



**The unseen enemy**

03.02.11  
by Matt Sussman



Trevor Paglen's *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2010

Trevor Paglen's photography has always been about making the unseen visible. His luminous chromogenic prints unsettlingly reveal that the machinery of war and surveillance controlled by the military-industrial complex is more often than not hiding from plain sight; one need only have the right high-powered lens to gaze back.

One of the ironies of Paglen's work, owing largely to the great distances from which he must photograph his purposefully obscured subjects, is how minuscule and non-particular they appear within the photographs themselves (this is also why Paglen's work, in particular, suffers in reproduction). Test sites are twinkling oases amid vast surrounds of rock and sand, orbiting satellites are often no more than streaks of light, and unmanned planes are but black flecks against large expanses of sky. The human element is absent or left implied.

"Unhuman," the title of Paglen's second solo show at Altman Siegel, is thus quite appropriate, calling to mind the unmanned and auto-piloted craft that he repeatedly shoots while also drawing attention to the reality that much of this technology will continue to exist and perhaps, one might speculate, even continue to operate long after we have vanished. The recent work in "Unhuman" zeros in on both concerns.

Take the black and white photograph, *Dead Military Satellite (DMSP 5D-F11) Near the Disk of the Moon*, in which the titular forgotten object, lighted only by a half-veiled moon, is barely visible amid the surrounding darkness of space. The shot could easily be mistaken for a matte painting from *Alien*, and its seeming impossible vantage point makes Paglen's dogged tracking of the dead satellite somehow all the more poignant.

Other photographs are less subtle. In the diptych *Artifacts*, a black and white photograph of the famous Anasazi cliff dwellings in Arizona's Canyon de Chelly National Park hangs next to one that captures the glowing traces of spacecraft perpetually orbiting thousands of kilometers above the equator. Although the score-marked cliff face in the first photo forms a nice formal counterpoint to the hatch-markings of time-lapsed stars in the second, the pairing (perhaps a nod to Kubrick's bone-satellite?) offers too heavy-handed and easy a comparison.

But Paglen doesn't need to spell things out so directly. The show's most stunning pieces are a series of lush skylines in which reaper and predator drones hover mote-like amid large, gaseous swathes of color seemingly lifted straight from a Rothko or Turner. The abstract beauty of these images is held in tension by the near-unseen menace that their titles call attention to. It's a tension exacerbated by the limits of Paglen's own machine-enhanced vision, such as when he photographs a similar type of dronecraft in a blurry, enlarged "close-up" two miles from the Indian Springs, Nev., site where it sits parked.