



Unhuman Trevor Paglen

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Altman Siegel Gallery

by Genevieve Quick

While Trevor Paglen’s *Unhuman*, at Altman Siegel Gallery, is conceptually and formally strong, it also provokes speculation about how the combination of image and content create space for the viewer to pose questions about the visual or contextual information the artist provides. Paglen’s artistic practice interlaces academic research, journalism, and photography to explore the shadowy world of surveillance and intelligence-gathering by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and National Security Agency (NSA). As government agencies search for signs of domestic and international terrorism, Paglen aims his camera at the satellites and unmanned drones that discreetly look back at us. Paglen’s images are frequently fascinating in content and often visually intriguing. However, at times his photographs fail to move beyond the detailed explanations he gives as context for the viewer and allow for experiential viewing. In addition, sometimes I am left feeling a lack of surprise at how the image and the content unfold together in a way that is greater than the sum of both.



They Watch the Moon, 2010; C-print, 36 x 48 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

They Watch the Moon (2010) is a mysteriously hazy green photograph of Sugar Grove, an NSA listening station that is part of ECHELON, the classified and automated network of ground stations developed during the Cold War to intercept and relay data communications. Located in the hilly topography of West Virginia, Sugar Grove is in a National Radio Quiet Zone, where radio waves and wireless high-powered transmissions are prohibited, as they interfere with ECHELON. As alluded to in the title, *They Watch the Moon*, ECHELON operates on “moonbounce,” in which spillover signals escape into space, bounce off the moon, and are detected by satellites when they return to the Earth. There are many conspiratorial and investigative websites about Sugar Grove and ECHELON, with little governmental verification or negation, which may add to the intrigue that surrounds the

long-exposure green image. Sugar Grove and the way it operates are incredibly interesting subjects that elicit concerns, whether justified or not, about suspicious behavior on behalf of the U.S. government, or about those who wish to harm national interests. While the image is engaging, it doesn’t present ECHELON, Sugar Grove, moonbounce, and the National Radio Quiet Zone in a way that moves beyond documentation. Instead, the contextual information provided with the checklist is so fascinating and revelatory that it may overshadow the image.



Artifacts (Anasazi Cliff Dwellings, Canyon de Chelly, Spacecraft in Perpetual Geosynchronous Orbit, 35,786 km Above Equator), 2010; one of two C-prints, 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

In his diptych *Artifacts (Anasazi Cliff Dwellings, Canyon de Chelly, Spacecraft in Perpetual Geosynchronous Orbit, 35,786 km Above Equator)* (2010), Paglen succeeds in creating surprising formal and conceptual ties between two seemingly disparate images. In graphic black-and-white photographs, the linear pattern of striated cliffs and the diagonals created by the long-exposure image of satellites tie the two pictures together. In addition to this formal correlation, the work also speaks of obsolescence and artifact, both in the Anasazi ruins and in a ring of satellites; many of the latter are no longer operational, but remain in perpetual orbit. Through Paglen’s juxtaposition of images, we see the historical time frame, and thus obsolescence, of artifacts left both on the Earth and in space.

The two series of *Untitled* photographs dedicated to CIA Reaper and Predator drones fuse image and idea such that they feel unified and generative. Compared to the rather weighty content of the rest of the show, these photographs at first seem almost frivolous. Sensuous sky and clouds are minutely dotted with unmanned aircraft used for surveillance in Pakistan, Yemen, and other countries. Like a cloak-and-dagger approach, the expansive fields of billowing and delicate clouds, seemingly benign, act as decoys while the insect-like vehicles belie their true scale and possibly sinister nature. The ambiguity about the subjects of the photographs is revealed by the parenthetical separation in titles, such as: *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*(2010) and *Untitled (Predator Drone; Indian Springs, NV)*(2010). The *Untitled* photographs have an experiential quality where the images play off their content to pull the viewer back and forth into the photograph in a sequence of looking and scanning that highlights the juncture between art-viewing and surveying.

Much of Paglen's work clearly expresses the poetics of obsolescence, the expansiveness of space and time, the sinister nature of government surveillance systems, and the reflexivity of photography and looking. However, I also find the content of Paglen's work so compelling that, at times, the image itself seems almost redundant. I am left wondering, aside from being formally commanding, does the photograph take the idea anywhere that a text couldn't?

***Unhuman* is on view at Altman Siegel Gallery, in San Francisco, through April 2, 2011.**