



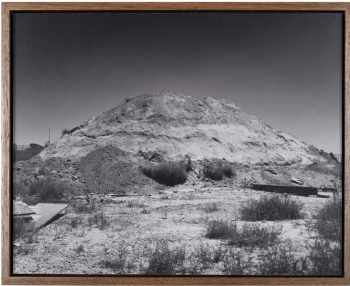
But first, define the mountain.

JOEY LEHMAN MORRIS

Moving Mountains



But first, define the mountain. features two bodies of work by Joey Lehman Morris that encompass his interests in photography, sculpture, land use, and language. Much of Morris' work involves traversing and depicting Southern California landscapes—from the metropolitan Los Angeles area to the Mojave Desert. These are landscapes teeming with mythologies constructed and planted by artists who have come before him. Rather than shy away from such loaded territories, Morris finds possibility in rethinking these spaces from a contemporary point of view.



The exhibition takes the notion of the mountain as a unifying element. The title is indicative of some of the structural (both linguistic and photographic) concerns at play. It involves and implores: *But first, define the mountain.* We can define the mountain semantically as a way of understanding its precise nature or meaning. We can also physically delineate the mountain, acknowledging its boundaries and

the outlines of its shape in relation to the space around it. Morris, via his subject matter, photographic process, and use of language, encourages us to rethink familiar spaces and imagines the monumental as something temporal.

Morris' newest project, *Grading Southern California*, consists of black and white photographs that depict mounds of gravel, dirt, and sand—created and left as residual material after land is graded, or leveled, for development. The artist is positioned as an explorer of these urban “mountains,” discovering them while driving around Los Angeles. Morris is drawn to the tension he senses in the structures; “They are temporary, yet they have the physical characteristics and chiseled features of grandiose mountains that seem to have been there for ages.”¹ These piles and their life spans are often the result of our current economic climate, and many of these particular piles sit in wait for stalled development projects to be restarted.

It is serendipitous that Morris' photos appear in the same gallery of the museum where Lewis Baltz's *Park City* portfolio (1979) was on display last year. Baltz, along with other "New Topographics" photographers such as Robert Adams, is known for photographing man-altered western landscapes that were quickly subsumed as real estate. Baltz's *Park City* project documented the housing developments and subdivisions built up around Park City, Utah, as it was transformed into a ski resort community. Over 30 years later, development continues in many U.S. locations, but the notion of a man-altered landscape takes on different meaning in this era of global financial collapse. Though there



are no people depicted in the visual frame of Morris' photos, the land around these structures could be thought of as stages—set for imagined players (construction workers, architects, real estate moguls, credit lenders, homeowners, consumers, factory-line workers, us) to inhabit as various acts unfold over time.

The formal approach and content of Morris' pictures situate him in relation to other art historical predecessors. Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, members of the 20th-century *f/64* group, are known for photographing California locations in a highly detailed manner, drawing attention to the majestic and sublime qualities of these landscapes. The formal properties of some of the construction site piles in Morris' work are reminiscent of the mountains made iconic by Weston and Adams. The earth-moving and entropy evidenced in Morris' photos also evokes other kinds of earth-moving—namely the land art created in the 1960s and 1970s in the American Southwest by artists such as Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria, and Michael Heizer. Though the *f/64* group and land artists responded to western landscapes in materially and conceptually different ways, they shared a tendency to romanticize this region.

Morris, informed by these precedents but armed with his own contemporary concerns, approaches these urban mountains with simultaneous earnestness and humor. His use of titles furthers the comedic/sincere interplay and draws attention to mountain nomenclature. Historically, mountains have been named based on their location, the person who discovered them, their physical characteristics, or an event that unfolded there. All of these variations are represented in the fictional names that Morris gives the piles that he photographs: *Mount Chaperone overlooking Lake Ullage*, *Mount Aguirre*, *Verrucose Hills*, *Clavicle Mountain*, *Mistryst Butte*, etc.

While *Grading Southern California* addresses mountains-in-the-making, the second body of work on view involves the seeming erasure of mountains. Over the past several years, Morris has spent a significant amount of time photographing in the Mojave Desert. He visits and revisits, getting to know the geographic intricacies of the area. All of the desert photographs presented here were made at night as the artist positioned his 8x10" camera on a dry lakebed/salt plane in Death Valley, facing Black Mountain. Relying on the full moon as the only light source results in exposures that span several hours, and occasionally, multiple nights. Morris' process fights against the notion of a photograph freezing a singular moment in time; instead, these are still images that imply an accumulation of moments or movement that unfolds while the camera's lens is open. The resulting photos render an illuminated, highly-detailed salt plane, and the distant mountains disappear in deep shadow.

There is a romantic aspect to Morris' continual return to the same location, and a relationship to other contemporary artists who have committed to multi-year, ongoing projects with particular places. Roni Horn's love affair with Iceland and Joachim Brohm's study of industrial decline in the Ruhr region of Germany come to mind. Morris presents the desert as a space for simultaneous perceptual clarity and bewilderment. He pushes these perceptual concerns by introducing objects into the landscape while photographing and presenting the photos as objects that viewers must physically contend with.



Black Mountain Detachment: Two Nights, From Waxing to Fully Stated presents the dry lakebed in a straight-forward manner, but is framed and presented as a sculptural object within the gallery. The photo and the frame that houses it are trapezoidal—wider on the top horizontal than the bottom. The skewed perspective is then corrected by leaning the work against the wall. As you walk toward it, its size and tilted presence lure you in to the landscape. By leaning the work against the

wall, the artist emphasizes not only the desert sited in the picture, but also the place where you're standing to observe it.

above: *Black Mountain Detachment: Two Nights, From Waxing to Fully Stated*, Chromogenic (Lightjet) print on Dibond, lacquer on poplar, 2007
middle: Lewis Baltz, *No. 42 Prospector Village, Lot 102 looking west, from Park City*, Gelatin silver print, gift of Edward and Melinda Wortz
© Lewis Baltz, 1979

far left, top: *Suture Mountain*, Gelatin silver print on Dibond, walnut frame, 2009/10
far left, bottom: *Mount Aguirre*, Gelatin silver print on Dibond, walnut frame, 2009/10

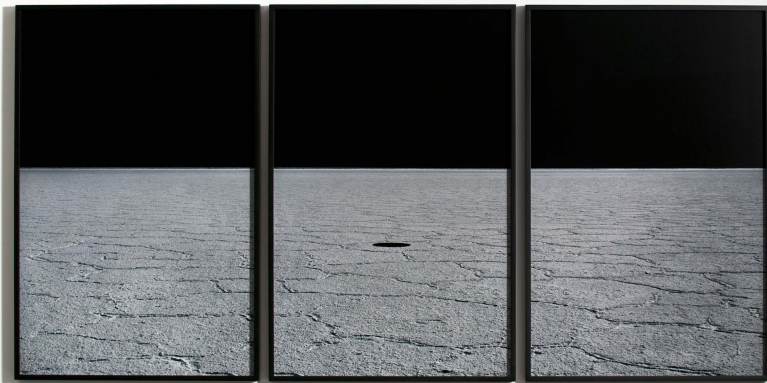
In (*Enfolding*) *This is Where We Go to Lie* [*Base Camp (Waning Gibbous)*], Morris introduces a white bedsheet onto the salt plane, interrupting our expected view of the desert landscape. Similarly, *Black Mountain Avulsion: Hanging Walls of Detachment* is a large-scale triptych in which the artist has situated a black, circular disk in the scene. We may read both of these singular materials by formally relating them to the landscape that they are part of. But, once we turn toward the language of the titles, a different range of metaphoric meaning is activated. How visual and textual language wrestle with each other is a fundamental aspect of all of Morris' work. As he has stated, "Reading and looking merge and mature symbiotically, though at times their relations become parasitic. Attention is given to the strain between connotation and utterance and there is a desire to impose upon that strain."² Morris' works are more about the act of looking and reading than any singular, declarative statements being made therein.

The balancing acts that Morris achieves is what makes his work intriguing and increasingly layered. He preserves extended periods of time within a single photographic surface. He exerts a visual and textual voice in which romance and rigidity, humor and sincerity, commingle. He locates the monumental in what may seem mundane.

Kristine Thompson
Assistant Curator, UCR/CMP

¹ Interview with Joey Lehman Morris, September 11, 2010

² Joey Lehman Morris, artist statement, 2009



Black Mountain Avulsion, Hanging Walls of Detachment, Three Chromogenic (Lambda) prints on Dibond, museum glass, lacquer on maple frames, 2010

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July 1 through October 30, 2010

Born in Los Angeles, CA
University of California, Irvine (MFA, 2008)
University of Southern California (BFA, 2004)

Recent selected exhibitions:

Assembly: Eight Emerging Photographers from Southern California, Fotofest, Houston, TX; *Landlot*, Galería Perdida/Project Row Houses, Houston, TX; *Infrastructure*, Wignall Museum, Rancho Cucamonga, CA; *Alternative Places*, Los Angeles International Airport, CA; *The Doubt Can Just Roll off the Tongue*, Shotgun Space, Los Angeles, CA

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cover: *Mount Chaperone*, Gelatin silver print on Dibond with walnut frame, 2009/10