

Apr 18 Terri Loewenthal explores "the intersection of landscape and psyche" in *Psychscapes*: "Who would I be in that place?"

[Feature](#)

"Are you romanced by the work? Maybe that means you are seeking hope."

By Hannah Loesch

Terri Loewenthal is an Oakland-based artist whose recent work explores the intersection of landscape and psyche. In her new series, *Psychscapes*, Loewenthal investigates the sublime expanse of land and sky romanticized in the still-potent mythology of Utopian California. Psychscapes are single-exposure, in-camera compositions that utilize special optics developed by Loewenthal to compress vast spaces into complex, evocative environments. These photographs combine straightforward landscape photography with explorations into the psychology of perception.

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HL: What inspired your investigation into the psychology of perception through photography?

TL: Nature has always been my refuge. When I lose the plot, I turn to open-ended walks in the hills for a reset. I am able to quiet my busy mind by immersing myself in a natural landscape, and this where all of my good ideas tend to come from. I've been taking pictures for a long time. When studying landscape, even before I discovered my current process, I was rarely drawn to make a literal document of nature. I've always been more interested in depicting the palette of a

place than the place itself. The relationship between colors is endlessly fascinating to me. I'm not entirely sure when I first had the idea to shift the colors of the natural world, but I've been experimenting for years, attempting to find a process that works with the natural beauty that already exists.

My desire to push the boundaries of photography is partly a reaction to the ubiquity of photographs today. I had a bout of feeling bored with making imagery and it caused a mild identity crisis. The only cure I could find was to make images that I was genuinely excited to look at, which meant they had to look completely different than anything else. I needed to deliberately engage in a process of discovery in order to deepen my relationship with what I was seeing.

HL: The dreamlike landscapes I see in your photos are so otherworldly, it's hard to believe they come straight out of your camera, and are not created in post-production. I know you like to keep the specifics of your process under wraps, but in general, how do you do it?

TL: The process involves composing reflections of the 360 degree landscape surrounding me and using filters to shift colors. Each image is a single exposure; all of the layering and color-shifting happens optically. I like to think of these images as in-camera collages. This means that the subject for most landscape photographers – the mountains in view – becomes raw material from which I construct images that are new vistas altogether. The images are not a document of where the camera was pointed. Shifting colors completely unmoors the image from actuality. Why does ambiguity have to be relegated to dreams? Being able to work with color independently from subject gives me much more control over the emotional tenor of the images. Changing color changes everything.

My work is a marriage of calculation and spontaneity. I have a toolkit and I have a sense of what might happen, but at the same time, it's a surprise. It's almost like popping a periscope up from a submarine, only once I pan past one view I can never pan back to see the same thing; it will have shifted to something new by then. What actually happens is the product of a playful moment. I know the conditions that make good Psychscapes, but I never know exactly what image I'll see when I put my eye to the viewfinder.

Since the images are made on-location, it's as much about the experience as it is about the photograph. There's an altered state of mind that comes from leaving the city behind, and that's definitely part of it. The fact that I don't know what I'm going to get keeps me excited. There are so many natural factors beyond my control during a session – the cloud cover, the angle of the sun, the precipitation in the air – and all of these things affect what I'm able to produce. Not only do I not know what the image is ahead of time, but even as I'm doing it, it's fleeting. If I don't take the picture the moment the magic happens, I lose it and can't remake it.



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Hannah Loesch: You describe this work as an exploration into the "intersection of landscape and psyche." What is the relationship between landscape and psyche?

Terri Loewenthal: In a way, our impression of ourselves is the most unmediated experience we have. And yet, it is wholly ephemeral. Our connection to physical places gives us a starting point for the exploration of our psyches. Because we define ourselves based on the experiences we've already had, we gravitate towards the familiar. Psychscapes utilize elements of actual landscapes, so they offer a comfortable first step into the unknown. They appeal to our memory of forest, mountain, stream and sky, yet we know confidently that they aren't real – a paradox that accentuates how artificial the divide between the psyche and the external world really is.

On its own, the notion of our psyche – our understanding of ourselves – is an abstraction. It only becomes meaningful when it is forced to contend with reality. Our natural environment gives us context for this understanding. The two questions "Who am I?" and "What's my place in the world?" must be answered together since it's the alchemical mixing of our spirit and our place

that determines what is possible. Joseph Campbell describes how tribes based in the jungle – amidst moist soil teeming with worms and tree-cover thick enough to hide the sky – believed deities were beneath them, underground, while tribes in the desert – in wide open skies – believed that heaven was above. Without consciously choosing, we come to understand our resources, both immediate and metaphysical, by being in a place. The same thing happens when we look at a picture of a place; we intuitively envision ourselves there, asking, "Who would I be in that place?"



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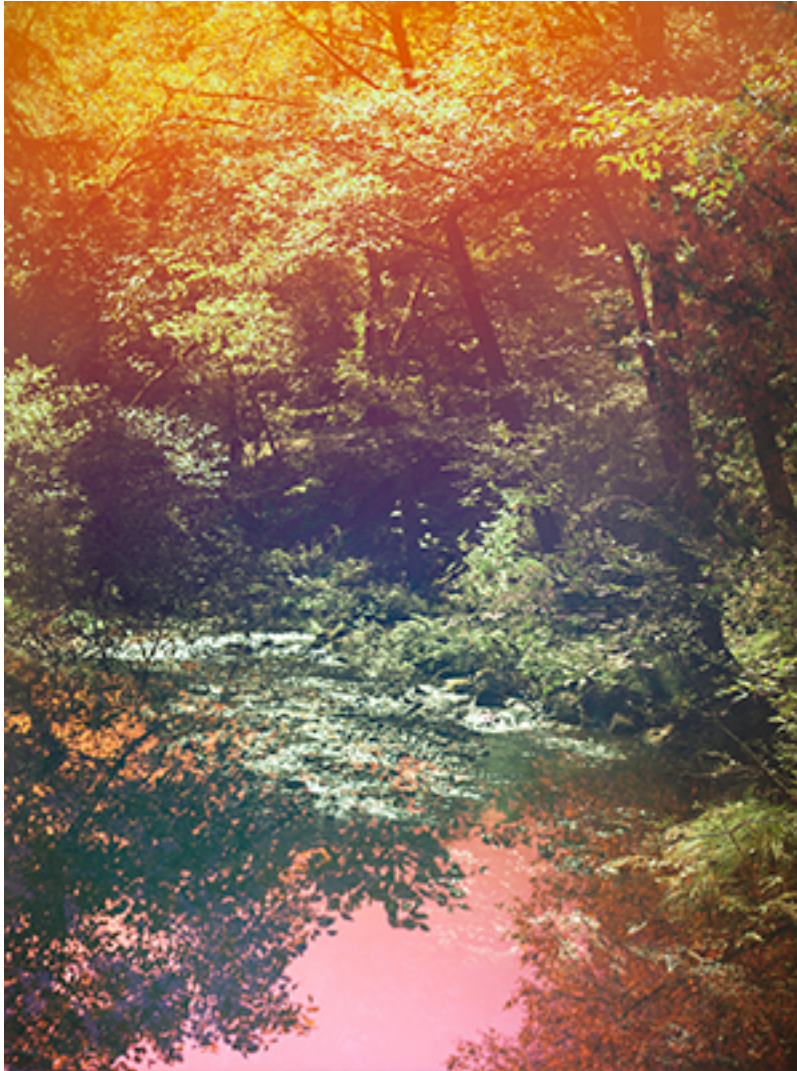


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HL: In *Psychscapes*, you investigate the expanse of land and sky romanticized in the mythology of Utopian California. Other than the fact that you are a native to the state, why California?

TL: California is a natural starting place. Not only is this the place where I fell in love with photography, it's the place where I've found my people – people who care more about creativity, social justice, and community-building than paying homage to the crumbling paradigms of what we “should” do with our lives. In California, I feel encouraged to explore ideas that don't spring from what I've been taught or shown, to trust myself. Here, people start at “yes,” and this encourages the open-mindedness necessary to indulge impossible ideas.

I am interested in creating Psychscapes in new terrain, but I would guess that the colorful aspect of my work might cause them to still read as having been made by a Californian, regardless of where they are shot. Color is a secret backdoor to our soul. Like the soundtrack to a film, color tells us how to feel. To have a psychedelic experience is to momentarily step away from the constraints your mind is normally under, and maybe the easiest way to visually suggest a hallucination is to shift something we already know (and love) to a shockingly new state. California has a long and rich history of fostering this kind of shift, and nurturing it into something beautiful.



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HL: You say the mythology of Utopian California is still potent. What do you mean by that? Are utopian societies meant to be questioned? Even in your photos, do they exist?

TL: Constructing a vision of a better place is an exercise in questioning our current day. The future is our chance to address the past. We should do so with eyes open, asking questions all the way. These images are not documents, they are an invitation to have a subjective experience. The places depicted in my work do not exist, but they aren't alien either. They look familiar and inviting. That's because we all house a vision of a better world within ourselves, but it's not a strictly logical construct; that's what makes these fantastical images a few steps closer to real. Psychscapes feel like recognizably better places, but the specifics of "better" are personal. If you feel like you are seeing a better place when you see these images, than there's evidence that you house a utopia of your own.



HL: What is it about psychedelic colors and your special optics that makes a landscape seem sublime and utopian?

TL: I often wonder the same thing while I'm shooting. There's a vibration that happens when certain colors are combined, an effect compounded by composition. Other art forms offer complete control over color in a way that photography, being representational, has been much more constrained. With Psychscapes, I can make color and light behave in ways they do not naturally behave. For example, I can have a wash of color emanate out from a valley or even across multiple separate features in the landscape. Color can unify composed elements, or shift the viewer's attention, or change the apparent time of day or mood. These are all common uses of color in paintings, but to be able to use color in this way in a photograph, while many elements of the image still appear "real," is endlessly surprising to me.



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HL: A lot of artists use photography to bring to light the often painfully real parts of the world that some would otherwise overlook. Why do you choose to romanticize instead?

TL: The moment Trump was elected my husband looked over in despair and said, "At least punk is back." My immediate reply was: "Beauty is back." Envisioning a more beautiful world encourages hope, and hope is what we need right now. While a lot of photography is a period at the end of a sentence, a document of reality, I want to offer an opening stanza. The psyche is complex, with dark nooks and crannies ultimately characterized by depth and surprise. I carve a path for the imagination to find what it will. My work is an entry point – let's try something a bit disorienting, and see if we can't reorient. Are you romanced by the work? Maybe that means you are seeking hope.



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In our current political climate, the painfully real is front and center, so now it's time to showcase the thing that we continually gloss over: the sublime. A mountain might be the easiest thing to overlook. Mountains are grandiose, and we have an intrinsic draw to know them, but it's very easy to start and stop with the notion of their beauty, and not push any further. By using the landscape not as subject, but as raw material for composition, I start with something that we've already filed away and reconfigure it in a way that helps us move beyond simply considering it beautiful again. I use elements from the natural world to show you the rest of yourself. Remember: you are nature – body, psyche and all. What's more hopeful than that?



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