



The Last Pictures (Warning From Space: Demonstration of Eating, Licking and Drinking), 2012

## ▼ Art

# Spooks and Aliens

Trevor Paglen surveils the surveillance state **BY R.C. BAKER**

In a stroke of grim serendipity, Trevor Paglen's latest exhibition opened on the day the Senate began confirmation hearings on John O. Brennan, President Obama's choice to head the CIA. A recent brief by the ACLU notes that Brennan is "something of a Forrest Gump of toxic national-security policies, having been in the room when everything from torture to the killing of an American citizen was being debated." Paglen was not in any of those rooms, but he might have been watching them: His long-range lenses (repurposed from astrophotography gear) have captured the vast network of buildings, vehicles, and technological marvels that make up our mostly out-of-sight, out-of-mind national-security complex.

At first glance, Paglen's five-foot-wide 2012 photo *Untitled (Predator Drone)* seems like one of Ed Ruscha's canvases with the subject airbrushed out. But look very closely at the gradated beige and orange background and you'll discern a teensy plane in the desert sky. A senior fellow at the Brookings Institution estimates the kill rate of these attack aircraft at "10 or so civilians" for every "mid- and high-ranking [al Qaeda and Taliban] leader," and Paglen's image captures the terrifyingly remote, indiscriminate nature of high-tech warfare. The U.S. drones circling unseen over Pakistan and Afghanistan are piloted by joystick jockeys based somewhere near Las Vegas, who can rain down sudden hellfire on foe and mistakenly targeted friend alike.

In the 2012 diptych *The Last Pictures (The Narbona Panel; Humans Seen Through a Predator Drone)*, Paglen probes the moral dilemma of a war that keeps

one set of combatants out of harm's way. In the left-hand photo, Navajo pictographs illustrate an 1805 massacre by Spanish troops led by Antonio de Narbona. The tribe hid in a high cave and the Spaniards fired up into its mouth, the ricochets killing everyone inside, sight unseen. The right-hand panel depicts hazy figures trudging through gnarly topography, the scene garlanded with targeting data. Paglen captures the fog of digital warfare in these static-blurred shapes—a tough call for some over-caffeinated pilot in an air-conditioned building half a world away.

Paglen brings the war home with *National Security Agency Utah Data Center, Bluffdale, UT* (2012), which documents the ongoing construction of the gargantuan facility that will Hoover up yotabytes (one quadrillion gigabytes) of American citizens' e-mails, Google searches, and cellphone calls, plus such digital "pocket litter" as parking receipts and bookstore purchases. Traveling to Aruba, Moscow, or Lahore? Don't



Spot the drone: Terrors of remote warfare

Untitled (Predator Drone), 2012

worry—the Men in Black will know where to find you.

The artist, who has a Ph.D. in geography, writes, "One of my analytic assumptions is that all human undertakings, including secret programs, are spatial... even though classified programs are organized in such a way as to maximize their own invisibility, they have to happen somewhere." Whether he's taking his own photos or appropriating the work of others, Paglen indeed appreciates the complexity of compressing our volumetric world down to two dimensions. At 3 by 4 feet, his photo of the blossoming NSA complex delivers painterly heft through a swath of bright work-lights bisecting a nocturnal landscape of mountains and desert.

Paglen's *The Last Pictures* project, meanwhile, has taken his obsessions into orbit. Represented here by several diptychs on the wall and in a slide show, the work itself consists of 100 images etched onto an "ultra-archival" silicon disk sealed in a gold shell and affixed to the EchoStar XVI communications satellite—a picture book for whatever beings might find it circling the Earth eons after we're gone. Not knowing our fate is part of the point. The pictures run the gamut of humanity: a trainer bows to a killer whale in an aquarium; a Vietnamese mother tends to children deformed by the effects of the U.S. Army's herbicide Agent Orange; Captain America hurls his shield. Two walls of the gallery are festooned with outtakes from the project, a mural of formal hijinks: a Japanese graphic featuring sexual congress between a maiden and an octopus is juxtaposed with Pentecostal snake handlers; firing rocket engines join Turner's

### Eat, drink, man, woman: Cyclopean starfish and other space oddities.

painting of Parliament burning, along with the steam-belching Moloch machine from *Metropolis*. Like a DJ, Paglen connects moods and segues among rhythms in this deft visual jam culled from the graphic babel of the Internet.

In an excellent catalog essay, author and critic Rebecca Solnit observes, "Artists are, at their best, honorary aliens seeing the familiar through strange eyes and the unseen in plain view." This notion becomes manifest in one of the more playful diptychs on display from *The Last Pictures*. On the left, a still from a 1956 Japanese sci-fi film depicts characters in cyclopean starfish costumes struggling to communicate with endangered earthlings. On the right, reality gets even weirder: in 1975, as part of the Golden Records program for the Voyager space probes, three Cornell scientists were photographed demonstrating "eating, licking, and drinking." In the image here, a woman's tongue strains toward an ice-cream cone, an older man clamps his teeth on a sandwich as if he's preparing to shake it to death, and a grad student

### THE LAST PICTURES PROJECT HAS TAKEN PAGLEN'S OBSESSIONS INTO ORBIT.

streams water into his mouth from a pitcher held above his head. Unlike Paglen's photo album, which is eternally locked in geosynchronous orbit with Earth, Voyager 1 is approaching the outer edge of our solar system, bearing this bizarre calling card from humanity to whatever interstellar denizens might try to decipher it.

In Paglen's expansive visions, miscommunication—too often intentional—is a fact of life. In war, innocents die as a result; in pop culture, aliens are stymied; in America, the Constitution gets bent.

So it goes.

**Metro Pictures, 519 West 24th Street, 212-206-7100, metropictures.com. Through March 9.**