

a wing and a prayer

The aerial perspectives that Alex MacLean brings back to earth present alarming documentary evidence of a world sleepwalking towards environmental disaster, says Annie Dare



The work of Alex MacLean:
page 7 — White Beach of Solray,
Rosignano, Italy
page 10 — Junk Yard Along River
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opposite — Duckweed Harvesting
in a Sewerage Lagoon
page 38 — Piles of Tepscoll
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and Pivot Irrigator
page 42 — Flower Fields, Carlsbad,
California

"I call them 'ground pictures,'" laughs Alex Maclean, pilot and aerial fine art photographer, of those occasional photographs he still takes at street level. A life in the cockpit and behind the lens has evidently given him a different perspective on the world - visually and verbally.

The urge to document the world on foot is voluntary, he says, and sporadic.

Whereas aerial photography is a self-confessed compulsion. The only time he's ever flown without a camera has been when he's been on commercial flights, and even then, he's sometimes snapping out the aeroplane window.

MacLean is a brilliant hybrid: part Robert Frank, for his dogged fidelity to America as photographic subject, part Sir Nicolas Stern/AI Gore, for deep environmental commitment, and part Richard Branson for enthusiasm for the skies.

Like his French equivalent, Earth From The Air photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand, decades spent with a bird's eye view of the planet has made him an environmental evangelist, and while many of his photographs are devoid of people, human nature and behaviour is implied in every frame: our competitions, our territorialism, our miniature war-games, our enjoyments and boundaries, the way we consume, engorge or celebrate the landscape.

Hidden human hands have built the gleaming thoroughfares and train sidings he shoots; they've also built the residues of human thrill-seeking that he captures in the maniacal skids scorched into racetracks by tyres racing endless circuits.

He also documents the compulsion for

travel, revealed in the uniformity of cars in hounds-tooth patterns.

Where people feature in their own right, as dots on a kaleidoscope of tiny picnic blankets fanned out in front of a concert, say, his lofty take on the world shrinks us down to the scale of organisms in a Petri dish, a perspective that further highlights our parasitic relationship with nature.

While aesthetically beautiful, Maclean's photographs also have an overt, political message - and distance doesn't necessarily lend enchantment to the view.

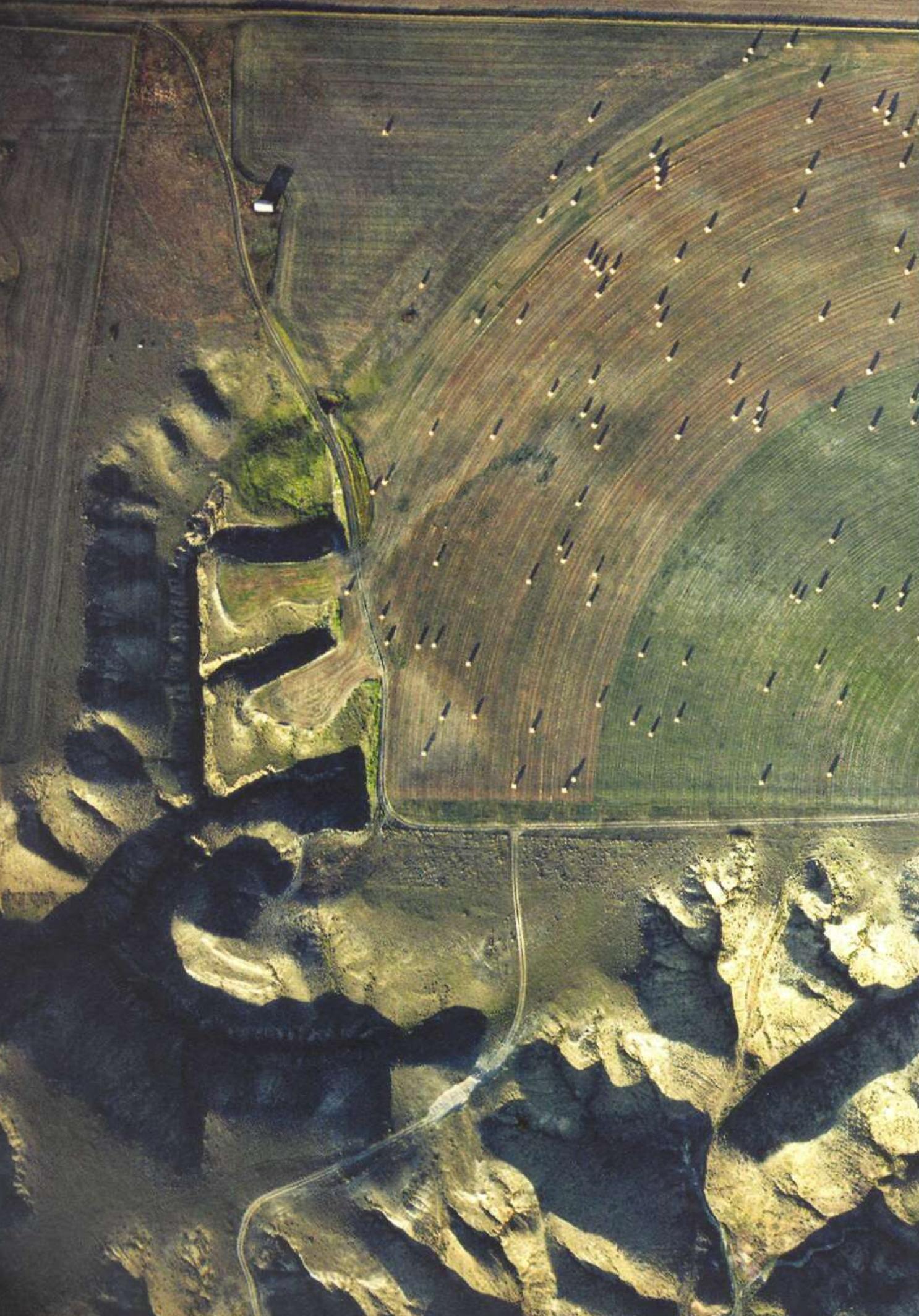
MacLean has seen enough of his compatriots' environmental conduct to declare that Americans are labouring under a 'national delusion'. He bemoans the country's role as global poster boy for development. "American culture is so pervasive, we are aped around the world. But what most of the world wants to emulate is a flawed lifestyle."

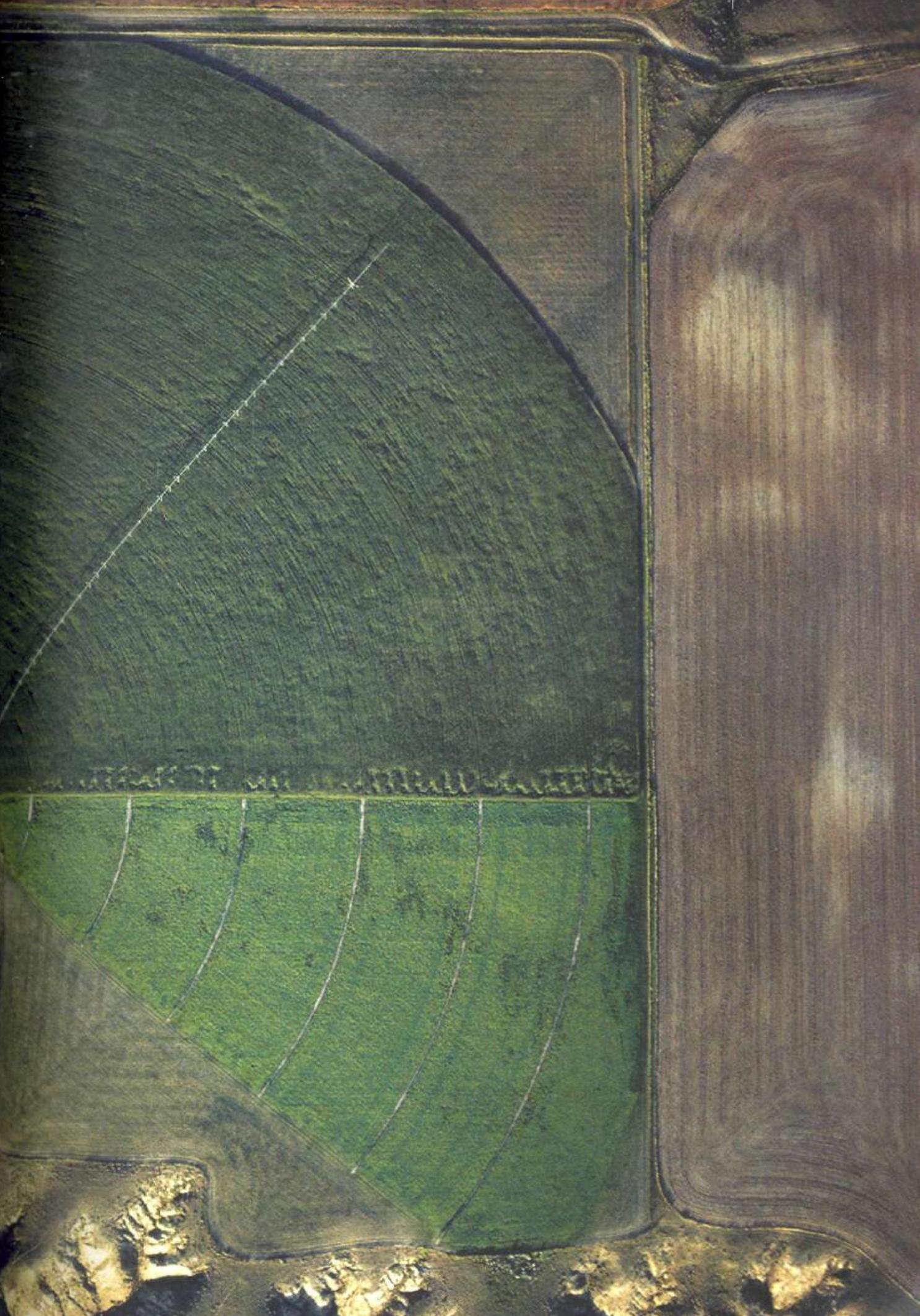
His forthcoming book, *Over* (out this autumn) will cleave his argument into nine clear sections: bundles of pictures to help hammer his point home. First are images of the atmosphere, 'as thin a wrapping as a sheet of cellophane around an orange'. The second chapter is devoted to our decadence: it includes oversized, spread-out housing and wanton everyday waste. Third is a document of car culture and auto-dependency, with subsequent chapters on desertification, water consumption, waste and recycling. A chapter on rising sea levels is particularly chilling: images of hurricane damage along the coastline, juxtaposed with pictures of Utopian housing Q













developments in Florida, where individual homeowners' 'stabs at defence' with sand-barriers flung out like flimsy matchsticks against the giant maw of storm-surges from the sea.

As MacLean says, "People are in a state of denial. It's the hardest thing for people to swallow, that a rise in sea levels translates into the loss of thousands of miles of shoreline. The pain of it, the consequences, are just too great for people to really go there."

For MacLean, the politics of landscapes, photography, and flying all became intertwined in the 1970s, when a fellow student on his architecture degree course - whose uncle just happened to run what was then the biggest flight school in the country - suggested he share his photography skills with teens on a summer camp in exchange for flying lessons. The ideas he was developing at architecture school, such as notions of the built environment and analyses of urban planning, were only reinforced by this new view of the earth, laid out like a carpet under the wings of his plane.

He finishes Over with a chapter on urbanism, which builds on his life-long questioning of the wisdom of America's architectural orthodoxy: the assumption that sprawl is better than population density. "Density is about how we use energy. New York is the greenest city in the country per capita precisely because of its density levels. A lot of people walk to work, there's good public transport, people live in small units, they share party walls so it's efficient to heat.

"But the average American drives between 20,000 and 40,000 miles a year just going about their daily life. It is the 'sprawl pattern' - ghettos of shops, housing and schools whose boundaries become even more pronounced when seen from the sky - that necessitates America's culture of auto-dependency. In outlying areas, the densities are so low that public transport just doesn't work." MacLean doesn't see conspiracy, or neglect on the part of town planners, behind these architectural contours on the map of America. Cheap energy, abundant automobiles, and the post

World War II surge in affordable housing projects in the inner cities fuelled the 1960s 'white flight' away from urban centres. The American dream: a white picket fence, a yard, some land - the only route to this particular dream was via the car. In his work, MacLean attempts to educate people away from a knee-jerk assumption that the definition of happiness can be measured in the square feet that you can put between yourself and your neighbour.

But he's not ready to write the human race off just yet: "I can't. It's a challenge, but people are genuinely starting to examine how we relate to our environment. Reading the landscape is like reading a book; you can see stories, you can see injustices, you can also see cases of really good environmental stewardship. I've been flying over abandoned downtown areas, and though there are lots of cities with vacant plots, some are starting to heal and fill in. You're starting to see new mixed developments, and open parks creeping in, with the awareness that having green

spaces makes cities easier to live in." MacLean pilots himself, and takes photographs straight from the cockpit on his hand-held 5D Canon digital camera. He circles his subjects, manoeuvring the plane's altitude and tilt to get the best composition, and uses a gyrostabilizer to reduce vibrations. In 2002, he rejected digital photography, thinking the resolution would never get high enough in his lifetime to warrant a switch. But he made a digital leap of faith in 2005, and hasn't taken a frame of film since. He asserts that 35mm is equivalent to the detail you get on Medium Format. MacLean's working methods have also been transformed by GoogleEarth and GoogleMaps, now integral both to prepping shoots and to archiving: he now tracks his images geographically with metadata using the digital camera's GPS. He always flies with a broad shooting agenda: "I've never set out to capture a specific image. I have a list of themes, so I'm never short of things to photograph. And you can't help but love some of the patterns which you fly over."