

Seeing New Mountains

by Erin Elder

Summer 2022

Most mountains take millenia to form. On our continent, most mountains were formed eons ago. They were made by the movement of tectonic plates far below the earth's surface. The subterranean tensions pushed the Earth's crust into new shapes through uplifts, tilts, fractures, faults, gravitational collapses, folds and sometimes eruptions. These mountains contain multitudes: rivers, meadows, valleys, cliffs, ridges, faces, and peaks. They are alive with weather and wildlife.

But now there are new mountains. The new mountains are geometrically tiered, their sculpted mesas perfectly uniform except for surprising streaks of vivid color. They crop up atop the desert floor or line the foot of larger ranges. They can emerge quickly, sometimes forming in less than a decade. Constructed by humans with dynamite and enormous machines, these rock piles are massive yet often unseen.

Lee Saloutos has been exploring the Great Basin for decades, taking in various scenes with his camera in hand. As a photographer, he loves the desert's soft color palette, the razor sharp air, the constantly changing light, the wide spacious expanses of landscape with a view of mountains almost always in the distance. He likes to take long drives, allowing his eyes the opportunity to roam. Over the last few years, Lee started taking notice of large hulking landforms of terraced rock. They were both quietly unassuming and undeniably present. With a longstanding interest in mining, he knew these to be the waste piles from surface mines and although these waste piles are as common to the area as sage brush or jackrabbits, he became newly fascinated by their formal qualities. They appeared to him as a kind of land art—massive, intentional, manmade, beautiful in their own way. He saw each one as distinct and yet related; he wanted to photograph more and more of them. He wanted to take a close look at each of these newly formed landscapes and he wanted to see them en masse.

Long before Nevada was a state, humans were mining it. The region's early people mined obsidian, quartz, agate, jasper, turquoise, and other materials. When Europeans came to the area in the mid-1850s and began digging around, they found silver and gold. Since then, mining has been an essential element of Nevada's economy and its identity. But it wasn't until a century after those first bonanzas when mining became industrialized and visibly changed the landscape. What had been primarily an underground activity could now, with the advent of big machines, happen on the earth's surface.

Open pit mining is a marvel of human invention and might. Picks and shovels have been upgraded to dynamite and bulldozers. Through drilling and blasting, the surface rock is broken apart and moved aside so that the useful parts are extracted. Over time, the mine forms in stepped terraces that curve along the contours of the growing pit. Depending on the material being mined, the process is different, but there is always a massive amount of overburden or waste rock removed from the growing pit. The waste rock must be hauled out by trucks and dumped strategically into piles. The piles are made up of large

terraces engineered for safety, stability, and sometimes revegetation. Large mines can produce tens of thousands of tons of waste rock every day; their piles can be hundreds of feet high and stretch for miles. To call them piles is a bit misleading because these rock heaps are monumental and engineered and they will last forever.

Lee began using Google Earth and various mining websites to seek out these new mountains. Sometimes they were visible from the road, sometimes a little more effort was required to get just the right shot. Access to these mines, especially the active ones, can be challenging. So he ventured down public roads and skirted the fence lines; more than once he was chased away. For Lee, there was a cumulative impact of visiting these sites. He began to see their differences and similarities; he learned to read each landscape for its unique story. He saw that what is ubiquitous is also bizarre and that what is ordinary is truly confounding. With his camera, he was documenting a place at a moment in time, capturing a reality to share later with an audience. But photography has always felt, for Lee, more relational than straight record-making. Because by spending years with a particular subject for years, the subject becomes more complex and nuanced. Various perspectives arise and are allowed to coexist. Therefore, the work is less about expressing an idea or making a point. It's about creating a series of honest and beautiful portraits of some very complicated places.

The New Mountains is a collection of 22 photographs of different mining sites throughout northern Nevada. They are made with a medium format digital camera and, without much photoshopping, turned into very large archival digital pigment prints. The wonder of large-scale photographs is that you can see one from across the room, walk right up to it, and look around inside. With images this large, you must look up and down and move across them with your body. You cannot take them in without getting involved. And when you approach Lee's images, you will recognize many things—a water tower, a line of trucks, individual plants and rocks. Towns appear at the base of a massive pile. Native mountains are somehow eclipsed. A road winds in or out. What becomes apparent at this scale is not only the magnitude of these piles but their proximity and relationship to everyday life.

And this is perhaps what makes mining so complicated: we depend on it for nearly everything in modern life. Every appliance, gadget, building, phone, lightbulb, and vehicle is made and powered with materials mined from inside the earth. And yet the materials we mine are finite and the cost of their extraction is taking a toll on the planet's health. To see this many new mountains in a singular exhibition space, you are faced with the undeniable fact of their impressive number and their unmoving existence. New mountains are forming all the time, day and night, near and far. They are a reality to be recognized if not reckoned with. For some people, the new mountains are toxic waste dumps; for others, they shimmer with gold. In places like northern Nevada, mining is a good job and a way of life. And for a good many people, these places are home. Lee Saloutos sees in these new mountains a complex and fascinating phenomenon. Step up, look around, and see what you think.