

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

Wiener, Max, "Unids | Trevor Paglen," Musée Magazine, November 14, 2023

NOV 14 UNIDS | TREVOR PAGLEN

REVIEWS



Installation view, Trevor Paglen, *Unids*, 2023, Altman Siegel, San Francisco. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Written by Max Wiener

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It's hard to believe, but there are times when the Earth - the planet and our surroundings - makes us feel humble. It's a common colloquialism in science and culture that we're just living on a small rock in space, and artists like Trevor Paglen truly manifest this sentiment with their groundbreaking work. At the Altman Siegel gallery, Paglen's series *Unids* - a slang term for UFOs used by amateur astronomers - depicts the vastness of space in one of the grandest displays of artistry you will ever see. Paglen's unmatched artistry takes the infinite frontier of our solar system and places it in our hands, giving us access to worlds far beyond our reach. In his world - Paglen's - we're all explorers; he is just giving us the field map. This stunning exhibition opened on November 2nd and has a scheduled closing date of December 22nd, giving viewers ample time to experience this breathtaking display of mastery.



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The subjects of Paglen's photography, the Unids themselves, are all U.S. government-monitored objects that orbit the Earth, though, according to Altman Siegel, their "purpose and origin are officially unknown." This adds a tremendous amount to the speculation, and lord knows the average American will have their theories. "It's an alien!" "It's a weather balloon, just like in Roswell!" Rabbit holes of disbelief will suck what feels like days out of your life, and no matter where you look, you will never feel satisfied with the answers.



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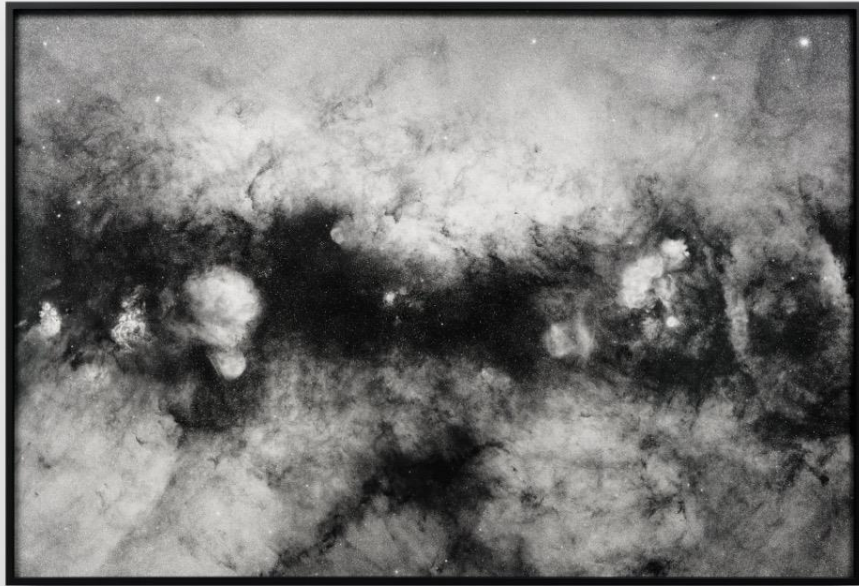
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Paglen looks at these objects as art pieces, occupying a gorgeous surrounding with the delightful pattern of a ballerina. He pays particularly close attention to the sky they occupy - a beautiful kaleidoscope of natural serenity - making them appear much smaller than they may be. In approaching it this way, Paglen plays with the Unids' status as the piece's focal point and depicts it as merely a spot in the overall surroundings. This simple subversion allows us to fully soak up the incredible breadth of our solar system in ways we never could have imagined. Even in the black and white of Paglen's work, our minds paint beautiful landscapes of rich color with our senses. Paglen almost gives us free will to color in his world as we see fit, debasing the traditional viewing experience and creating one unique to him.



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As more information about UFOs and their existence is revealed, Paglen asks us to slow down and appreciate the present. Perhaps, he argues, we shouldn't peer too deeply into their purpose but look at them as pieces of art adorning the sky like specks in a snow globe. Jerry Garcia in the song "Scarlet Begonias," would sing, "Once in a while, you get shown the light in the strangest of places if you look at it right." In *Unids*, Trevor Paglen shows us this light.