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Critic's notebook: Art and modern warfare

Trevor Paglen focuses on the typically unseen aspects of conflict and military action.



Trevor Paglen's "Nine Reconnaissance Satellites Over the Sonora Pass" (Trevor Paglen / July 6, 2010)

By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic
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On the wall of my mother's den hang two framed 19th century military rosters. One chronicles the Union troops my great-grandfather, a civilian soldier, led during the Civil War. The other lists the 11 battles he fought in — Malvern Hill, [Fredericksburg](#), Gettysburg, Spotsylvania, etc. — from 1862 to 1864. Spotsylvania is where he took a Minié ball to the midsection, a wound that likely would have killed him had it not passed through his leather belt first.

Today his uniform (and the belt) are in a glass case at the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, just up the street from where he ran a plumbing business. In a small box on my desk I keep a conical, gray-white, three-ring Minié ball that a friend sent from Gettysburg. The bullet is lead, but I'm still always surprised at how heavy it is.

I thought of those rosters, that uniform and the weighty Minié ball when I visited the newly refurbished Oakland Museum of California a few months ago. The madeleine prompting the recollection was a large, seemingly abstract photograph showing scores of concentric circles and pencil-thin arcs of bright light against an ashen ground. The mysterious image, like something concocted by Franz Mesmer to illustrate a spinning Hitchcock vision of [vertigo](#), recalls a cross between a flat target and a deep tunnel.

Titled "Nine Reconnaissance Satellites Over the Sonora Pass," the 2008 photograph is in fact a complex time-lapse work by Oakland artist Trevor Paglen. Sonora Pass is a treacherous High Sierra route south of Carson City, Nev., and north of Yosemite, braved by 19th century Eastern immigrants traveling by wagon to California. Quintessential

wilderness, it's the remote spot in which Paglen set up a technically enhanced camera, aimed it at the night sky and recorded a four-hour exposure using only natural light.

In essence, what the camera saw was warfare.

In addition to starlight, the artist captured the light reflected off at least 10 man-made satellites, typically invisible to the casual naked eye, nine of them launched by the United States and Russia as reconnoitering tools during the Cold War. As the Earth turned, concentric circles of reflected light were inscribed by the camera. The swirling picture looks like a target inflected by a sensation of dizziness.

It pulled me up short. Wilderness turns out to be not so remote after all.

It's one thing to see the names of people inscribed on an antique decorated military roster, recognize the scratchy woolen cloth of a soldier's uniform and feel the heft of lead ammunition. It's another to see what Paglen shows us — invisible, untouchable but nonetheless omnipresent conditions of conflict and military action. We are the subject of constant if unseen surveillance from hundreds of miles away, all for wartime purposes that are no doubt still underway.

Visually, "Nine Reconnaissance Satellites Over the Sonora Pass" is a photographic echo of the 1935 "Rotoreliefs" made by [Marcel Duchamp](#). In order to parody faith in human vision as the sole avenue to artistic knowledge, the Dada imp made a dozen spinning disks inscribed with circular patterns that, when rotated by a motor, create optical confusion. Paglen's static photograph does too, but in a decidedly less playful, more sinister way. It's included in "Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes," his fascinating new book from Aperture, and its emphasis on concealment and invisibility as a photographer's best friend is provocative.

Among the series of Paglen works chronicled in "Invisible" is a suite titled "On Ghosts." Selections were included in the traveling exhibition "The New Normal," which visited the Pomona College Museum of Art in Claremont last year.

Grainy black-and-white ink-jet prints show passports and passport pictures used by [CIA](#) agents involved in the 2003 kidnapping of an innocent Muslim cleric, Abu Omar, who was taken to two American military bases and transferred to Egypt, where he said he was tortured. (Last year an Italian court convicted 23 Americans in the illegal rendition.) Paglen's prints are found photographs. Through reproduction, they forfeit traditional artistic claims to originality. Questioning identity is certainly a standard trope in postmodern art theory, but it's given fresh life when the subject is brutal covert military action taken against an ordinary civilian.

Paglen's unusual background has prepared him well for the uncommon projects represented by photographs of desert military installations, spent uranium fields, symbol-laden insignia designed for classified intelligence programs and secretly orbiting spacecraft documented in the book, his fourth. The artist, 35, is the son of an Air Force doctor who treated spy-plane pilots, and he grew up on various military bases. He holds a bachelor's in religious studies from [UC Berkeley](#). That was followed by a master's of fine arts in photography from the [School of the Art Institute of Chicago](#) and a doctorate in geography, also from Berkeley.

One result is that Paglen's own life experience and academic training actually reflect the blurred boundaries so widely celebrated as a new-media hallmark of contemporary art. Another is that his crisp studies of highly classified people, places and things are approached almost as documents for a parallel art world, complete with distinctive symbol-systems and an amorphous socio-cultural profile. Artists, geographers and theologians all engage in mapping unknown territories.

I think of the pictures in "Invisible" as surprising guides to America's darkest, most mysterious spiritual landscape. Titles of his three earlier books suggest the ongoing theme: "Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights" (written with investigative journalist A.C. Thompson), "I Could Tell You but Then You Would Have to Be Destroyed by Me," and "Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World." Chunks of work in those books are included in "Invisible," the artist's first monograph.

Did you know that a secret runway at Las Vegas' McCarran International Airport is used daily to shuttle civilian workers to an untold number of covert [U.S. military](#) bases in the otherwise seemingly empty Southwest desert? Looking at Paglen's pictures of airplanes shimmering in the heat on the tarmac, photographed from a distant hotel bedroom on the Strip, it's suddenly easy to believe that an estimated 4 million Americans — roughly 1 in 75 — hold a state security clearance of some sort. Think of it the next time you deplane on the way to your favorite casino.

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Writer Rebecca Solnit, whose grim introductory essay to "Invisible" provides essential context, calls what Paglen does "seeing in the dark." The description is apt, especially when you consider that the artist can be photographing an otherwise unseen subject in the sky using only mathematical coordinates plotted on a map, or recording a shadowy ground installation 40 miles away from where he stands with his cumbersome camera and lenses — Carleton Watkins for a super-secret age.

Still, it's what happens in looking at his pictures that resonates. An eccentric image of concentric light-rings, tiers of blurred colors that show a remote weaponry testing site or a grinning face that graces an officially faked document each requires slow scrutiny to begin to comprehend. A viewer replicates what the artist did in making the photograph.

Even then, what you're seeing balances on a knife edge between an answer to a question you might not have known to ask and a whole new set of questions that suddenly opens up. Faith, in fact, may be the area of Paglen's primary accomplishment: When I look at my ancestor's military roster, I believe he did what it says he did — and I also believe that those arcs of light on Paglen's spy-satellite photograph represent what the artist says they do.

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