

Series Number One
A Desert
Big Bend National Park
Photographs 1983-86 - Essay 2025

Thirteen Photographs
Michael Nye

A Desert

Big Bend National Park: 1983-1986

Series Number One

paradoxically - dramatic contrast – lack of water – absence of soil - subfreezing temperatures – persimmon gap - jurassic age rocks - erosion dormancy - arroyo - badlands – semiarid - caldera - clays - edge effect - petrified palmwood – uplift - twisted - metamorphosed - dense limestone - maverick mountain - grapevine hills – perseverance – humility - stratigraphy fossil- millennia - extreme wind and cold and heat – imbedded horizontal limestone – lajitas and marathon - dinosaur bones – non-anthropocentric vision

A desert's history is mostly invisible, even to the desert itself. The calligraphy on the desert floor is the cracking earth and erosion. The orange and black millipedes with their 750 legs make a slow walk from shadow to shade.

What stands out to most people visiting a wild desert is the vastness of land, untouched by human hands. An elusive connection to the past. A single cloud passing serves as a stop light. The nights are never black, even in moonless hours. At Persimmon Gap the sky has a rounded tilt. Our circling galaxy at midnight takes your breath away. Ask a desert what she is thinking about? The answers are about the weight of deep time.

Big Bend National Park is located along the Texas-Mexico border. The Rio Grande River defines its southern boundary. It was established as a national park in 1935, preserving the largest tract of desert topography in the United States. The Park is larger than the state of Rhode Island. Over 90 dinosaur species have been found to have lived in this area: Plant eating “duckbilled hadrosaurs” - “thunder lizards” weighing up to 30 tons - large flying creatures. Geologists have suggested that, “for a period of some 300 million years, a deep-ocean extended into the Big Bend region”.

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 in a wild place. Big Bend National Park. This desert has a reputation of not needing water or shade to survive. In every treeless hill and stone and melting cactus there is evidence of deepest patience.

Driving into Big Bend National Park for the first-time, just over the border on highway 118, I saw tucked away in the east a glowing clay hill with stripes of purple and reddish bands in full sunlight. I pulled the car over and began walking. A large view camera and tripod was on one shoulder and on the other, a bag of film plates and water. I hiked to the top of a small hill overlooking the clay dune and waited.

Within an hour the clay dune changed in intensity from a light brown to a glowing fiery creamy white. Then within a minute, as if it never happened, it suddenly changed back to darker grays and delicate blacks. (See photograph #1 - Near the entrance of the Park on Highway 118 near Maverick Junction.)

In Series Number One, "A Desert" I wanted to experience the desert in all its seasons. I wanted to be there. I photographed the shifting light of the Javelina and Bentonite clay hills and mounds. Shadows on these hills bend with the moving clouds. These hills were the first chameleons, absorbing and reflecting light at the same time. Over the next three years, I returned to the exact same place alone, camping, hiking and photographing the light embedded in these melting hills. Can the temptation of light serve as nourishment?

Journal; Nov. 17, 1984

Sunday – 6:45am: Pancho's café. 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. A prospector. The tips of his fingers look like flat coins on the table. His elbow sleeve is bloody. He is moving his fork to his mouth in slow motion.

February 2, 1986

It was a very difficult night. First time my tent blew over. I thought I was a tumbleweed. The tent stakes were not strong enough so I placed large stones around the edges. All night my tent was breathing, shaking and coughing. Around 3:00 am it started raining and a few hours later it was quiet. Light dusting of snow was on the ground in the morning.

July 14, 1986

Revisited the clay dunes on the eastern side yesterday. Clay and sandstone stripes of brown and purple and red bands on top. Ancient seashells and petrified wood rested on the surface. Very little sound anywhere. As I was returning to the car at sunset, two feral dogs approached tried to attack. They growled and circled around me. I took my camera off my tripod and began swinging it over my head, and threw some rocks. They backed off, but followed me to the car. It was almost dark when I drove away.

March 27, 1987

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

These photographs say very little about my experience in the desert. How can they? The desert has a habit of aloofness. Light waits, arrives, returns, departs, softens, yields and colors lighten when they merge with heat and dust. This desert in all its disguises shimmers and flashes before dark. I would hike several miles off the highway and camp alone among these friendly hills. I felt nervous at night when I heard strange noises. I thought the wind flapping against the tent might be a mountain lion. The boundary lines in the desert are not found on a map or survey, but have to do with risk.

In late spring, the hawks fly low over the ground searching for tarantulas. Beneath a darkening sky in early night, there is a desperate deep thirst and ache rising up from the cracks on the desert floor. Heat and distance seem related. Days and nights are not a measurement of time but by mood and temperament. The light from the sun and moon don't go unnoticed in these lonely spaces.

Essay February 2025

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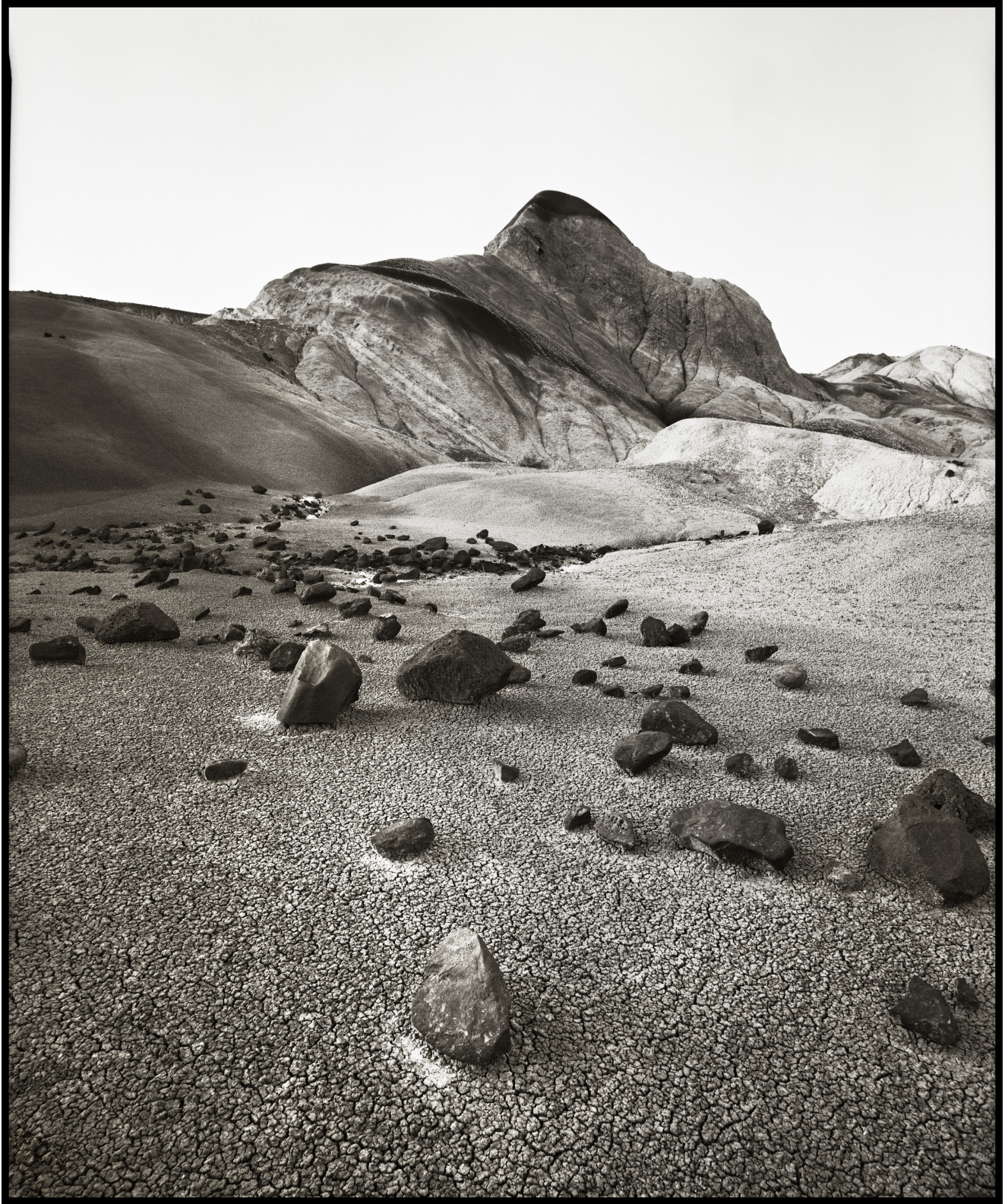
Desert One



Desert Two



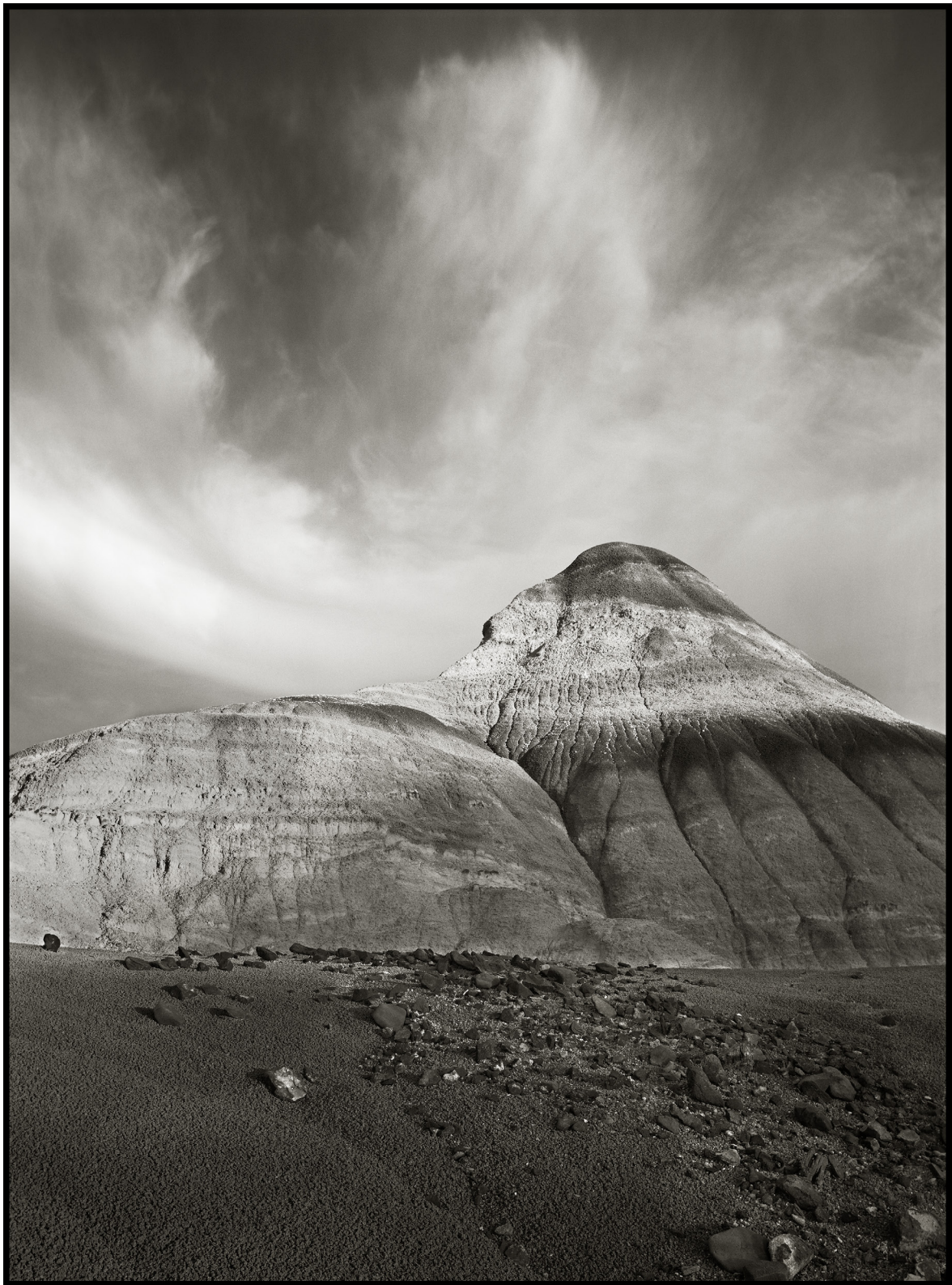
Desert Three



Desert Four



Desert Five



Desert Six



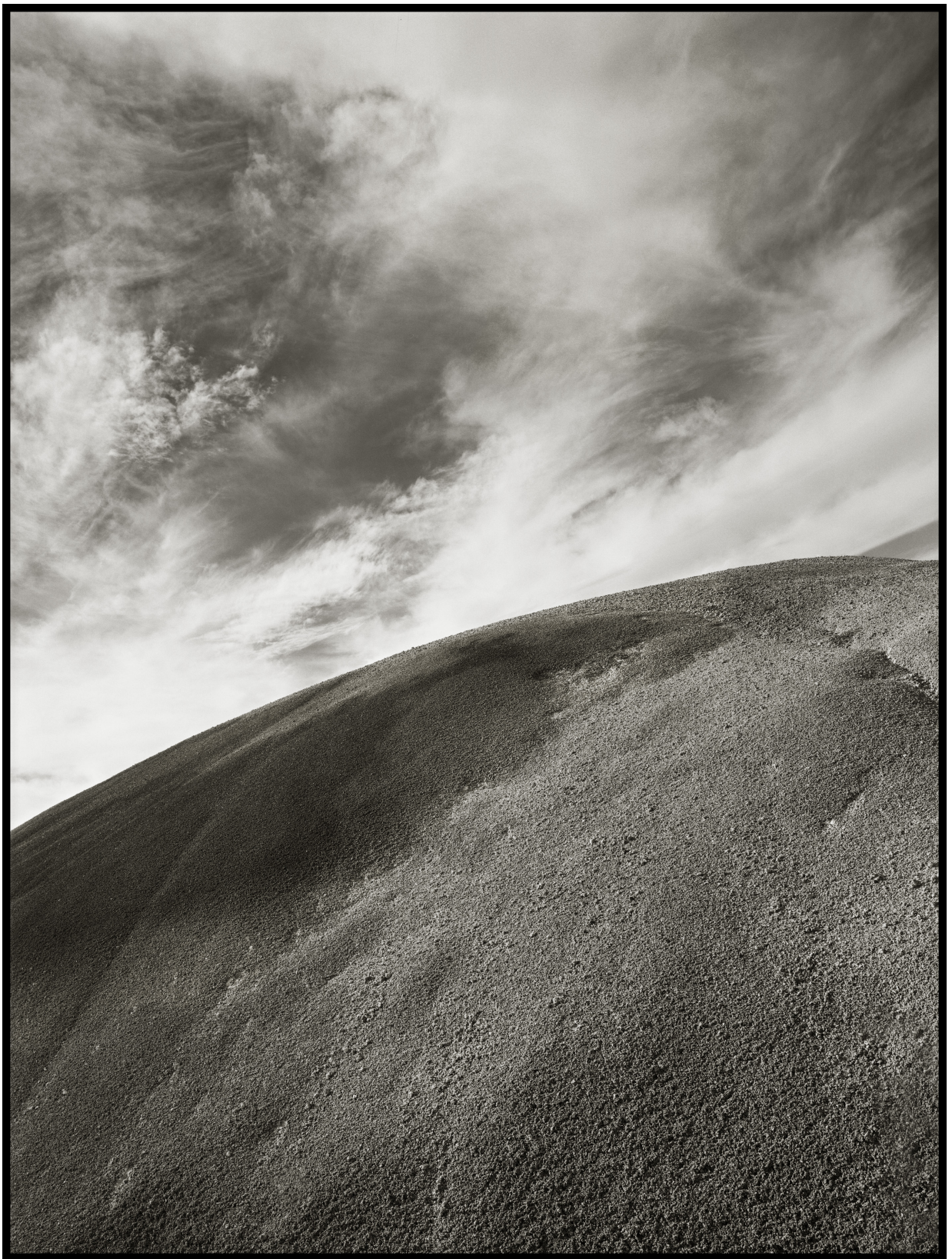
Desert Seven



Desert Eight



Desert Nine



Desert Ten



Desert Eleven



Desert Twelve



Desert Thirteen