

# frieze

Issue 138

## Trevor Paglen

Secession, Vienna, Austria



There are some things we can't see because we aren't able to and then there are those things we can't see because we just don't want to. In a laconic, almost affectless way Trevor Paglen manages to show us both. 'At the beginning,' the artist and experimental geographer explained at the press conference for his solo exhibition at the Secession, 'I was very angry about the US and what it was doing, but could not prove what it was doing.' At that time, in the years following the second US-led invasion of Iraq, Paglen began to camp out in the California desert and liaise with amateur astronomers and satellite watchers to photograph the movements of CIA planes and spy craft. The resulting images still can't prove anything. Yet they point toward a vast, clandestine intelligence network that exposes the proximity of this hidden world to the public, visible one.

In *Workers*; Gold Coast Terminal; Las Vegas, NV; Distance – 1 mile; 8:58 (2007), Paglen, using a telescope from a hotel room about a mile away, photographed passengers disembarking from an unlabelled plane. The resulting image is blurry and ambiguous; the alleged secret agents employed at covert military bases in the surrounding desert are indistinguishable from the paunchy, desk-bound workers who fly in and out of the Strip everyday. In *The Fence* (Lake Kickapoo, Texas) (2010), what looks like a fiery sunset is actually the electromagnetic image of the radar perimeter that blankets the entire US, its microwave frequencies shifted into the visible spectrum. Paglen calls 'the Fence' – serving to track any satellite flying over the US, as well as its early missile warning system – Earth's largest galactic footprint.

That a multibillion-dollar weapons system can exist in plain sight is part of what makes the US war on terrorism – amorphous and seemingly without end – possible. Paradoxically, this world only becomes visible at the very limits of the telescopes and astrophotographic equipment that Paglen has access to, and therefore can only be observed in the form of fuzzy or dubious images. The photographed objects, therefore, take on a speculative quality, such as in *Keyhole Improved Crystal* from *Glacier Point* (2008), in

which a CIA reconnaissance satellite becomes visible only when photographed with a long exposure. Over time, its path bisects those of real stars like some wayward sun falling out of orbit. Or take the abstract clouds of *Untitled (Predators)* (2010), a riff on Alfred Stieglitz's series of photographs of clouds, 'Equivalents' (1923). In Paglen's version, the sublime quality of the sky is punctured by tiny Predator drones near the centre of the image. They could just as easily be black flies in honey – depending on whether we choose to believe the claim Paglen's title makes. Suspending one's disbelief becomes necessary to confront the question implicit in Paglen's work: as Brian Holmes asks in the exhibition's catalogue, how do we conceive of the American war apparatus and where do we fit in this larger order of systematic secrecy?

Part of the answer may lie in Paglen's references to photographic history, reprising works of 19th-century frontier photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan and Carleton Watkins, who used the most advanced technology of the day to photograph the equivalents of today's satellites, reconnaissance planes and spacecraft. But while their photos evince a romantic sense of adventure in technological achievements and conquering new territories, Paglen's framing of his subjects suggests paranoia. His view shows us the flipside of American exceptionalism – a superpower in decline and an empire surrounded by barely visible enemies, both real and imagined. The diptych *Artifacts* (*Anasazi Cliff Dwellings, Canyon de Chelly; Spacecraft in Perpetual Geosynchronous Orbit, 35,786 km above Equator*) (2010) juxtaposes an image modelled after O'Sullivan's 1873 *Ancient ruins in the Cañon de Chelle, New Mexico* with another image of satellites in orbit, their paths mirroring the striations of the cliff ruins. In the Navajo language, *Anasazi* means 'ancient enemy'. Little is known about these people, except that they suddenly disappeared around 1100 BCE. The satellites on the right circle the Earth at about 22,000 miles above the equator – high enough that gravity no longer plays a role, thus guaranteeing their orbit for billions of years, even when out of commission, and outlasting us all.

**Helen Chang**