

I am repeatedly drawn to the exuberant, otherworldly landscape of South San Francisco Bay. There, depending on the mood of a Sunday, I can bring binoculars to bear on the still abundant wildlife, explore diverse halophilic microorganisms with a field microscope, hike out to ponder early engineering interventions scattered across the Bay shallows, or (my favorite) launch a kite-lofted camera to photograph juxtapositions in the landscape from above. And juxtapositions abound—dendritic marsh channels as foils for the straight lines of infrastructure; wild openness confronting the confines of encroaching capitalism; salt ponds, vividly colored by the aforementioned halophiles, constrained by subtly hued mud and marsh; derelict, forgotten engineering works faintly echoing their former functions.

Over time my idle curiosity became a sustained fascination. For behind the visual richness of these juxtapositions lie the South Bay's interesting history and the active formulation, at this very moment, of bold initiatives for its future. So, for five years now I have hiked the South Bay and taken low-level aerial photographs over the salt ponds using cameras lofted by kites. That these images are often visually compelling is in no small part because they reveal hidden and often enigmatic aspects of the landscape. It turns out that the vantage point of my aerial images, ranging between three and three hundred feet above the ground, greatly reduces sky reflection from the salt pond surfaces thus exposing colors, textures and traces of the Bay's previous epochs.

Cris Benton is a Professor of Architecture and former Chair of the Department of Architecture. With principal academic interests lying in the Building Science area, he is engaged in the Building Science Laboratory for teaching and research as well as a longstanding program of post-occupancy case studies.

Benton harbors considerable passion for Kite Aerial Photography (KAP) and its associated historical, applied, and artistic dimensions. Benton began his South Bay work during a sabbatical year spent as Artist in Residence at the Exploratorium in San Francisco where he worked on several KAP-related projects. The work has continued under Special Use Permits issued by the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge and the California Department of Fish & Game. There is a website page with background notes and Google Earth links specifically for this article at: http://steel.ced.berkeley.edu/research/hidden_ecologies/?page_id=465





