



Print Article



Trevor Paglen's "Black World" at Bellwether



Left to right: *Control Tower/Cactus Flat, NV/11:55 a.m./Distance ~20 miles* (2006), *Canyons and Unidentified Vehicle/Tonopah Test Range, NV/Distance ~18 miles/12:45 pm* (2006) and *Large Hangars and Fuel Storage/Tonopah Test Range, NV/Distance ~18 miles/10:44 pm* (2005)



Trevor Paglen
Tail Numbers/Gold Coast Terminal, Las Vegas, NV/Distance ~1 mile/5:27 pm 2005
Bellwether

BLACK SITE SPECIFIC by Ben Davis

Trevor Paglen, "Black World," Nov. 16-Dec. 23, 2006, at Bellwether Gallery, 134 Tenth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10001

Radical geographer, muckraking author and outlaw artist, San Francisco-based Trevor Paglen has, in the past, presented installations such as 2005's "Code Names" at Diverse Works in Houston, a display performing the formidable task of gathering in one place the codenames of all known classified government programs. He's also participated in agitational stunts such as releasing robotic "drones" outside of Bechtel's Bay Area headquarters, programmed to deploy leaflets exposing the corporation's criminal activities to passersby. Paglen's works touch on the far-out regions where reality becomes indistinguishable from paranoid delusion, and they have taken him from the fabled Area 51 in the Nevada desert to the wastelands of occupied Afghanistan.

His latest project, "Black World," on view at Bellwether gallery, grows in part out of a years-long collaboration with journalist A.C. Thompson, recently culminated with the publication of their book *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights* (Melville House, Sept. 2006), which documents much of the factual background behind the works on display. Paglen's obsession with government conspiracy has put him ahead of the mainstream media: His project of tracking the CIA's secret network of airlines and "black site" secret prisons was begun well in advance of the *Washington Post* exposé last year detailing the practice.

The installation at the Chelsea gallery is something of a puzzle, requiring a certain amount of background to make sense of the artifacts on view. At its center are a variety of large C-prints, capturing mysterious rows of planes parked on tarmacs or inscrutable buildings in the desert. The images have a distorted quality, resulting from being shot from extreme distances, but also giving them an unsettling, haunted air. The same applies to a series of blurry video loops depicting similar subject matter.

Each work is tagged with a precise, informational title, as one might expect from an artist/geographer -- for instance, one reads, *Unmarked 737 at 'Gold Coast' Terminal / Las Vegas, NV / Distance ~1 mile / 10:44 pm* (2005). Aside from these title clues, it falls to further investigation (I had to call the artist) to fish for the incriminating specifics -- in this case, that this cryptic image of men entering a shadowy plane at night depicts a flight that ferries government workers to jobs at secret facilities.

Most sinister -- and impressive -- in this regard is a lone photo titled *Salt Pit, Shomali Plains Northeast of Kabul, Afghanistan* (2006). Using the testimony of torture survivor Khalid El-Masri, European flight records of known CIA planes, and Google Earth, Paglen was able to travel to Afghanistan and locate the "Salt Pit," the most famous of the CIA's secret detention facilities, ten minutes outside of Kabul (in an Alternet interview, he describes how he knew he was on



Trevor Paglen
Unmarked 737 at 'Gold Coast'
 Terminal/Las Vegas, NV/Distance ~1
 mile/10:44 pm
 2005
 Bellwether



Trevor Paglen
The Workers/Las Vegas, NV/Distance
 ~1 mile (still)
 2006
 Bellwether



Trevor Paglen
Missing Persons (detail)
 2006
 Bellwether



Trevor Paglen
Symbology (detail)

the right track when he passed a goatherd wearing a Kellogg, Brown & Root ball cap).

This drama is not visible in the photo, which features a strip of sand and a low building surrounded by barbed wire at the foot of a gravelly hill. In fact, what the image exudes is impenetrability, both physical and intellectual. Paglen claims to be the only person known to have photographed the Salt Pit and, rather than sell the image to a news source, he has chosen to produce the photo in an edition of one, an enforced scarcity that reduplicates the clandestine nature of the subject.

There are two other types of work in "Black World." One consists of displays of signatures photocopied by the artist from records gathered during his research into the network of dummy civilian corporations set up by the CIA all over the U.S. to charter aircraft. Each page displays multiple signatures side-by-side, showing identical names clearly printed in different hand-writings -- indexes of real operatives masked behind a fake identity used to skirt the law.

The final piece in the Bellwether show comes from Paglen's parallel investigations into secret Department of Defense activities. In a long case displayed on one wall, the artist presents some 20 patches once worn by personnel as part of secret programs, sent to him by various contacts inside the military.

The symbolism of these artifacts is fascinating and esoteric. They betray an almost nerdy love of wizards, aliens and ghosts, and are replete with ironic Latin inscriptions (one reads "Si Ego Certiorem Faciam. . . Mihi Tu Delendus Eris," -- "I could tell you. . . but then I'd have to kill you"; another, "Gustasus Similis Pullus," translates as "Tastes Like Chicken.") An accompanying booklet has Paglen decoding the insignias' oblique references to their affiliated government programs: According to the artist, a dragon refers to a codename for infrared satellites, while the oft-recurring sigma symbol stands for the number zero, representing stealth capability.

The murky, difficult-to-decipher nature of the "Black World" installation as a whole is not accidental. It doubles the works' content, forcing the viewer into a position of investigation that mirrors Paglen's own process. At the same time, this obscure approach reflects the conundrum of all projects that directly pose activism as art -- in what way does working through the art gallery, a venue best served for selling esthetic luxury goods (and the works at Bellwether are priced from \$1,000 to \$20,000 for the Salt Pit photo) serve the cause? With his lone-scholar-against-the-system approach, it must be said that Paglen's interventions are better fodder for the esoterica-obsessed intellectuals of *Cabinet* magazine (where, in fact, he will shortly publish a piece on the patches) than for building a mass movement against a government that has made electrocution, starvation, humiliation, simulated drowning and other terrifying practices a routine part of the way it does business.

But there is an answer to this too. In conversation, Paglen expresses some indifference to the question -- "If they want a political intervention, people can read one of my articles or attend a lecture. That's not what this is about." To laud him for his commitment as a political artist thus misses the mark -- the concern that underscores the diverse displays at Bellwether, from the unseen torture behind the fragmentary photographic images, to the unseen schemes behind the signatures and insignia, is the limits of what can be shown or known.

Read this way, what Paglen presents is a kind of negative political art. It portrays the esthetic capture of politics, even when it is very

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committed, as a kind of hallucinatory dead end. It makes the argument that there's a level beyond which representation can't take us, and that only something else -- investigation, organization or protest, it falls to the viewer to decide -- can take on.



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Trevor Paglen
Symbology (detail)
2006
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