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In the Italian Night, Islands of Light

By KERRI MACDONALD

Driving in the dark between Catania and Gela in Sicily, the Italian photographer [Massimo Cristaldi](#) couldn't help gaze at something twinkling in the distance.

Ms. Cristaldi's latest project, "[Insulae](#)," explores the contrast between that glow and the surrounding darkness. It is the second example of his fascination with artificial light. Last August Lens recognized his haunting nighttime photographs of [votive altars](#). That, he said, was just a starting point for his nocturnal photography.

It was driving along that road – the SS417 – that Mr. Cristaldi first discovered the U.S. Navy housing settlements Naval Air Station Sigonella and Mimeo Housing. For him, the boundary between the light and dark paralleled the physical boundary separating the settlements from the Sicilian countryside.

"These places are in a way something very, very peculiar," he said over the phone from Catania, where he lives when he isn't in Rome. "They are fortified; they are isolated."


Everyone has seen distant lights on a dark road. The difference in this case, Mr. Cristaldi said, is the lack of connection. The project, the name of which means "island" in Latin, focuses on detachment.

In the dark of the night, he said, the complexes are almost prison-like, and somewhat frightening. The setting does not resemble Europe. Nor does it look like an American scene.

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In the light of day. Massimo Cristaldi

"America is the land of freedom," Mr. Cristaldi said. "It's a little bit strange, in a way, that a lot of years after the Second World War there is still a kind of deficiency of integration."

Mr. Cristaldi, 39, is not a full-time photographer. He has a degree in geology and manages European projects dealing with environment and security. In the past year, however, he has begun to focus more on photography.

Most of the images in "Insulae" were shot on very dark nights. Mr. Cristaldi always placed himself at a distance to mark the distinction between the dark and the light. Using a two-headed tripod, he shot with both a DSLR and a medium format camera. The work began in Sicily, but he plans to extend the project, starting with a similar base in Germany.

"It's something that is part of the landscape," he said, before adding, "but in a very strange way."

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PICTURES OF THE DAY	278	STEPHEN CROWLEY	43
DAVID W. DUNLAP	253	DOUG MILLS	41
SHOWCASE	196	ON ASSIGNMENT	40
SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY AND COMMENTARY	109	ERIK OLSEN	38
BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY	90	MUHAMMED MUHEISEN	34
MERRILL D. OLIVER	89	TYLER HICKS	31
NEW YORK CITY	76	AFGHANISTAN	30
CONFLICT PHOTOGRAPHY	73	LUKE SHARRETT	30
JAMES ESTRIN	63	STREET PHOTOGRAPHY	28
MUST SEE	55	RUTH FREMSON	27
BEHIND THE SCENES	51	RINA CASTELNUOVO	27
AMERICAN SCENES	50	KASSIE BRACKEN	27
VIDEO	44	FROM THE ARCHIVE	26
MICHELE MCNALLY	44	ART AND ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY	26
PORTRAITURE	43	ALTAF QADRI	26



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