

San Francisco Chronicle

Saturday, March 12, 2011

Trevor Paglen: Seeing anew

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The elaborately captioned photographs of Trevor Paglen at Altman Siegel raise all the right questions: What does a picture show us, and how do we know? What distinguishes photographic art from mere documentation - impact, meaning, aesthetics?

Years spent capturing on camera unacknowledged or sequestered details of American military facilities and operations made Paglen, a geographer by training, a sort of optical forerunner of WikiLeaks.

In 2006, he and A.C. Thompson - neither of them a government insider - corroborated the Bush administration's "extraordinary rendition" policy in practice through deftly managed interviews and careful plane-spotting of civilian aircraft used by the CIA to send captives abroad for torture.

As in "Dead Military Satellite (DMSP 5F-5II)" (2010), Paglen has used long exposures to record the presence of stationary and moving spy satellites - both active and defunct - in orbit at elevations that make them all but invisible to the unaided eye.

In other cases, he has used extremely powerful lenses to collapse the distance between safe vantage points and isolated, secret military sites. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art aptly included Paglen's work in "Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera Since 1870" (through April 17).

Three big untitled prints at Altman Siegel appear at first to record empty skies, rather like Richard Misrach's horizonless skylines. But closer inspection discovers in each picture one or more Predator drones, delivering a momentary shock of the sort that instinct must give to small birds at the sight of a raptor overhead.

"The Fence" (2010) figures as the emblematic piece in the exhibition because it renders visible, in a sense, an electromagnetic entity that the eye cannot see: a surveillance field that envelops the United States, capable of registering any breach by unknown aircraft or airborne weapons.

Instruments have done the "seeing" and processing in this case. Pictorially, Paglen's "The Fence" occupies an indeterminate zone. It looks like an abstraction, but only

because its factual basis eludes the traditional technologies of representation.

Seeing "The Fence" may consist only in the recognition that hidden domains of surveillance, juiced by paranoia and lust for power, pervade the world that our senses take for real.

The video "Drone Vision" (2010) provides a kind of climax to "Unhuman": It consists of unmanned American drone surveillance transmissions intercepted surreptitiously by a "satellite hacker" with whom Paglen works.

Only the most obtuse visitors will fail to connect this creepy video - available on the gallery's website - with the armed drones that are losing hearts and minds in West Asian military adventures that speed the bankruptcy of the United States.

But again, is it art? Look, Paglen might reply, we have bigger problems.