

High Art

Gazing down at the world from space reveals truths about food

Published 20 December 2021, with Mishka Henner.

This episode was prompted by a visit to Bologna and the 5th edition of the Biennial of Photography on Industry and Work. The focus was on food, and all of the II exhibitions were really interesting and well curated, not least because they were often in glorious spaces that are not normally open to the public, resulting in some very fine cultural juxtapositions. One really caught my eye because it offered literally a new view of the foundations of America's appetite for cheap beef. Almost as soon as I got home I arranged to chat to the artist.

Mishka Henner: I'm Mishka Henner. I'm an artist and I see things. When I saw those landscapes, I had no idea what they were. I've never seen anything like it. At the very beginning, I didn't know what I was seeing. Cellular-like structures and channels that run in between these cells. Each of these cells is populated by any number of black and white dots, effectively. Almost looks like you're looking down into a very well-organised petri dish, organised in a grid structure filled with these almost microbial forms in each cell. And then the grid is interrupted by these giant, colourful lagoons. They just looked like no landscape or image I'd ever seen before.

Jeremy: I have seen images like that before, which was why I found Mishka Henner's work so interesting. He created large photographs of cattle feedlots, huge establishments that produce the vast bulk of American-raised beef. They are immense, home to herds of 100,000 animals and more, kept on bare earth and provided with endless food and water until they're trucked off to slaughter.

The scale of a large feedlot is almost impossible to grasp until you look at one of Mishka Henner's photographs and you realise that each black and white dot is a cow, and that the small rectangles are huge 18-wheeler trucks. Henner stumbled on feedlots while working on an earlier project to depict oil fields using satellite imagery.

Mishka: Never in human history have we had access to these tools with which to look at the world. One of the first challenges that I set myself was to try and represent these gigantic infrastructural systems. I did a number of works using this technique, and then a few years later I decided to focus on the oil fields because the oil fields are impossible to visualise. Their systems are so vast. The pipeline systems, the transmission lines, the fuel depots, they span such a massive area of land that they're just impossible to photograph from the ground or even from a plane.

Then, obviously, satellite imagery completely changes that. Suddenly, for the first time, from 5,000 miles up in space we can see for the first time these entire infrastructural systems and also the effect they have on the land. That's what I was looking for. I did a big project on US oil fields, and that's when I stumbled across these sites in Colorado, California, Kansas, and Texas.

Jeremy: Mishka Henner decided to find out what lay behind the images he was looking at, and to scope out the best ones for his project.

Mishka: I would go looking for the feedlot directories of various feedlot associations across the US. They would publish information about every feedlot in the state, and that would contain information on how much livestock they had in each feedlot as well as their addresses. Then it was just a simple case of just going through every single one across the US, getting a real overview of what these feedlot structures look like. Then, in a sense, choosing the seven most ... which were for me the seven most interesting examples of them.

There are really tiny feedlots. They're very small feedlots, but then you have these gigantic operations, which are the norm really. They're the ones that were the most interesting to me, these huge massive feedlots, and they all have different forms. Farmers use different chemicals to break down the animal waste, and that results in all these spectacular blooms of colour, of different colours on different feedlots, and in the lagoons.

Jeremy: One of the things that's slightly difficult when you see them, you talk about them being massive but there's no scale. Looking at the image, you don't really know. I guess you could extrapolate from the fact that a little dot is a cow. On some of them, you can see

trailer trucks and what have you, but there is no scale. You don't tell us what we're looking at.

Mishka: No. The whole point is that the viewer approaches the work and studies the detail. It's clear that you're not looking at an abstract painting and you're not looking at a photograph even. You're looking at something entirely new that you've maybe never seen before. As you get closer up and examine the detail, I think that's what happens. You start to pick up these little pickup trucks, telegraph poles, silos, farm buildings, and so on.

You got to be careful when you're making work. You don't want it to be a lecture really. You don't want to tell people what to think or how to even look. I try to keep it as ambiguous as possible really. I think there aren't many places left actually where we're allowed to be ambiguous. Especially now, everything's so polarised. I feel like that experience is what makes it so powerful when people do suddenly realise what they're looking at.

Jeremy: Well, what kind of reactions did you get when you first started showing the work?

Mishka: Well, the very first publication that featured the work was an American cultural magazine called Vice. Obviously, that set the spark really. I can honestly tell you that in the nine years since I've produced that work, there aren't many days or weeks that go by when I'm not fielding a request to do with this work. Whether it's an activist group who wants to feature the work on a leaflet or a medical journal that wants to feature images from the series in an article about the effects of feedlots on the land and on human health. Like I said, I've spent nine years basically just dealing with the effects of this work.

Jeremy: Now you get to deal with me. [chuckles]

Mishka: Well, no. I mean, it's brilliant. It's amazing. As an artist, you don't make a work like this every day. It's amazing to see all of the different ways in which those images have permeated across borders and across different cultures. I think of all of this as a kind of feedback, and there's a lovely symmetry between feedlots and feedback, isn't there? [chuckles]

Jeremy: [chuckles] Did anyone object? There are these things in the US, there are quite a few places ... Quite a few states have passed laws saying you can't go undercover into an agricultural organisation, you can't report on certain sorts of things. Has there been any pushback of that kind?

Mishka: No, the opposite. There was a journalist, American journalist, called Will Potter who saw the series and was inspired to create a crowdfunding campaign whose purpose was to fly drones over feedlots with a view to push back against the agricultural gagging laws in various states. That was a massive success, that campaign. It was a huge success. Many of these laws have actually been overturned as a result of all this. That was fascinating to me because when I did the series and it went viral, I had a journalist from Texas call me asking me did I have any problems with the agricultural gagging laws, and I'd never heard of them. I had no idea.

She explained it to me and I went and researched it further, and sure enough, yes. I had no idea that, in a way, I was exploiting a loophole in the legislation because these images already existed. I took them but I didn't take them — if you know what I mean. They were already there. They're already in the world. For me, that's what's fascinating about working in this way. I think the world now is an image of infinite detail, and the images are already out there. You just have to know where to look.

Jeremy: Our conversation went a bit off the rails then because another Mishka Henner project looked specifically at government censorship of images from space. Mostly, around the world, governments manage to smudge the places they think are important, so you can't really see what's there. In the Netherlands, they do something very weird.

Mishka: Countries around the world censor their satellite images. There's nothing new about that. What was really fascinating was the Dutch chose this spectacular Photoshop effect. It's ridiculous. Actually, it's absurd, but quite beautiful as well. What they do is — it's an effect called Crystallize in Photoshop, which reduces all detail into very bold, colourful polygons, different coloured polygons. So, you're kind of scanning, you would suddenly come across these beautiful abstract, clearly digitally applied forms in the middle of the landscape. It was like a red rag to a bull to people on the internet. So, many people

tried to start to figure out what was there, and sure enough, they were usually military bases, royal palaces, fuel depots.

Jeremy: The weird part about it is that instead of just fudging out or photoshopping in some other kind of thing, they draw attention to the ... They're not hiding the location; they're just hiding what's there.

Mishka: Oh, sure. It's just like having a massive arrow in flashing neon pointing to something and saying, "Don't look here." That's the same as the agricultural gagging laws really. It's the same thing. Who comes up with these ideas?

Jeremy: The ag-gag laws, you think, actually draw attention to the things they want to hide?

Mishka: The effect of the agricultural gagging laws is that suddenly Americans see the feedlots for the first time, and they're absolutely shocked and disgusted. They've no idea where their beef comes from; no idea. They look at the side of the package and they see some happy cows eating grass, and they think that's where their beef burgers are coming from. Obviously, the cumulative effect of that is that when you finally get to see where it's coming from it's a shocking outrage for many people.

Jeremy: It's interesting also that by presenting them as artworks, you're kind of avoiding the polemic, you're avoiding the campaigning. You're just saying, "Here, look."

Mishka: Well, I don't avoid it because I supply anyone who asks for that image. I supply it too because, like I said, I feel it forms part of a feedback loop to the work itself.

The other thing I should say is I'm not a vegetarian or a vegan. That's the first thing I should say. Secondly, I think these feedlots are kind of metaphors. They talk about something bigger than just the beef industry. I think it's a system for living and dying that can be applied to labour practices, to what's happened to education, to the health system. Now, this is a kind of aggressive capitalism that treats life in a very particular way. I think the feedlots are a beautiful reflection of that actually.

That's why I don't like to get drawn into the whole polarising debate because I feel that it's not ... Those are images of things that are

fundamental to our civilisation, and they don't just stop at the beef industry and hamburgers. They go way beyond that; for me anyway. That's what I found so fascinating about the series, and I think maybe why it continues to have legs.

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