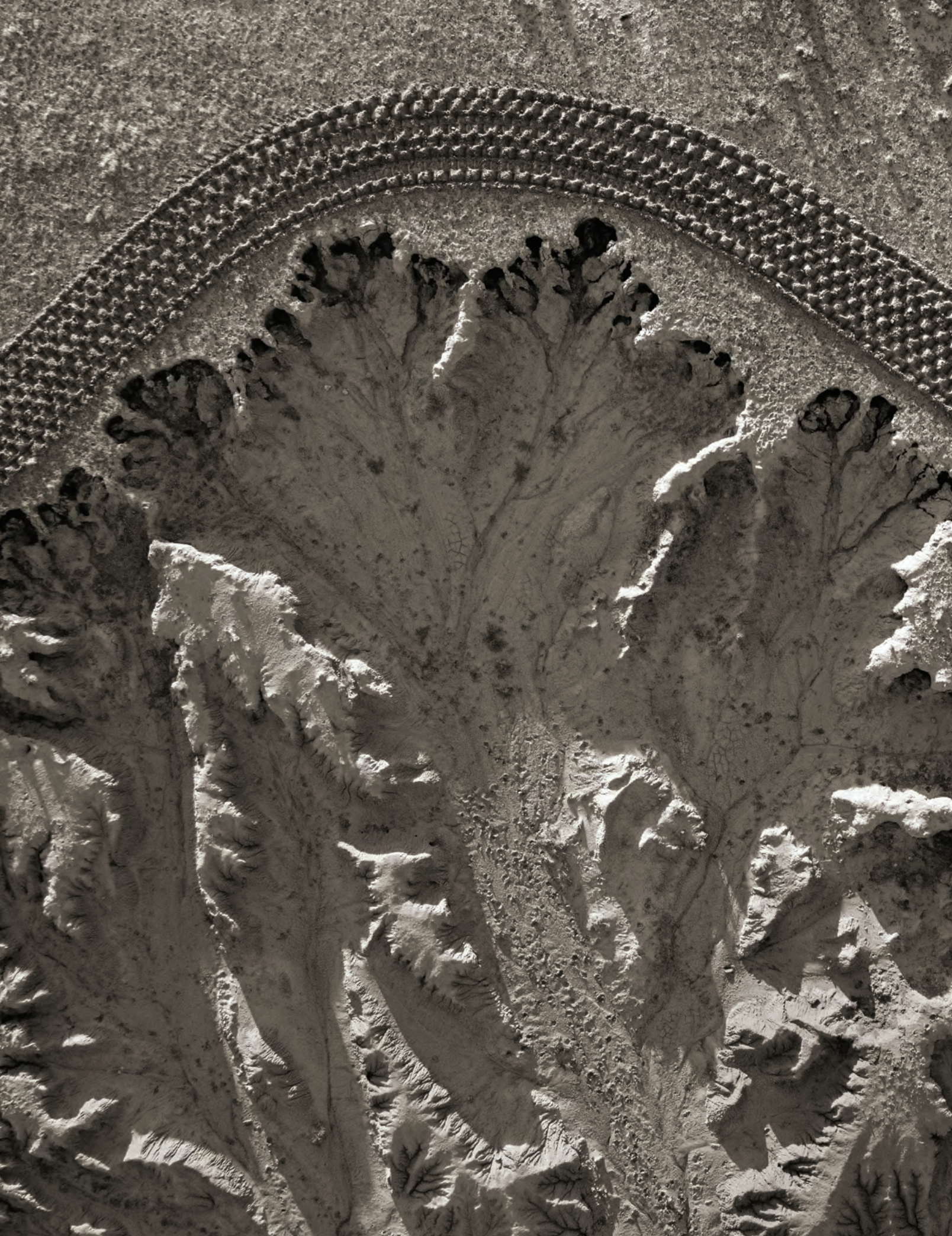




Esha Chiocchio

Restoring Earth's Canvas: Lordsburg Playa

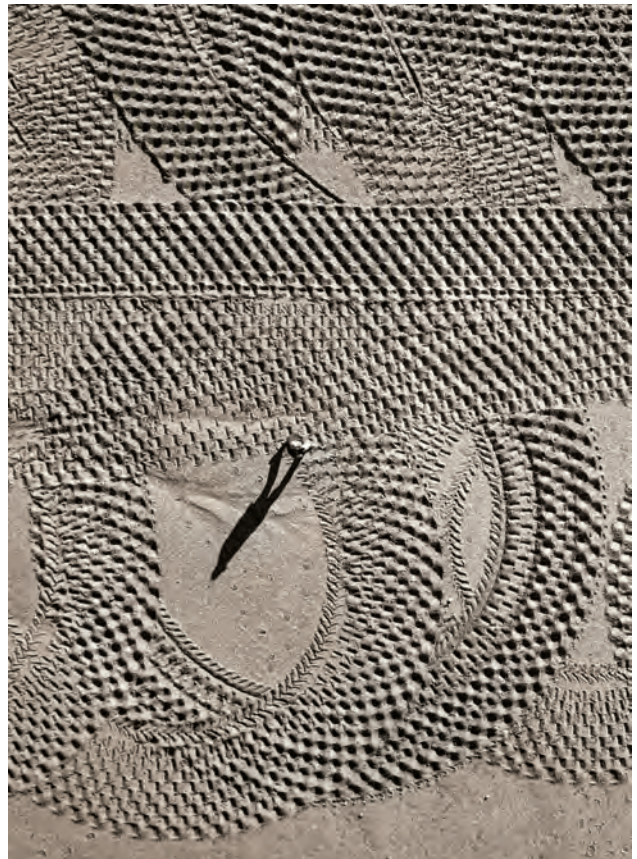
The remote Lordsburg Playa might look like a wasteland. Photographer Esha Chiocchio conjures it into art that carries a serious message—and a measure of hope.

Swirls of broken black lines twist on themselves in geometric abstractions that could represent ocean waves or storm clouds. But look closely at one small section and terra firma appears, indicated by the silhouette of a person in mid-stride. Except that the silhouette is not a person. It's the looming shadow of Gordon Tooley, himself a mere dot in this vast landscape captured by photographer Esha Chiocchio.

Taken with a camera borne aloft by Chiocchio's drone, the image encapsulates a valiant effort by a handful of people and a rare coalition of government agencies. Together, they aim to temper the disastrous effects of climate change and overgrazing in the far southwestern corner of New Mexico. The exhibition *Restoring Earth's Canvas*, held from August 25 through September 23 at Evoke Contemporary, is Chiocchio's beautifully realized ode to land art grounded in a life-and-death reality: Can a 60-mile-long dry lakebed learn again to accept water, grow native plants, and tame deadly dust storms?

"The whole watershed is broken," says Chiocchio of the Pleistocene-era Lordsburg Playa, which runs north to south between the city of Lordsburg and the Arizona state line to the west, and is bisected by the heavily traveled Interstate 10. Chiocchio learned about the Playa from Tooley, a well-known orchardist in northern New Mexico, while developing her *Good Earth* multimedia project, which features agrarians devoted to healing the land. In 2020, Tooley took her to the Playa's remote northern edge, which is anchored by a campsite lovingly dubbed the "Town of Dust" by its three regular denizens, the "Dustafarians" (see sidebar, starting on page 11.).

"I camped out in my little tent, the temperature below freezing," Chiocchio says. "But when I saw the land, I thought, Wow, this is drone territory."



Opposite: Esha Chiocchio, *First Tracks (detail)*, archival pigment print, 26.7" x 40".

Above: Esha Chiocchio, *Tooley in Circles (detail)*, archival pigment print, 20" x 30".

Seen from above, the northern part of the Playa blooms in a cauliflower shape. Descriptions of its appearance in Chiocchio's images can range from sensuous beauty to cancerous growth. It is, in fact, beautiful and awful.



Esha Chiochio, *Morning Train*, archival pigment print, 22.5" x 40".

The Peloncillo Mountains rise to the west, Big Hatchet Peak and the Little Hatchet Mountains to the east. Far from city lights, the Playa gleams under a canopy of stars. Rain still occasionally fills the lakebed, turning it into a birdwatching hotspot—images that Chiochio renders from ground level with a dreamy touch.

But pounding rain can also sluice across it. Howling winds whip it with tornadic force. Cattle continue to graze on the few grasses that survive. A casual observer can easily write off the Lordsburg Playa as an expendable wasteland.

Chiochio, however, saw art.

"The patterns are amazing," she says. "Parts of it look like the veins in a human body. Water moves through us just as it moves through the land. What we do to the land affects us all. It affects the planet. We're all connected.

"For me, this project is mostly about hope—the hope of taking a place that has been desertified like many places around the globe and restoring it to health. This is an

inflection point for turning it around."

Shooting with her Sony DSLR for ground-based photography and a DJI drone for aials, Chiochio has amassed a collection of images that marry natural beauty to a social conscience and an environmental message. Grama grasses pause in perpetuity as a breeze blurs some of the feathery seed heads. Cattle describe an arabesque atop the weather-worked landscape. The Playa secures the base of the image as a towering thunderstorm muscles toward the viewer.

Evoke owner Kathrine Erickson says that while it was the alluring imagery of Chiochio's work that first captured her eye, once she heard the backstory she was completely taken. "Even when I'm looking at the erosion of the land, how Esha captures it is beautiful," she says. "And she's spreading the word of the hard work of these pioneers bringing the land back to the way it once was. Our collectors are drawn to much more than beauty; they appreciate the stories that artists tell. And this is a time and a story that is critically important. It's urgent."



Esha Chiochio on location.

A Florida native who attended high school and college in Colorado, Esha Chiochio began honing her artist's eye and environmentalist's soul as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali. To learn more about photography, she enrolled in courses at Santa Fe Workshops, where she ended up working for several years, all of which led her to fall in love with the City Different's commitment to a wide variety of arts.

She and her husband, photographer Jamey Stillings, raised two children in the Santa Fe Commons on the Alameda, a cohousing community where residents cooperatively tend the luscious gardens connecting their homes and gather twice weekly for dinners of organically grown foods—activities that fit her ideal of living lightly on the land.

On the walls of their home, which includes a spacious studio, are hung images that Chiochio made on return trips to Africa, including of the traditional remudding of the massive Great Mosque of Djenné for a 2001 National Geographic article, and a health clinic in Lamu, Kenya, supported by Santa Fe's Jambo Café.

The Dustafarians

Meet the three-man clean-up crew of the Lordsburg Playa.

Esha Chiochio's exhibit includes portraits of those who have endured freezing winters and grueling summers to repair patches of the Lordsburg Playa. These self-styled "Dustafarians" come from different places and possess different types of expertise. From long days in the field to quiet nights around a campfire, they've grown into a gotta-believe squad that knows their efforts might not bear fruit for years to come. They also agree that everyone can play a role in building a better tomorrow, one drop of water at a time.

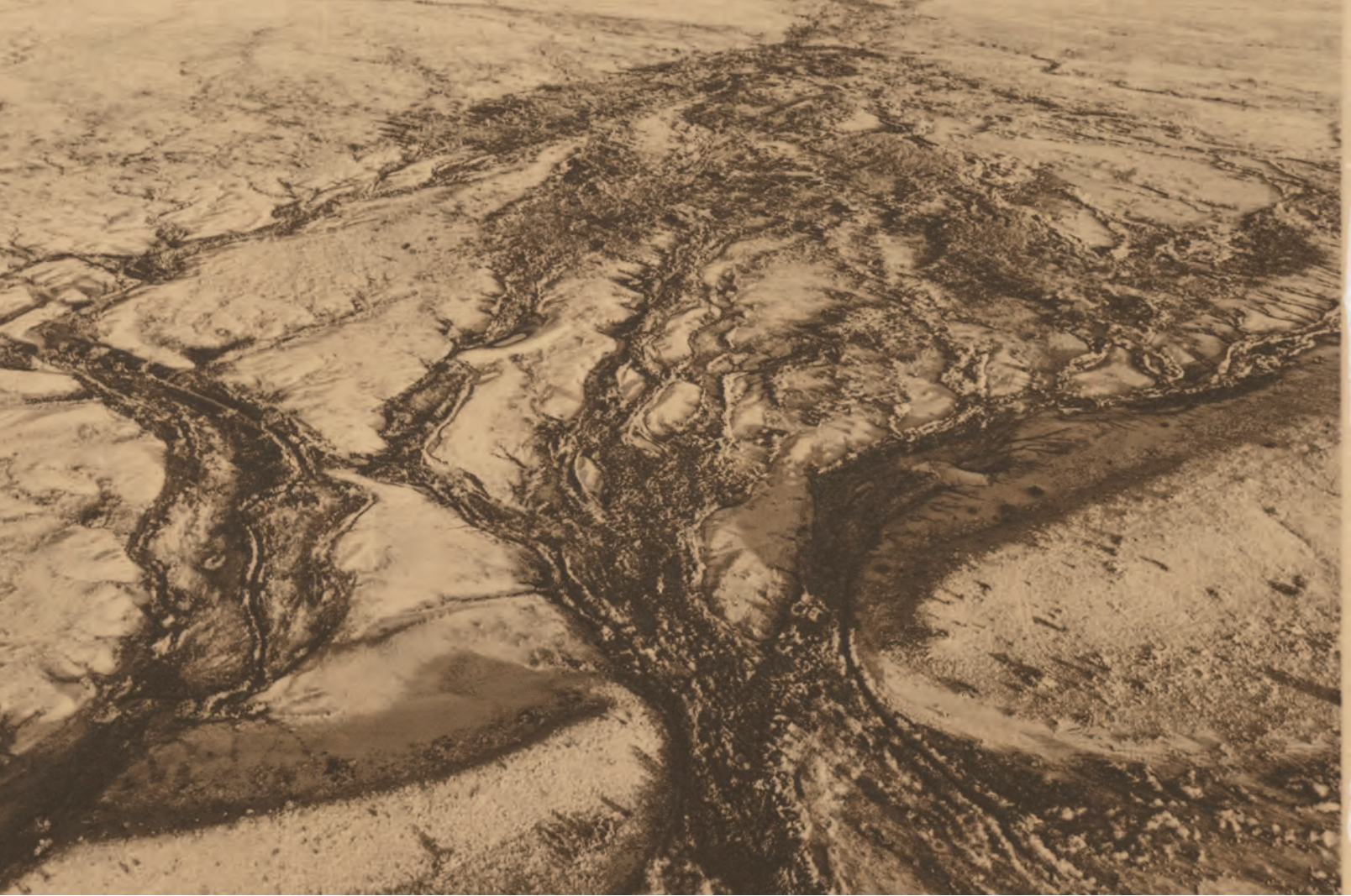
Gordon Tooley, Tooley's Trees, Truchas, NM

After successfully rescuing diverse species of desert-hardy fruit trees in New Mexico, Gordon Tooley got to the root of the problem. "The landscape below ground is much, much larger than what we view as terrain," he says. "We've fragmented our grasslands and forests with developments, roads, culverts. It changes how water behaves, and our landscape is drying."

The solution, he determined, required a deep focus on what lies beneath. With his keyline plow—a contraption developed in Australia in the 1950s—Tooley re-contours land with long, thin shanks that oxygenate the soil without turning it over. A seeder follows, and then an imprinter, pockmarking soil to further slow rainfall and use nature's biology to heal itself.



Gordon Tooley photographed by Esha Chiochio.



Esha Chioocchio, *Tree of Life*, Moon Gold leaf on archival Mylar, 6" x 8".

Most of Chioocchio's photography falls into an editorial framework, some of it funded by the New Mexico Department of Agriculture and National Geographic Explorer grants, of which the Lordsburg project is a recipient. She began moving into fine-art photography this July with Circular Solutions, an exhibit of her Good Earth images at the Turchin Center, in Boone, North Carolina.

For her Evoke show, Chioocchio is creating limited editions of large black-and-white prints, medium-size color images, and a selection of smaller prints that play off the historic orotone (gold-tone) photographic process made famous by Edward S. Curtis, with a haunting digital twist. "I'm using a modern printer and printing on Mylar paper, then using gold-leaf on the back," she says. The effort imparts a feeling that these contemporary activities belong to the distant past, a dislocation of time that hints at the potential of the Lordsburg reclamation project's long-term impact. "The thought behind the gold leaf is that soil is our most precious resource, it's our black gold, our bank account. We have been

abusing it and therefore depleting our reserves. It's time to regenerate the land and rebuild our resilience."

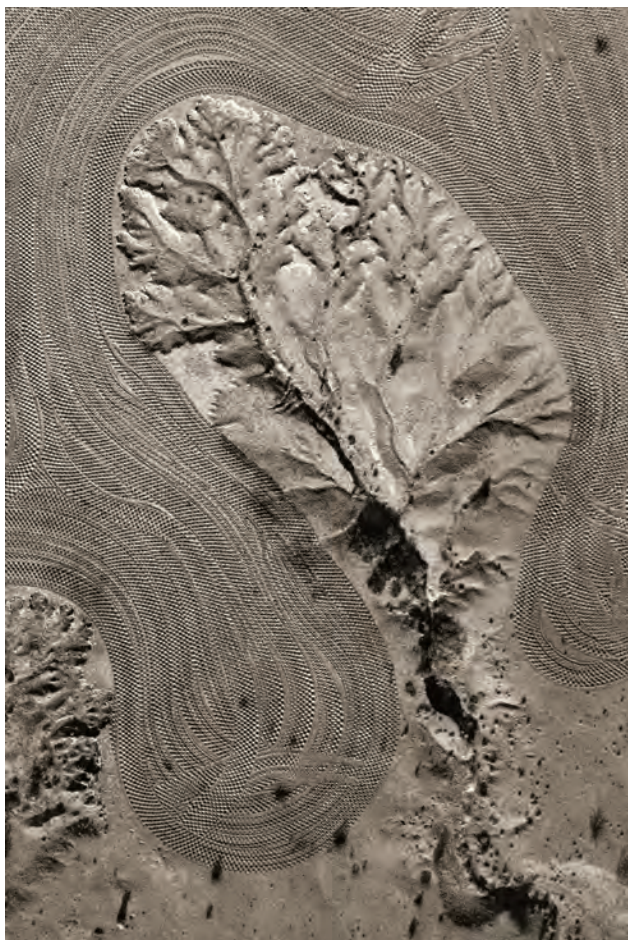
With all of her images, Chioocchio seeks to beguile viewers with an impressionistic quality of the area, and encourage them to learn more about holistic ways of mending our impact on the Earth.

"I didn't want to just take pictures of the land," she says. "I want to tell stories of the land."

When in the Lordsburg Playa, Gordon Tooley uses a keyline plow to which he's added a number of tools. The plow's long shanks dig slices in the soil without turning it, to re-contour the Playa's upper edge. Next comes a seeder, its hopper loaded with grasses, forbs, and shrubs chosen by native plant expert Mike Gaglio (see sidebar). Finally, an imprinter with a lineup of offset points pushes the seeds into foot-deep divots, each capable of holding a gallon of water. Complementing those efforts, waterflow expert Van Clothier

(see sidebar) marshals rocks and soil to divert rainfall, slowing its passage across the land so that it can nurture plants that hold the soil in place.

So far, only a small part of the Playa has received this treatment—some 700 acres, with another 950 acres planned for this fall and winter. Tooley calls their work quixotic, but the consequences of doing nothing are dire. The nation's worst dust storms regularly close I-10 and lead to crashes that have claimed dozens of lives over the last 50 years—in 2014, seven deaths in single incident. They also disrupt interstate commerce, deplete the resources of law-enforcement agencies, and divert truck traffic onto two-lane roads built for much lighter vehicles, which shortens the life spans of those roads.



Esha Chiochio, *Tattered Fabric* (detail), archival pigment print, 26.7" x 40".

"I view all landscapes as tattered, worn out," he says. "It's our job to be weavers and repair them. If we had millions of people thinking like drops of water, we could get land to retain that water and keep it as high on the landscape as possible."

This past summer, his Lordsburg days began at dawn. He'd work until the temperature climbed above 100°, take a few hours off in his air-conditioned trailer, then return in late afternoon to drag more plow lines across the troubled Playa. He endured the high-summer brutalities because that's when these seeds can best respond to their natural cycles.

"This is what we're supposed to be doing," he says. "It's our stewardship: to take care of ourselves, our neighbors, and the soil. We're the same thing as plants."

Mike Gaglio, High Desert Native Plants, El Paso, TX



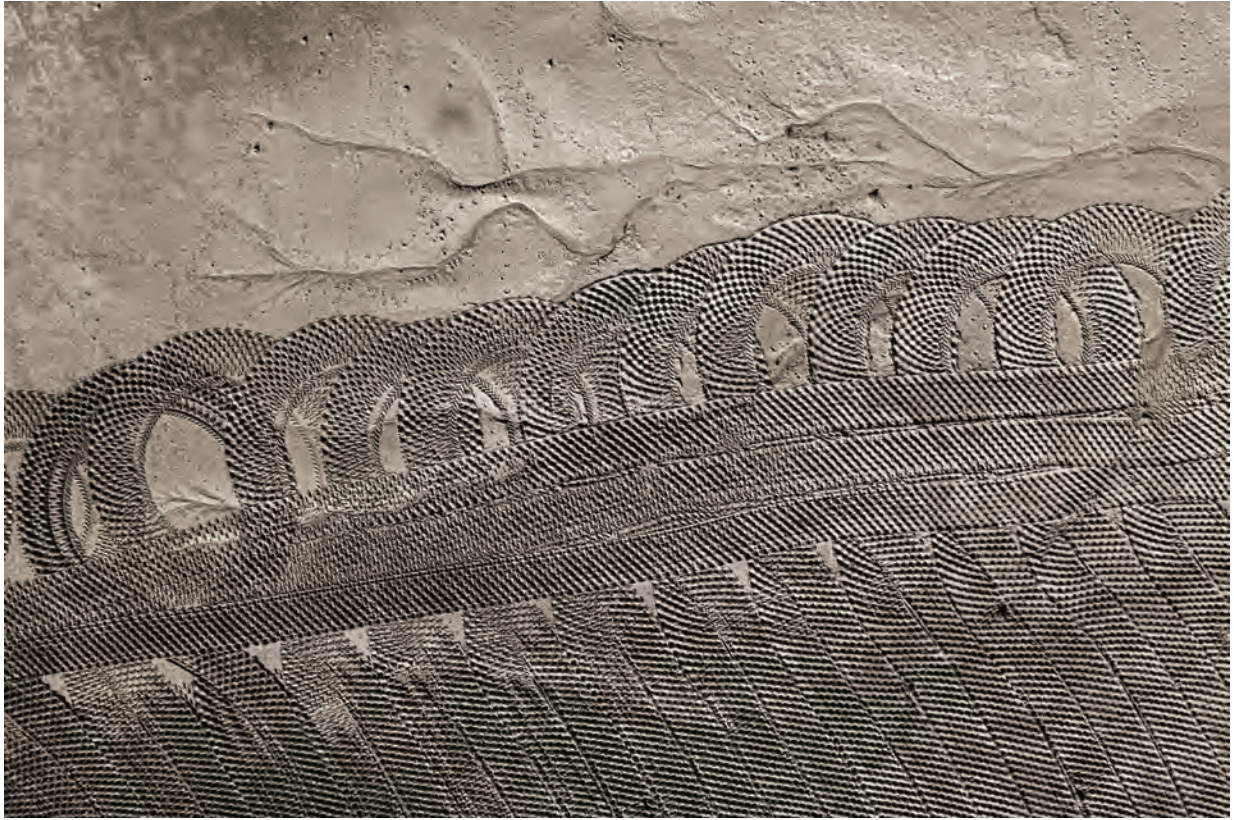
Mike Gaglio photographed by Esha Chiochio.

None of his previous projects come close to the size of the Lordsburg Playa, Mike Gaglio says—and those projects include installing rainwater-harvesting systems, building wetlands along the Río Grande, and revegetating Chihuahuan Desert lands just beyond the urban reach of El Paso.

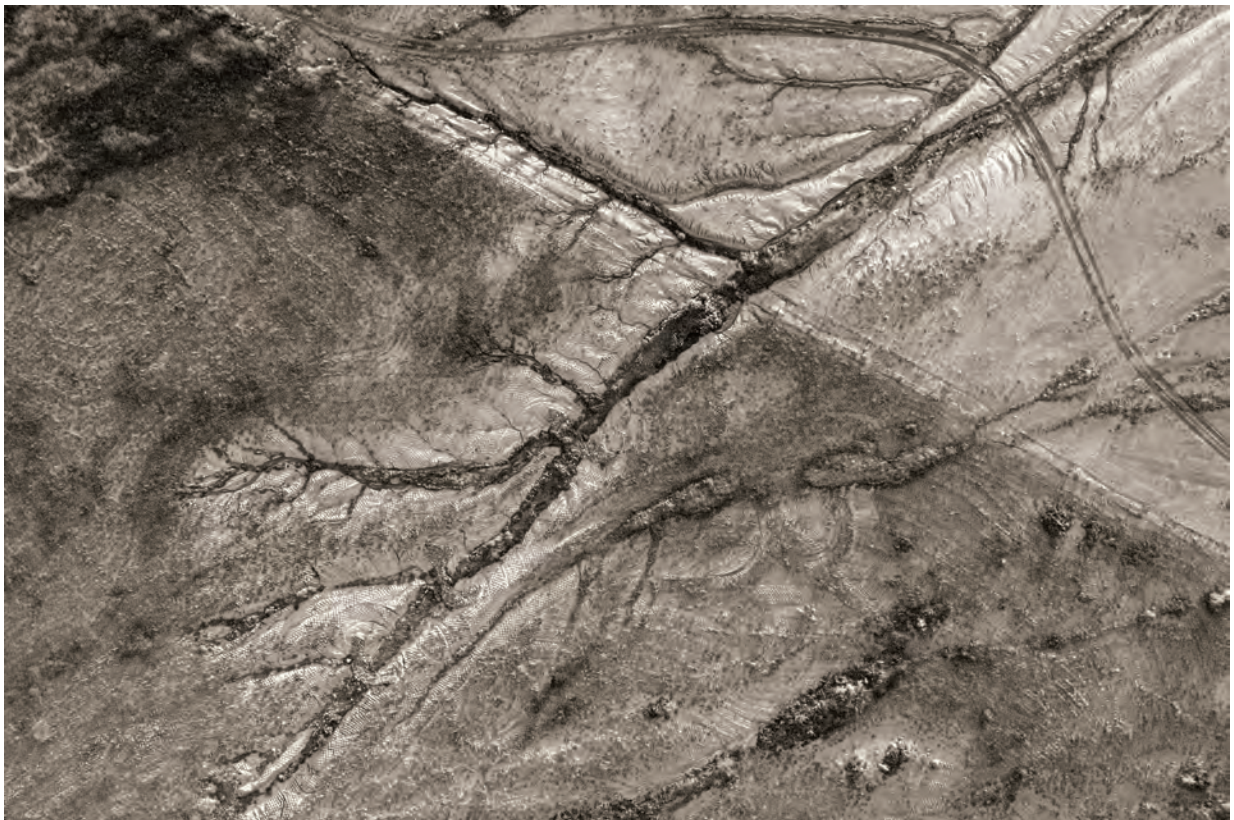
"For me, the Lordsburg project allows me to be a biologist, a restoration practitioner, a heavy-equipment operator, and to tinker and experiment," he says. "It allows me to do it all."

Gaglio chose a variety of grama grasses for the project, along with alkali sacaton, fourwing saltbush, and len-scale saltbush. "They're drought- and flood-tolerant," he says. "They're good species to experiment with in an ephemeral dry lake with really salty soils."

In 2020, during a campfire chat, Gordon Tooley had mentioned a photographer friend he wanted to invite down.



Esha Chiochio, *Piel*, archival pigment print, 26.7" x 40".



Esha Chiochio, *Rooted*, archival pigment print, 26.7" x 40".

The 2014 accidents drew action from New Mexico's Department of Transportation, an agency more used to laying pavement, installing culverts, and building bridges than working with a plucky crew of Whole Earth Catalog adherents. Besides installing new warning signs, wider highway shoulders, and a network of weather-detection stations, NMDOT looked well beyond its right-of-way to the sources of the dust. That required partnerships with the federal Bureau of Land Management and the State Land Office, each of which oversees a checkerboard of parcels across the Playa.

NMDOT obtained federal funds—so far about \$3.5 million—to experiment with reclamation. Anecdotally, the work has improved conditions, especially at an earlier and smaller test site south of I-10. “The eyes don’t lie,” says Trent Botkin, Acting Manager of NMDOT’s Environmental Bureau. “There’s grass. And where there’s grass, the soil is being held down.”

That much was expected. But no one predicted someone like Chiocchio creating gallery-worthy art.

“It’s amazing she came to us,” Botkin says. “It’s hard to get people excited about something that happens in the middle of nowhere. It’s hard to get the federal government excited. It’s great she saw the dream borne out on the land.”

In a summer of record-breaking heat, disastrous floods, and capricious tornadoes, Chiocchio’s images could galvanize even more action against climate change.

“There’s so much more to do,” she says. “This is just a drop in the bucket.”

—Kate Nelson

“Sure,” Gaglio said, and soon found himself enthralled by Esha Chiocchio’s images.

“This is a tough site to be on,” he says. “It takes a special person to see the beauty. It takes work. Esha’s pictures are so deep. There’s such a soul to them.”

Van Clothier, Stream Dynamics, Silver City, NM



Van Clothier photographed by Esha Chiocchio.

As a California surfer kid, Van Clothier loved studying the power of moving water. That he ended up doing so in the desert Southwest speaks to his commitment to improving how water interacts with land. As the founder of Stream Dynamics, he helps repair damaged watersheds, sometimes by simply moving rocks into the way of rainfall to slow its pace. And with Bill Zeedyk, he wrote the seminal book *Let the Water Do the Work: Induced Meandering, an Evolving Method for Restoring Incised Channels*, which has inspired farmers, municipalities, and backyard gardeners. Clothier began visiting the Lordsburg Playa years ago. “It’s beautiful in its own way,” he says. “It’s an interesting landform. We’ve camped there. A friend who’s a pilot landed his plane there. It’s almost like you’re on top of a mountain, with 360° views.”

The Playa restoration project introduced him to Tooley and Gaglio, who’ve since become fast friends. “We work seamlessly together,” he says. “We work, we camp, we have yummy food. We have beautiful sunrises and sunsets. We’ve watched rains and storms, seen the tremendous success of the project—and we’re having the time of our lives out there.”

—Kate Nelson