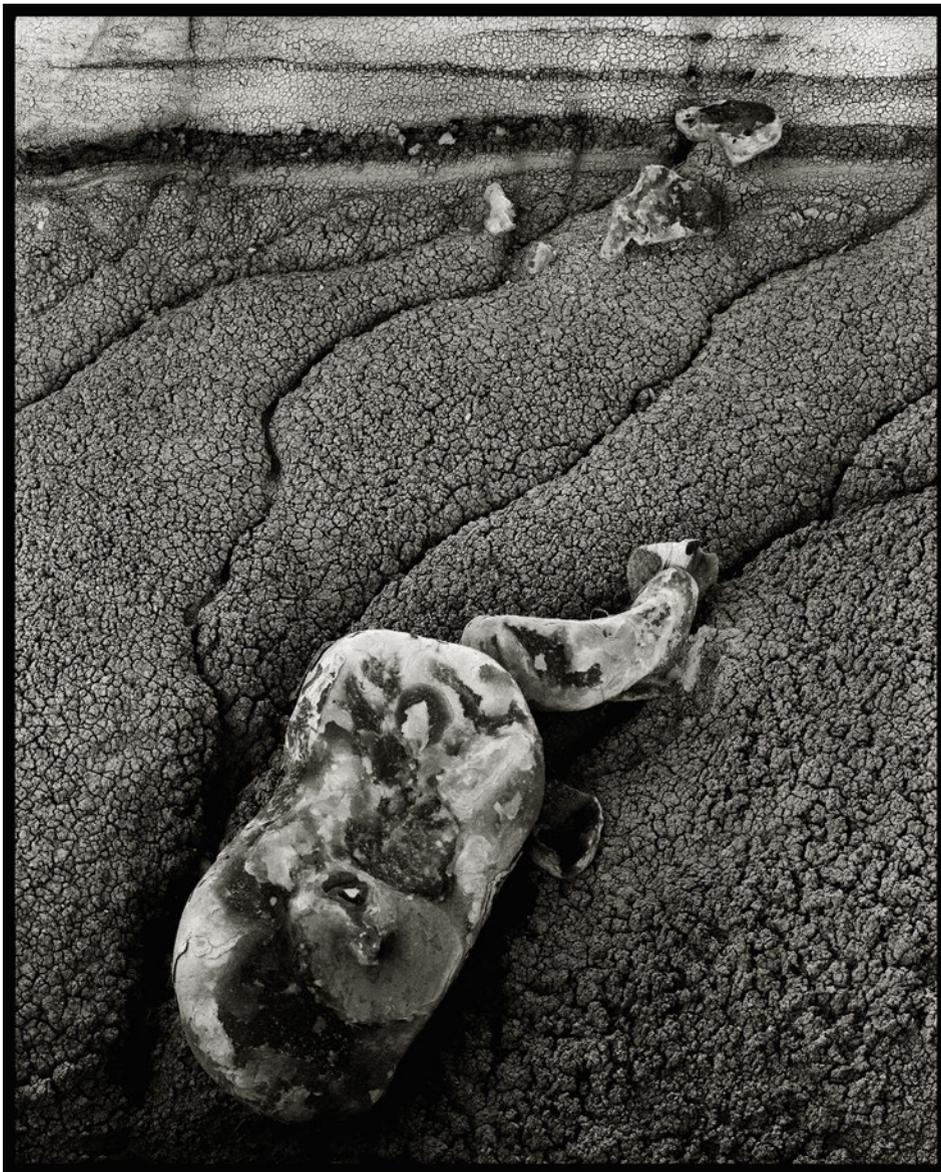
Desert #6

March 1985:

A black and white photograph can be an abstraction. It can simplify and represents something distant but close. Abstraction honors simplicity. It can also become a record of what was seen and remembered and felt.

July 3, 1985

I sit in Memo's café in Marfa – thinking of the car that is waiting for the train to pass. Everyone is waiting for something. This is the beginning of 5 days in the desert. Poet, Sam Hazo told me “good living needs ripeness in the present moment.” I started thinking about the word ripeness. Seems to lean toward readiness. The round watermelon cracked wide open, spilling its deep red blood and seeds. There is also a ripeness in thought – readiness with anticipation.



Desert #7

July 4 - 1985

Fourth of July in Lajitas. Ranchers – husbands and wives dancing and drinking to sad and beautiful Mexican love songs – A respite for them. Far out in the dark – beyond the dance floor and dirt roads is the reality of the sun and the harshness of daily life.

Then at another table was a young group from Dallas. They decided to experience the desert in their air-conditioned motel and swimming pool. They were singing songs and yelling. “Let’s bomb Russia and China.”

September 12, 1985

Take a scene; turn green into textured white, brown into a soft black and the blues and reds into various shades of gray. Then take the depth of field and compress it into two dimensions focusing both on what is close and distance. Photography was traditionally grounded in reality. However there is a paradox. Every photograph is inherently ambiguous and susceptible to many meanings.



Desert #8

Nov. 17 1985

Sunday – Study Butte at Pancho’s café – 6:45am – Cold wind blows along the edges. How cruel and beautiful and unrelenting the desert can be. Even quietness out here has a serious side. One man is eating alone. Prospector I think. The tips of his fingers look like flat coins on the table. Elbow sleeve is bloody; He is dusty, moving his fork to his mouth in slow motion. I’m still 36 years old.



Desert #9

February 2, 1986

It was a very difficult night. First time my tent blew over. I thought I was a tumbleweed. The cold wind was intense. The tent stakes were not strong enough – so I placed large stones around the edges. All night my tent was breathing in and out, shaking – coughing. Around 3:00 am it started raining and a few hours later the night was quiet. Light dusting of snow was on the ground in the morning. At the café two men talked about the wind and rain. One said – “Rocked my trailer back and forth like I was on the deck of a boat.” Another said – my wife made me move our car – afraid the trailer would turn over on it.” They laughed.

February 4:

Revisited the clay dunes yesterday - sandstone stripes of brown and purple and red bands on top – ancient seashells and petrified wood rested on the surface. No wind at all. Very little sound anywhere. As I was about to return to the car at sunset – two feral dogs approached wanting to attack – growling and circling. I was surprised at their aggressive nature. Took my camera off my tripod and began swinging it over my head – yelling and threw some rocks. They backed up but followed me to the car – almost dark when I drove off. I drove to Alpine the next morning and purchased a .22 small pistol – with buckshot for protection. I returned to the same areas today for more negatives – no sign of the dogs.



Desert #10

March 25, 1986 --- (walking in the desert at night)

History is everywhere

This ground has thoughts.

It remembers the last rain

Water from the black sky

Water that murmurs and sings

The earth is moving, looking for an opening

It is dreaming of becoming a mountain again

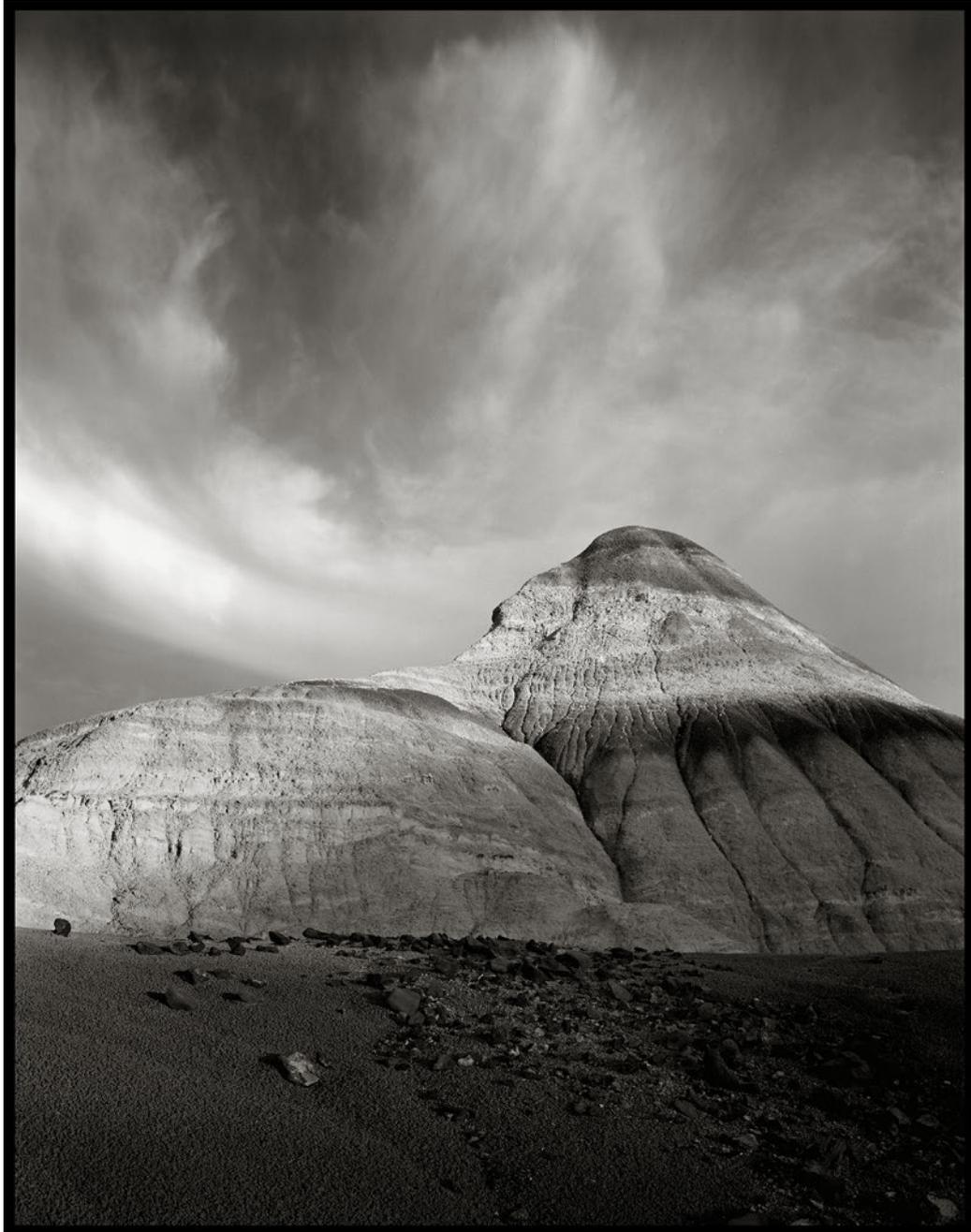
It believes in the stories of light.



Desert #11

March 27, 1986

Photographed around the erosion area and then hiked out two more miles – carrying tripod and camera beyond the stacked stones southwest of the highway. Made two negatives. Camera fell twice on a steep hill but no damage. All exposures were 2 to 3 seconds and now I worry about cloud movement. Last night the moonlight was too bright to change film. I covered my tent with blankets, sleeping bag – shirts and my dark cloth. This worked. Inside the tent was sufficiently dark black so carefully changed my film.



Desert #12

October 20, 1986

I can't believe that the erosion sandstone mound beside the highway has been bulldozed for a road – sadness. It is like knocking a hole through someone's home. Nature's slow gradual change for thousands of years and then this. -- (see Desert #13)



Desert #13

October 22, 1986

The women at ponchos cafe described the area as violent and desolate. Violent – yes at times -- but never desolate. The light is always improvising. Still thinking of skylines and earth lines. Working differently this evening. Waiting for light rather than looking for images.

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Desert #14



Desert #15