

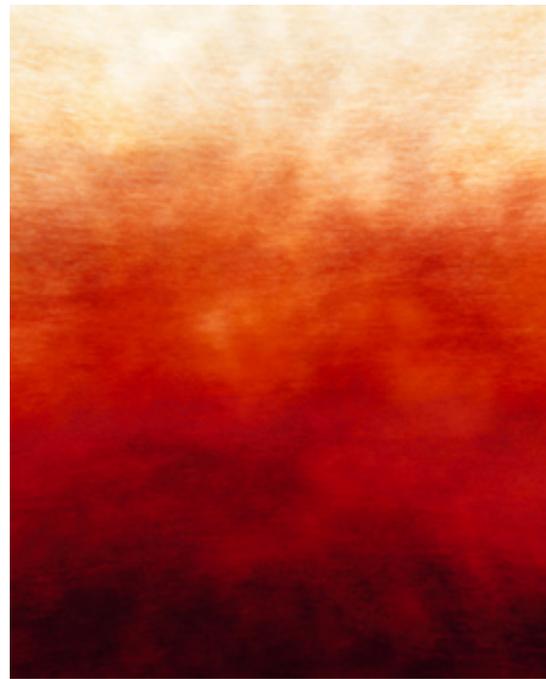
ARTFORUM

Trevor Paglen
ALTMAN SIEGEL
49 Geary Street, 4th Floor
February 10–April 2

With his latest exhibition, “Unhuman,” Trevor Paglen advances his ongoing investigation of what he terms the history of “seeing with machines.” It is a project that has led him to mine and chronicle the last vestiges of the unseen in our seemingly transparent world, namely all forms of military espionage and surveillance that exist in the interstices of our vision: secret government locations, satellite systems, invisible magnetic fields. It’s easy to be seduced by his pristine, stark landscapes that beckon with the allure of post-cold war intrigue—the green glow of a listening station tucked into the forests of West Virginia, for instance, or the striations left by an observation satellite’s trajectory across the night sky. But Paglen’s project is much more subtle and expansive in its implications, for it ultimately moves beyond the current military-industrial complex in all its splendor to examine the visual and epistemological regimes that inhere in its gadgetry—including his own camera.

As the show suggests, the history of these techniques of observation predate our contemporary global information systems, with roots in the nineteenth century’s advent of photography and experiments with the limits of vision. Quite aptly, Paglen revisits Eadweard Muybridge’s motion studies, replacing human locomotion with the systematic scanning of a drone. He also references J. M. W. Turner’s experiments with abstraction and retinal afterimages, which inform his spectacular abstract skiescapes, as in *The Fence (Lake Kickapoo, Texas)*, 2010, which captures a magnetic field in an image that resembles spirit photography and boasts equally spectacular effects. There are perhaps even traces of Caspar David Friedrich in the video of raw footage of a drone surveying eastern Europe. In the tension between these (almost) pastoral landscapes and an impersonal vision, Paglen brings us quite unexpectedly to questions of the sublime, which he recasts not as transcendence but as a brush against the gaps and fissures of a vast, intangible network. It’s a surprising gesture that also attests to a masterful deployment of the medium in an archaeology of the present that is as awe-inspiring as it is timely.

— Franklin Melendez



Trevor Paglen, *The Fence (Lake Kickapoo, Texas)*, 2010,
 color photograph, 50 x 40”.