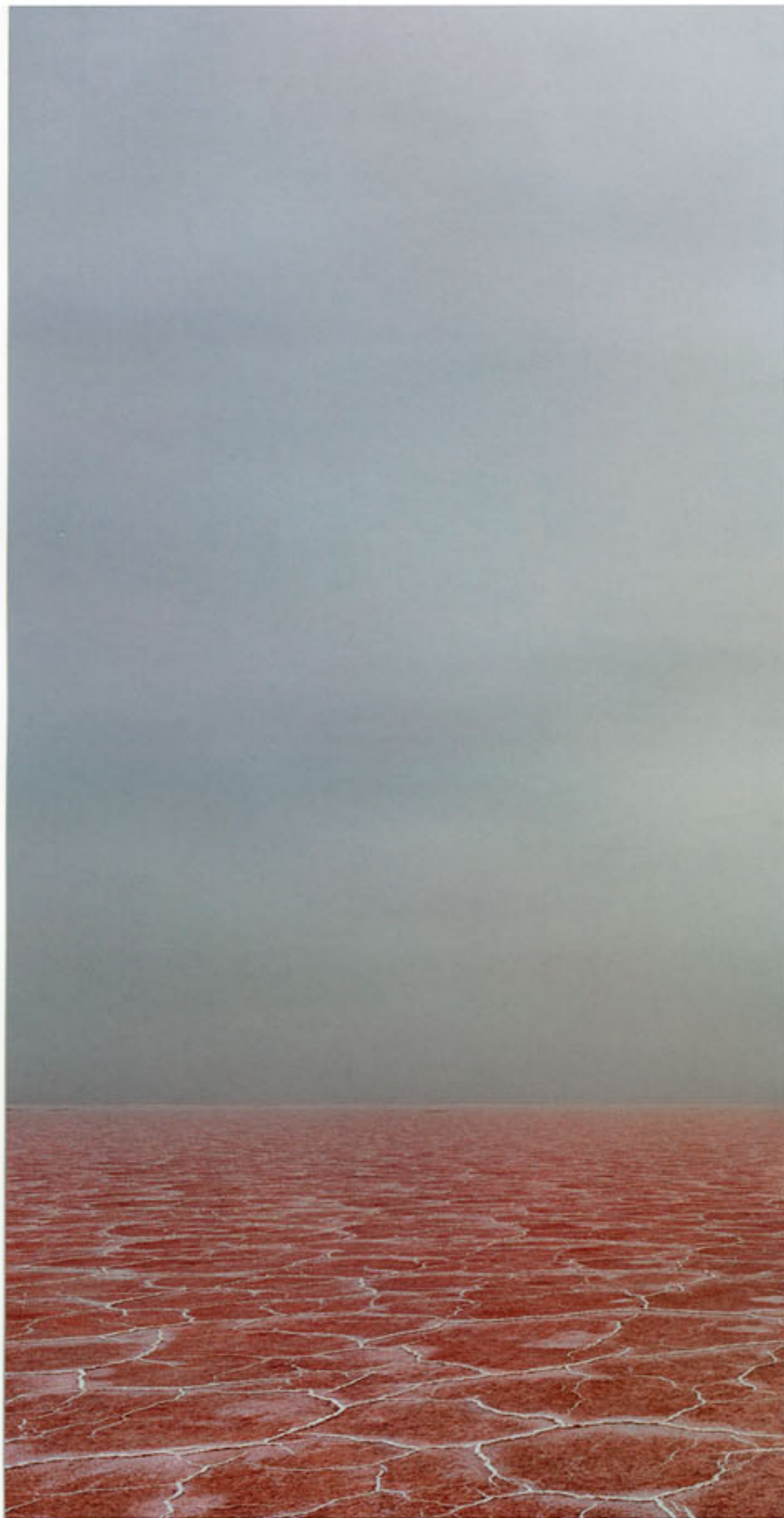
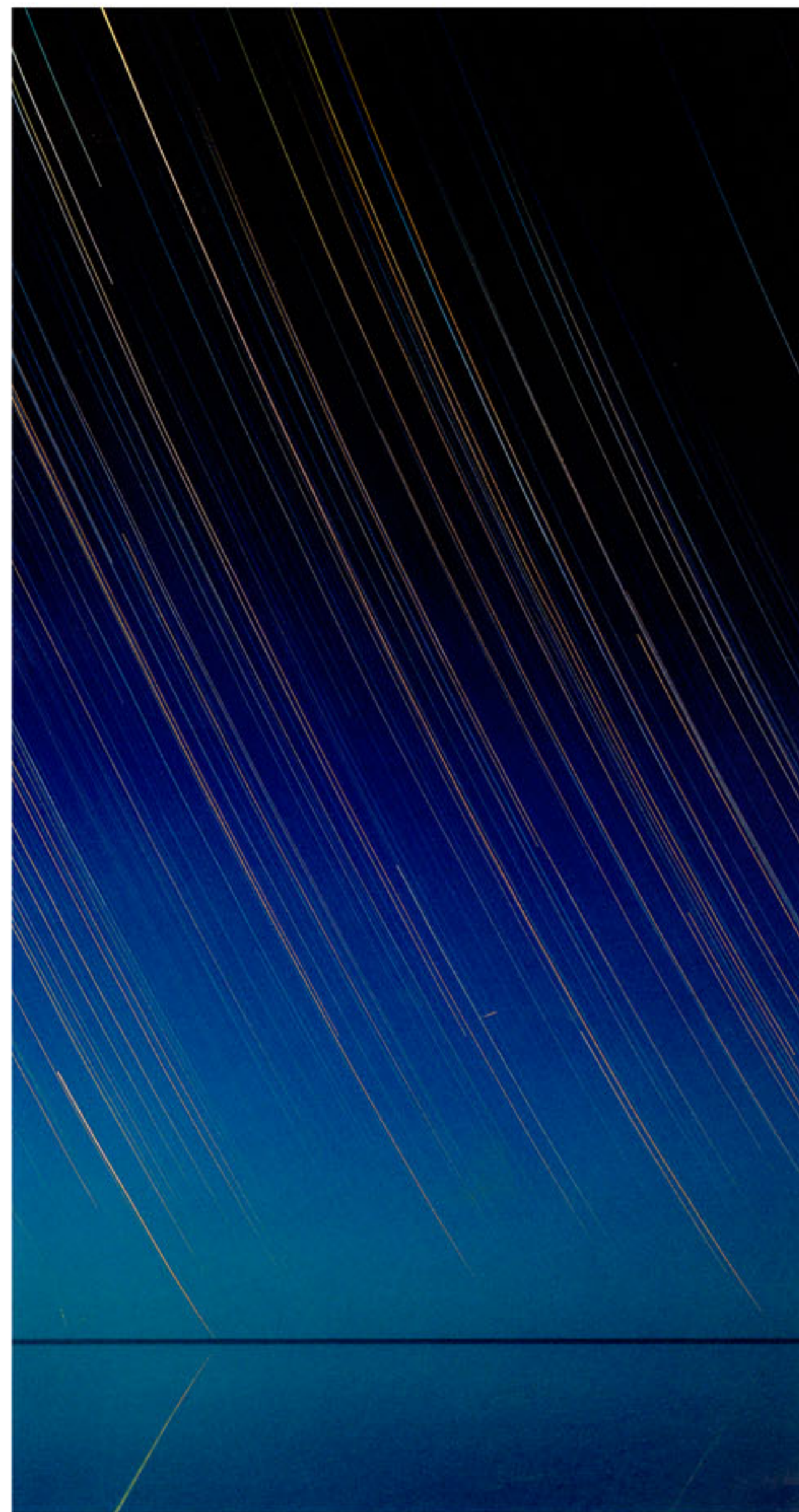
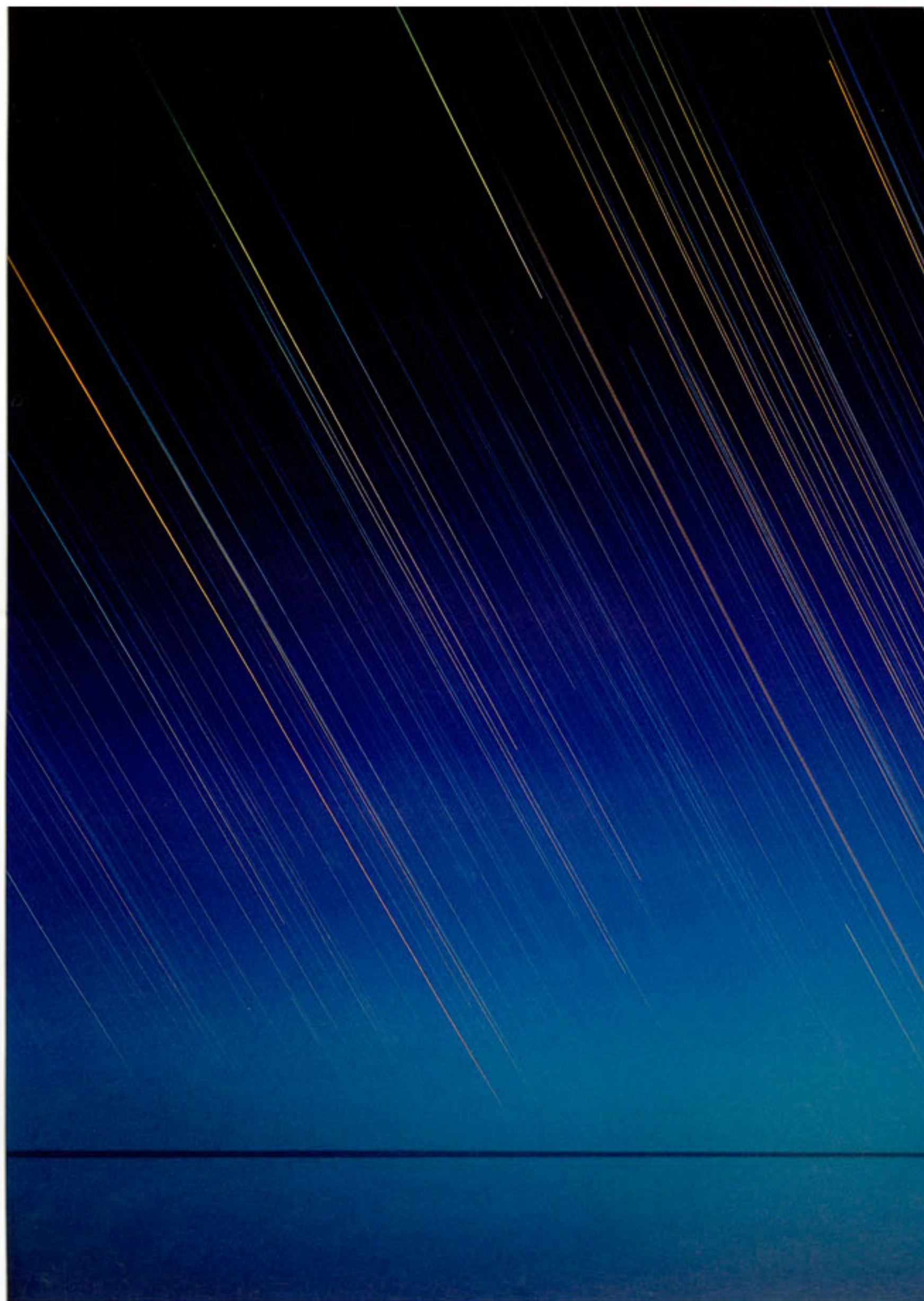


TO THE *Extremes*

Murray Fredericks is winning international acclaim for his dramatic landscape photography. We talked to him ahead of his latest exhibition

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For a man who has spent the last six years "photographing nothing" in the wastes of Central Australia, Murray Fredericks is surprisingly agitated. Just hours before he is about to jump on a plane to Bali, the Sydney landscape photographer is making a final cull of the images to appear in a forthcoming exhibition. "Would you mind taking a look?" he says, pointing to a dining table covered in haunting, ethereal images of vast salt pans, blood-red sunsets and limitless pale blue skies. "Point out the ones that you think don't fit, that jar in some way."

Fredericks, 37, has a gift for drawing you into his masterwork – a gruelling photographic study of Lake Eyre, a parched wasteland in South Australia. "It's like a black hole. Nothing lives there," he says. "The area has been in drought since 1988. Even the desert vegetation is dead. The desert has taken over."

The resulting images are so delicate, so impressionistic that they immediately overwhelm the viewer. Indeed, the critic John McDonald claims that Fredericks has crossed from photography into the world of contemporary art. So much so, that American and European collectors are ready to pay up to AUD10,000 for a limited edition print by the Australian photographer. In fact, Sir Elton John was so taken with the Lake Eyre images that he snapped up two at Hamiltons Gallery in London even before they could be mounted; an American collector subsequently bought the whole exhibition.

Fredericks, who lives in Bondi Beach with his wife and four young children, is gratified and somewhat bemused by the reaction to his Lake Eyre work – a project which has dominated his life for the best part of a decade. "I don't see photography as the medium. Landscape is the medium," he says. "What am I trying to do to people? I'm trying to create a shift for just a moment, so that they are somehow connected to me when I stand out there in the wilderness."

By his own admission, documenting the nuances of light and space in one of the world's harshest environments has taken a toll on his health. Each year he spends five weeks camping alone on Lake Eyre – but the operation means ferrying camera equipment, batteries, food and water using a bicycle and trailer.

"Between the edge of the lake and the salt pan itself is a section of waterlogged ground. This year it took two days to get all my stuff onto the salt. Then I need to re-supply every seven to ten days, which means coming back over the mud. The physical exertion nearly killed me. I've been back in Sydney for four weeks, but I'm still in a daze."

Apart from large format [8x10] cameras and heavy tripods, Fredericks also works with video and time-lapse cameras, which not only increased his payload but constantly drained his battery packs. On previous expeditions – all of them undertaken alone – Fredericks was forced to flee the lakebed during a two-day rainstorm. Although shallow, the water is whipped by the desert winds into fierce tides that could drown a man. As the water subsided, he found a small bump of higher ground – just big enough for his tent. "Solitude is a big part of the experience," he says.

"The physical exertion nearly killed me"

Despite running a successful commercial photographic practice in Sydney, Fredericks has an enduring passion for the natural world and has travelled extensively in Nepal, Patagonia and Tasmania; his black-and-white images of the Tasmanian forests and mountains established his reputation as a photographer of rare talent. The idea of Lake Eyre came to him during a trip to South America. "I had this experience of standing on a salt pan alone at night," he recalls. "And that experience, that feeling, wouldn't go away. When I heard about Lake Eyre I wondered if I could make a body of work out of pure emptiness – there's a lovely link there with the mind, and what happens when you empty your mind."

This amalgamation of Zen philosophy, technical prowess, commercial acumen and robust individualism is what makes Fredericks so unusual and, in part, explains the brilliance of his Lake Eyre pictures. The maverick tendency is evident throughout his career. Raised in a prosperous Sydney family, Fredericks tried to placate his parents by studying economics at the University of Sydney before backpacking around the world – and falling in love with photography. Largely self-taught, he then served "a type of apprenticeship" in the studio of respected Sydney photographer Gordon Undy before launching his own business and, in 2002, enrolling at the College of Fine Arts (COFA) at the University of NSW. "That changed everything," he says. Since completing his masters degree, Fredericks has been given a research position at COFA.

Apart from opening himself up to the work of so many other photographers, artists and mixed media practitioners, Fredericks also began playing with the notion of deconstructing landscape, of going beyond the stereotypical images that have become fodder for postcards and calendars. In previous generations the Australian landscape has been seen as a colonial trophy – or a place of heroic suffering. But for him the inner journey is far more captivating.

"It's not about being heroic, of conquering the landscape and coming back with these trophies, these images," he says. "The whole idea of approaching emptiness involves [the risk of] almost destroying me – at least of the conscious part being torn apart by the solitude. Out of that process come these objects."

The handsome prints (each measuring 150x120cm) are hand-crafted on German watercolour paper. "It's a hybrid," Fredericks explains. "While the images are shot on traditional film they are scanned [by computer] and then outputted on a 12-colour pigment inkjet printer. This is the best of all worlds – and creates its own aesthetic which is the most important thing."

With six field trips under his belt, Fredericks had imagined that his involvement with Lake Eyre was now at an end. His wife certainly wished so. But the photographer of nothingness feels the lake may yet surrender a few more precious images. "I might have to go back," he says whimsically. "If only for a few days. But that's the thing about Lake Eyre. You arrive with all these ideas, but it has a habit of destroying your plans. I return from every expedition thinking it's been a failure." For him, the exploration of "pure emptiness" is far from over.

Mark Chipperfield

PLATINUM

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Murray Fredericks' Vision

TURKISH DELIGHT

The Charm Of Cappadocia

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To The Extremes

Artist Profile by Mark Chipperfield (editor Sydney Magazine) in PLATINUM November 2007

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Mark Chipperfield 2007