

Psychedelic Pictures Reconsider a History of American Landscape Photography

hafny.org/blog/2018/4/psychedelic-pictures-reconsider-a-history-of-american-landscape-photography

April 10, 2018



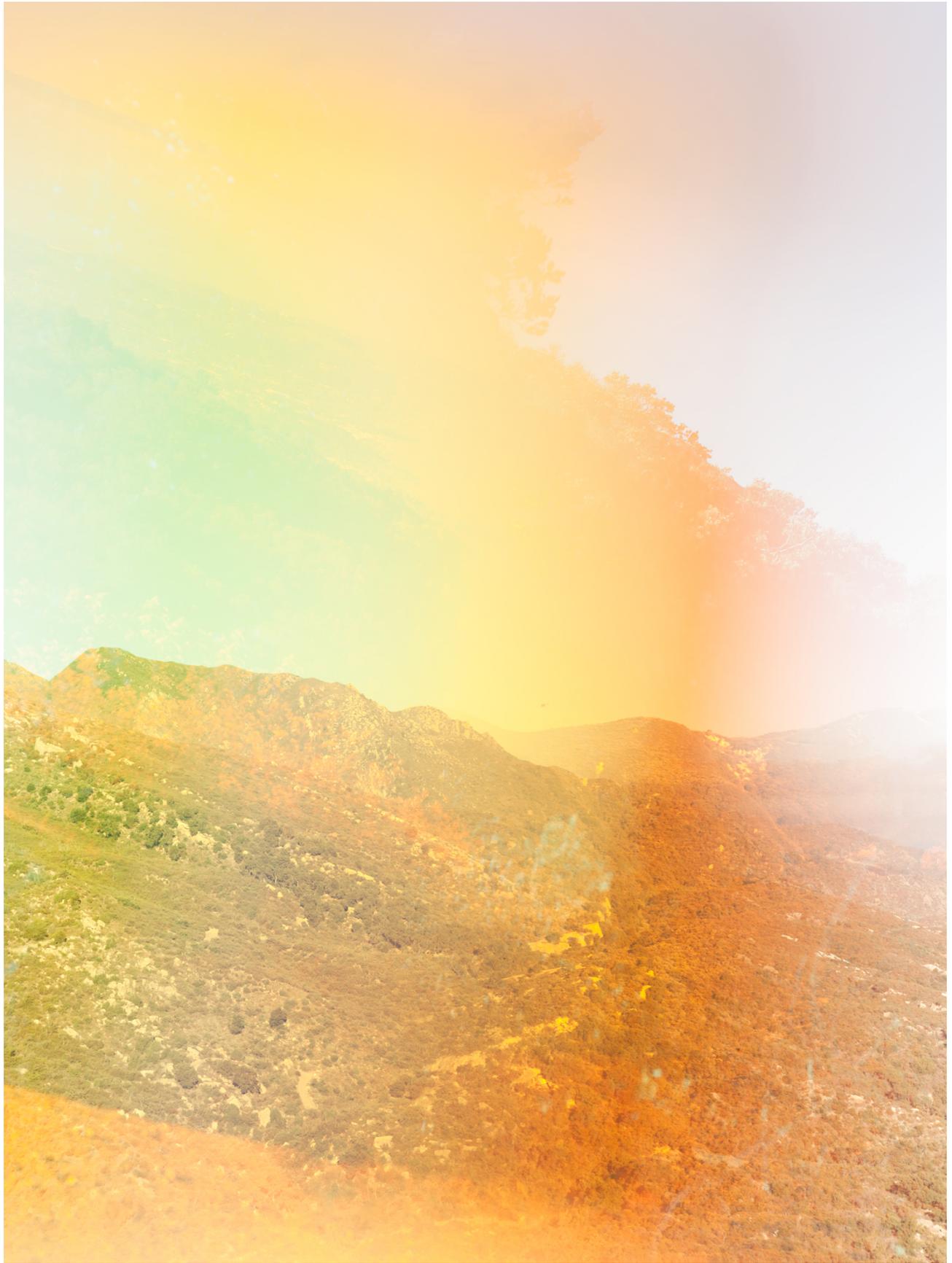
Psychscape 18 (Banner Ridge, CA), 2017 © Terri Loewenthal

Terri Loewenthal's Psychscapes, on view at [CULT | Aimee Friberg Exhibitions](#), San Francisco through April 21, considers the California landscape as a canvas for technological and psychological interpretation.

Terri Loewenthal's colorful visions are grounded in – and radically riff on – the photographic expeditions of post-Civil War US Geological surveys, which had many now-controversial goals. On one level, newly gathered information might help industrialists better understand – and subdue – the vast terrain between the growing nation's eastern and western shores and properly feed an increasingly hungry consumer economy. On another, to help “secure”

the land and fully realize Manifest Destiny's mandate, governmental agencies used survey information to envision future European-settler civilizations. Photography was a tool to meet both of these ends and visually justify their explorations and conquests.

Exhibition review by Roula Seikaly



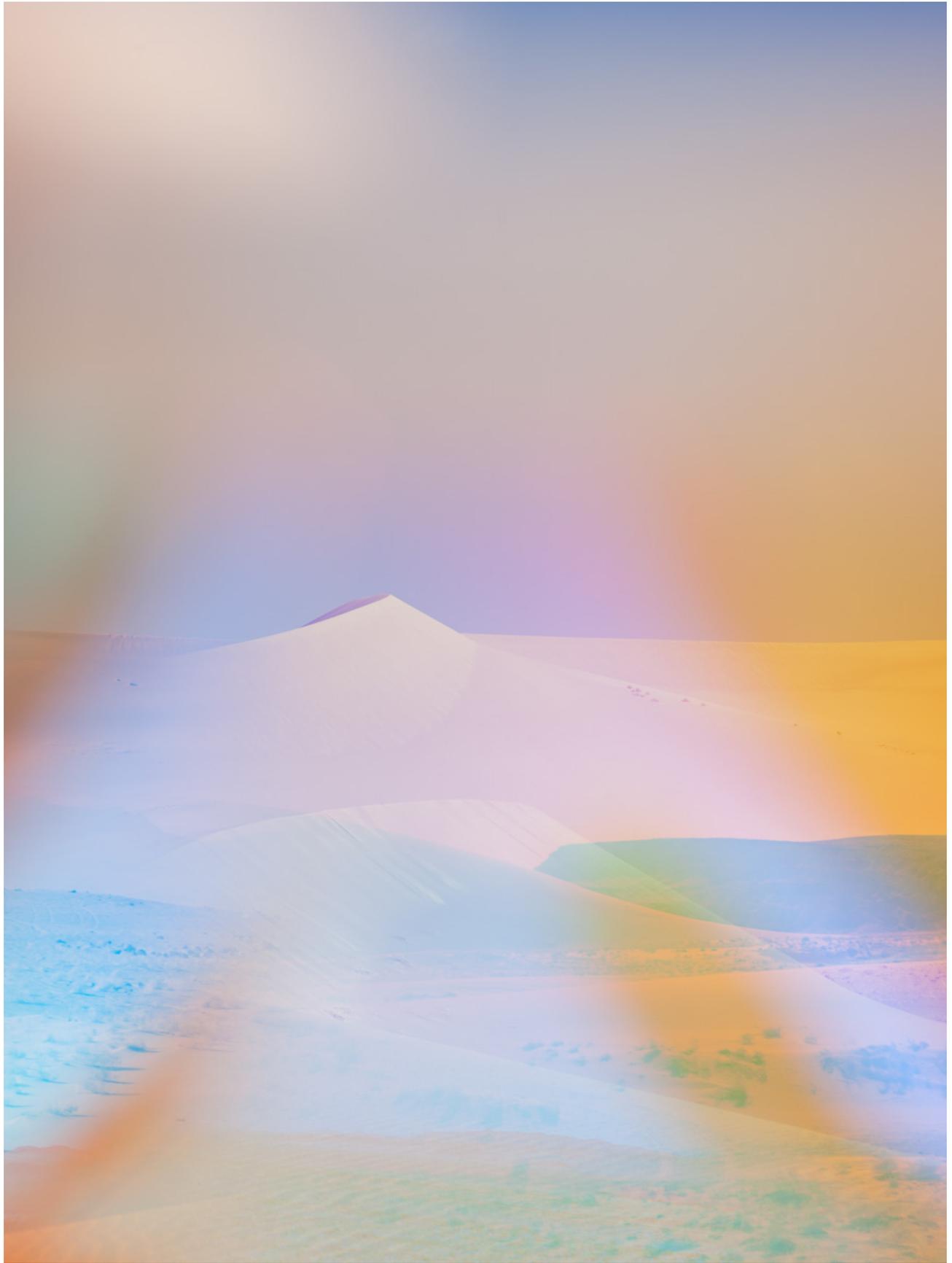
Psychscape 26 (Rock Garden, CA), 2017. © Terri Loewenthal



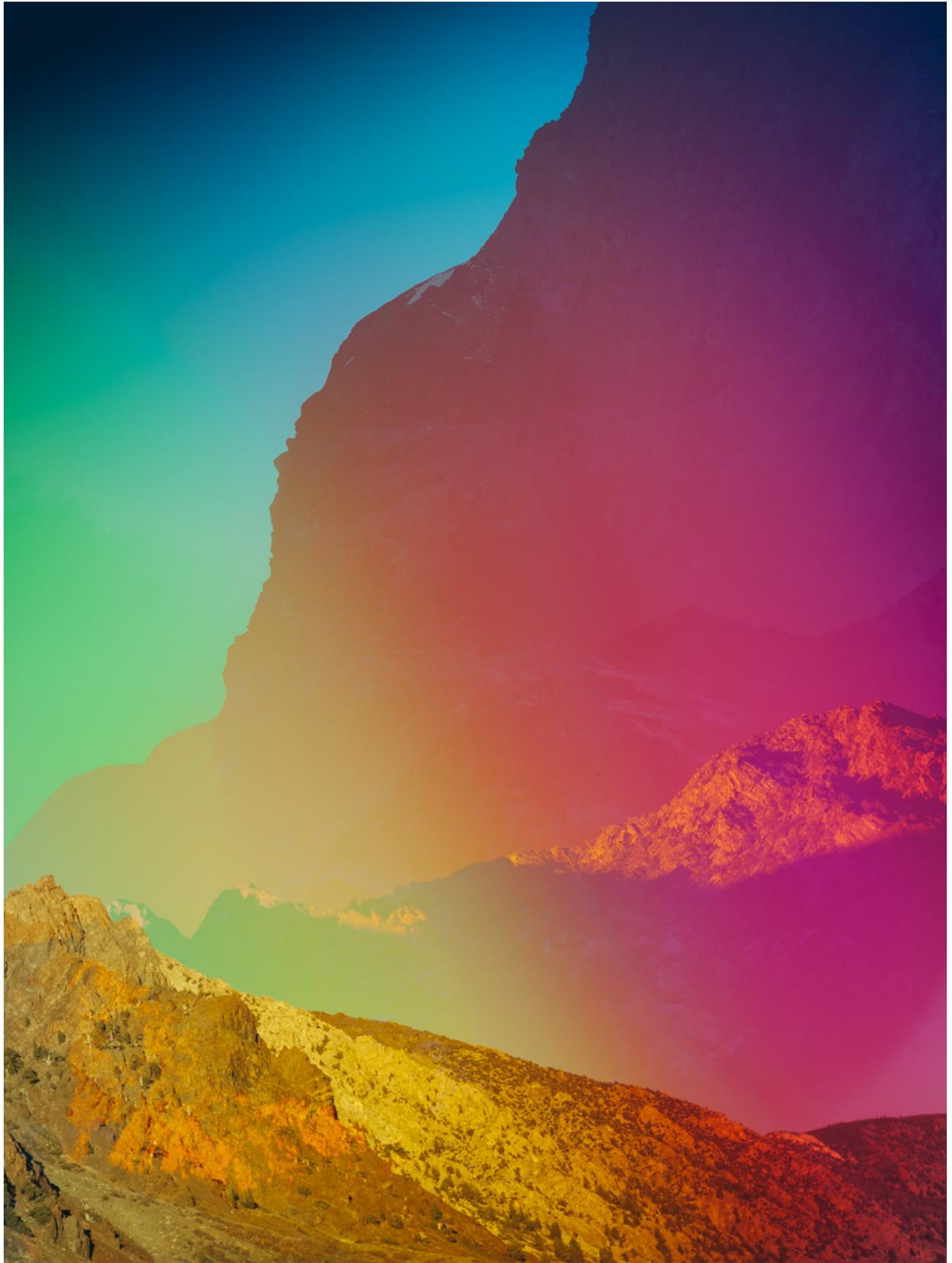
Installation photograph courtesy of Cult Exhibitions / Terri Loewenthal

Oakland-based Loewenthal is an explorer with a different, often psychedelic approach. Regular excursions to remote inland regions – complete with a fully-loaded photographic equipment kit – serve as retreats from the demands of urban life and opportunities to explore both the land and the technical modifications to her camera that enable her hallucinogenic compositions.

Her photographs are achieved in-camera, not in post-production, through a process she keeps a mystery. In our current, information-dense state, not easily recognizing how Loewenthal arrives at the final product intensifies the alchemical magic that so enthralled early photography enthusiasts and audiences.



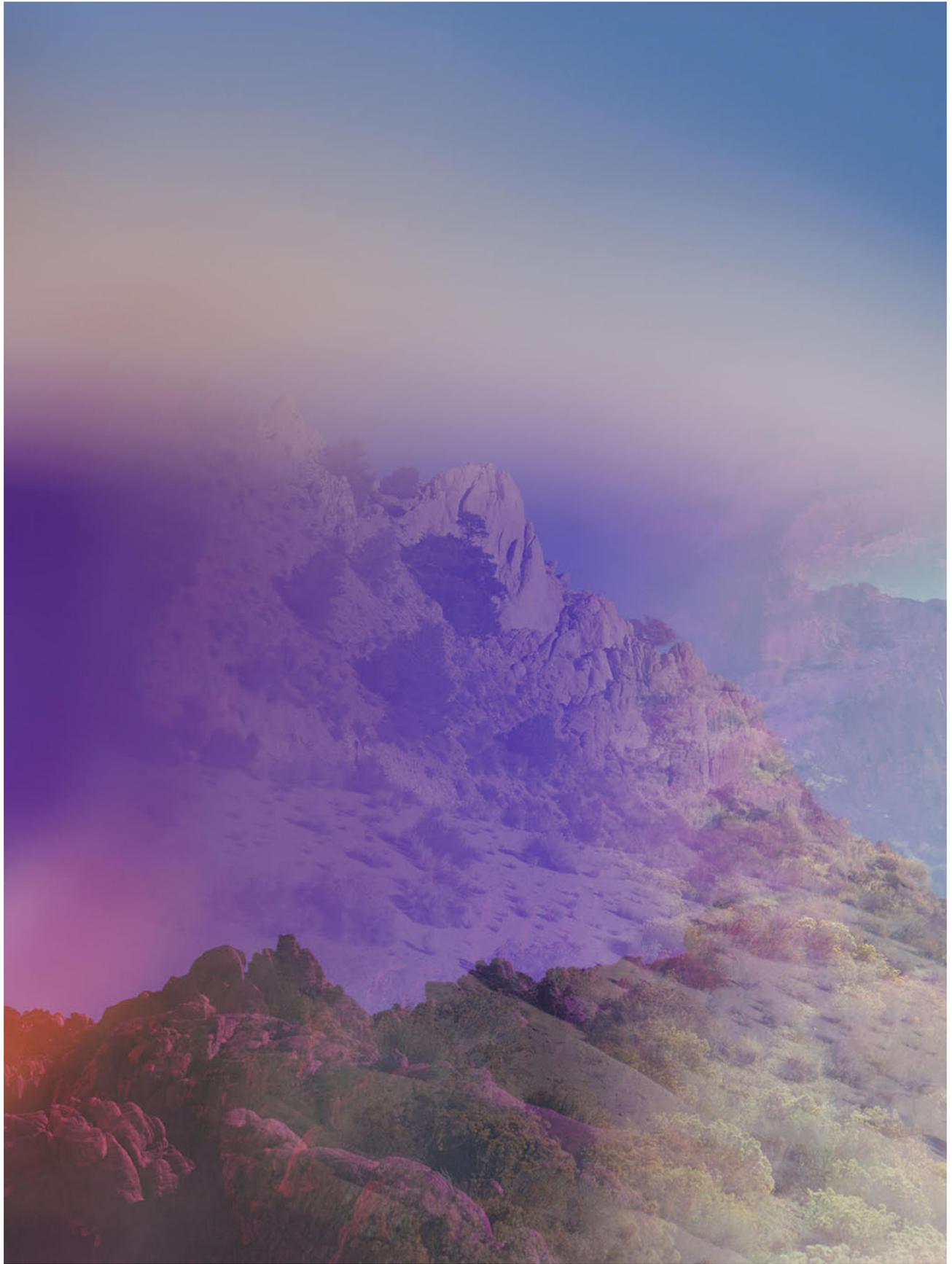
Psychscape 69 (Tonopah, NV), 2017. © Terri Loewenthal



Psychscape 41 (Lundy Canyon, CA), 2017 © Terri Loewenthal

Scanning each vibrant surface for usable information, we identify recognizable elements: sand dune, valley, canyon wall, forest. Those elements are discernible, but their presentation defies the perceptual and cognitive organizational schemas we've developed over time. *Psychscape 69 (Tonopah, NV)*, proposes sand dunes superimposed over a scrub brush desert, while *Psychscape 41 (Lundy Canyon, CA)* envisions a steep canyon wall looming over ancient mountain tops. In each composition, reassuring markers signaling the fore-, middle and background fold into the frontal plane, and relatable color palettes are abandoned.

Without knowing the topographic features that distinguish one location from another, it's practically impossible to name the regions we see in each image. Loewenthal's kaleidoscopic compositions ultimately restore mystery to a perennial photographic subject and deny our visual ownership of natural spaces.



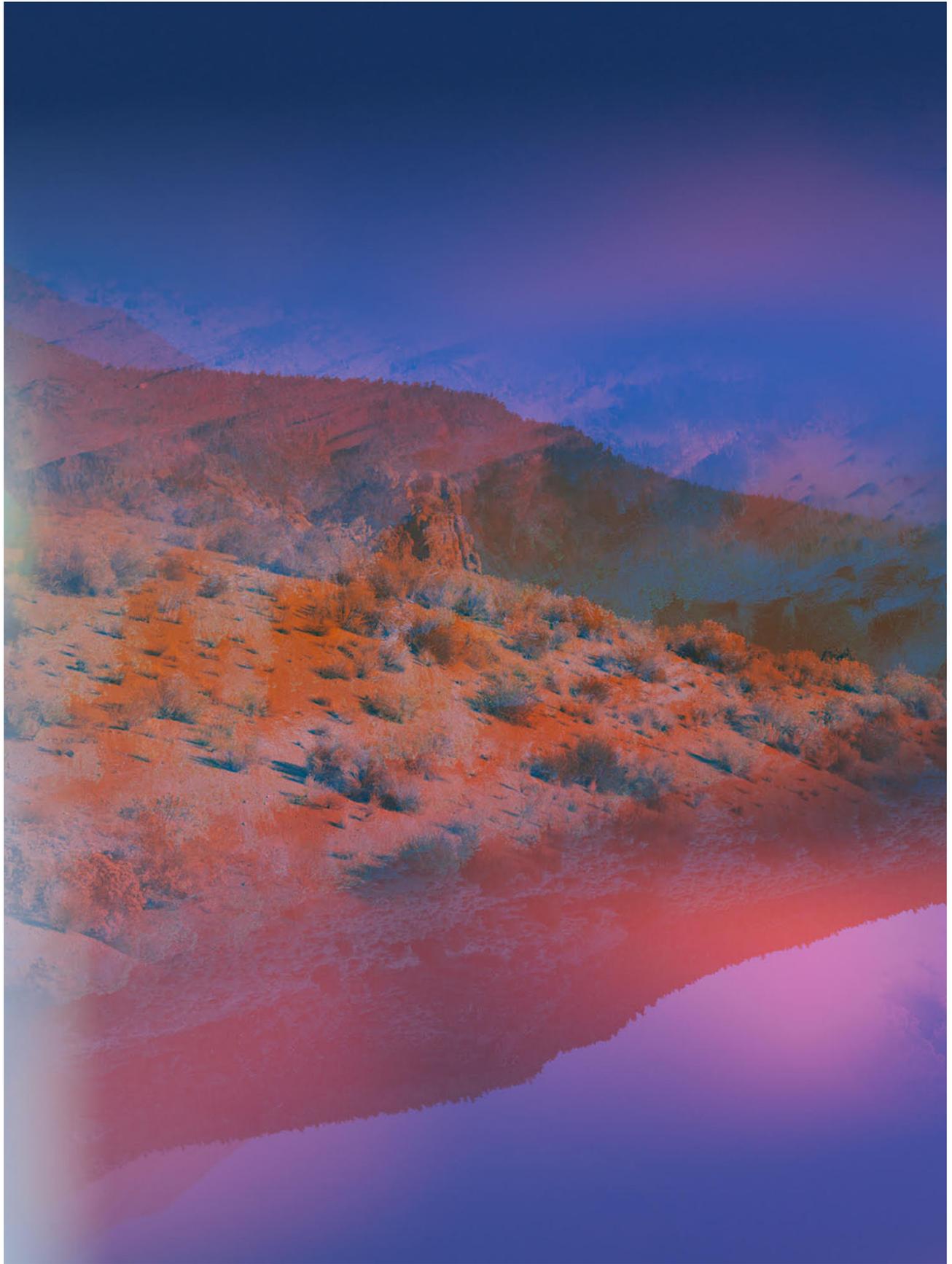
Psychscape 73 (Downs, Mount, CA), 2017.j

Early in photography's history, Gustave Le Gray and Henry Peach Robinson sought to overcome the limitations of long exposure times when creating land and seascapes by producing manipulated combination prints. These rendered both sky and ground legible, affirming our perceptual expectations of what the world looks like and buoying the collective belief that what we could see and claim as our own.

Loewenthal's compositions defy the clear visual perception that Le Gray and Robinson strove to perfect photographically, and our urge to name what we see. Her compositions present landscape not as the blank canvas onto which nineteenth-century expansionist dreams were projected, nor as diminished and disappearing from excessive human encroachment or industrial exploitation. Instead, these landscapes represent what is liminal, exciting, and possibly dangerous in the physical and psychological spaces we enter.



Installation photograph courtesy of Cult Exhibitions / Terri Loewenthal



Psychscape 78 (Obsidian Dome, CA), 2017 © Terri Loewenthal

Posted April 10, 2018

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TagsTerri Lowenthal, New Landscape Photography, New Photography, Large Format, Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, American Landscape Photography, Terri Loewenthal