

## Reviewed: Michael Horsley at DCAC

Posted by **Louis Jacobson** on Jan. 30, 2014 at 2:00 pm



**Michael Horsley** is best known for his documentation of pre-gentrification D.C., but in “At the Crossroad: A Topography of Space, Time and Memory,” an exhibit of new and newish works at DCAC, Horsley turns the page—at least a bit—to a more varied conception of the American landscape.

While the exhibit includes a bunch of examples of urban decay, it also spends quality time in more scenic locales, such as the Nevada desert, Lake Tahoe, Utah’s Capitol Reef National Park, and the Hawaiian island of Kauai.

Horsley’s work is most notable is in its technique, which is often high-contrast to an extreme. Like **Noelle Tan**, whose early works graced DCAC’s walls nine years ago, Horsley revels in all-encompassing shadows, such as the image in Philadelphia where it’s so dark, the photographer’s unsteady grip is made plainly visible.

Especially noteworthy is a triptych Horsley made in an urban wasteland in St. Louis’s warehouse district, one so moody that it could stand in for a still from **Robert Rodriguez’s** 2005 comic-book-noir movie *Sin City*. In Horsley’s images, the sky is a near-impenetrable black, while reflective surfaces—from concrete to brick to asphalt—

are shiny, verging on white.

The combined effect is intriguingly disorienting—one gets the sensation of not knowing whether it is day or night. Horsley says this stems from manipulation through Photoshop, though he adds that the blackness of the sky isn't an artificial creation, but rather the decision to tune in to wavelengths emanating from the sky that aren't commonly seen or captured on film.

In many (perhaps too many) of his works, Horsley, a professional archivist, salutes his photographic forbears. An image of the ocean seen through a rocky fissure hat-tips **Minor White**; several sand dune photographs echo **Edward Weston**; an odd, elevated boulder suggests the work of **Paul Caponigro**; a triptych of a desert lake calls to mind images by **Richard Misrach** and **Mark Klett**; and several works suggest the work of Horsley's hero, the 19th-century photographer **Timothy O'Sullivan**.

Horsley's cleverest nod to photographic history, however, comes from the humblest of source material: a pointy geometric structure in D.C. for built for holding road salt. The dome is built from identically sized panels; the available light bathes each panel in a different, and progressing, shade of darkness. So when Horsley was beginning to fine-tune the process he used in this show, he used the salt dome image it as a digital-age stand-in for that old darkroom relic—a photographic test strip.

*The show is on view to Feb. 9 at [DCAC](#), 2438 18th St. NW.*

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