

Artist Trevor Paglen Has His Eye On Satellites

Timothy Buckwalter | May 31, 2008 | San Francisco Chronicle

Up in our darkened sky, sinister objects lurk.

They are not the vehicles of some alien life form bent on destroying humankind, though many do look like props from a sci-fi film. Some are so large they could engulf three football fields.

For four decades, the United States has been filling the outer reaches of our atmosphere with 189 reconnaissance satellites. And for several years, artist-geographer Trevor Paglen has been keeping his eye on them. (Paglen was named last week as one of four recipients of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art Awards, which come with a cash prize and a show at the museum in 2009.)

"The Other Night Sky," which opens Sunday at the Berkeley Art Museum, is a result of Paglen's nocturnal efforts. The exhibition features a gallery with a dozen large-scale and midsize photographs, as well as a darkened room that houses a computer simulation and sound re-creation of the satellites, broadcast onto a globe.

Shot from Paglen's East Bay rooftop and at a base in the desert near Mono Lake, the photos capture sweeping fields of stars or the glowing haze of the Milky Way. The images seem little different from the usual lush astral photography seen in National Geographic or Cosmos magazine, except that every photo harbors an extra scratch or streak of light. That blemish is a spy satellite in motion.

The photos highlight a cross section of our high-tech wolf pack, such as USA 193 - the faulty satellite shot down three months ago - in its wobble, or the traces of a satellite launched in 1968.

"When you look at the number of satellites, what they're doing and what they represent, it is really a vision of trying to have the world in your clutches," says Paglen in his disheveled office in UC Berkeley's geography department. "Like the Greeks trying to see what their gods were doing, or Kepler, Galileo or Newton looking up at the night sky trying to understand laws of gravity, this project is trying to think about what that gesture of looking at the night sky in search of truth means today."

Smelling of cigarettes and clad in black Levi's, a weathered T-shirt and Doc Martens-like oxfords, Paglen looks like a man who spent his formative years in punk clubs - which he did. After earning a bachelor's degree in religious studies and a master's in fine art, Paglen merged two disparate fields of study - art and geography - into numerous projects.

Today, surrounded by stacks of books, computers, spy plane photos and boxes of military patches, in a room that is not much larger than a janitor's closet, Paglen is getting ready to turn in his doctoral dissertation in geography.

Paglen is not alone in his fascination with recon satellites. Dating back to Sputnik, in 1957, amateur astronomers have been keeping tabs on the orbiting bodies. Paglen uses data sets produced by these "observer clubs" to predict when the satellites are going to linger over Northern California, awaiting a photo opportunity.

Paglen has found a way to use the club's data. He has teamed up with a crew of coders at Eyebeam, an art and technology center in New York, to build a suite of software that tracks and presents the position of the recon satellites in real time.

The result, on display at the Berkeley Art Museum, is a darkened globe crawling with tiny white spots of various sizes, avatars for the 189 satellites. Paglen has also dug up intercepted signals from the satellites, immersing the globe in sounds similar to the blips and groans of a fax machine.

"The Other Night Sky" is not Paglen's first foray into extended studies of secret military projects.

Six years ago - while working on a project about the California penal system that involved examining satellite photos of prisons - he stumbled on some classified military sites. At the time, the war on terror was in full bloom and a number of rumors about secret sites had begun to circulate.

"We knew the CIA had to be running secret prisons around the world," Paglen says. "It was not in the news, but you could tell - people were being rounded up but were not being put in our jails. These hidden military sites I stumbled upon seemed really relevant to the idea that the state was disappearing people."

Through numerous information requests at the national and state levels, he generated reams of knowledge about the United States' secret rendition program that was not then making news. That he had time to pursue it gave Paglen a sense of moral responsibility.

In his newfound role as gadfly, Paglen presented his files to investigative journalist A.C. Thompson, whom he knew from the Oakland music scene. The artist and the reporter co-authored an article for the San Francisco Bay Guardian that was picked up around the world. A book deal for what would ultimately become "Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights" soon followed. Published in September 2006, it was the first book to focus on extraordinary rendition - when the CIA takes terror suspects to countries where they can be tortured or jailed without due process. The New York Times called it "the real thing ... and not on the evening news. Go figure."

Spinning off that research, Paglen created numerous art pieces. One involved documenting the fake signatures of fictive CEOs who headed CIA-front companies. Another proffered an exhaustive list of code names for active but classified military programs. More recently, Paglen published "I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have to be Destroyed by Me: Emblems From the Pentagon's Black World," an art book that presents peculiar shoulder patches created for the weird and top secret programs funded by the Pentagon's black budget (an achievement that landed him on "The Colbert Report" and in the New York Times).

Despite his apparent political bent, Paglen is more concerned with exploring what is behind appearances than in using art to advocate for specific policy change.

"I'm not so interested in the secret sauce," he says. "I'm much more interested in how the world is transformed through the fact that all this secret stuff exists. You start to recognize that normal things you see every day are actually very, very strange."