

# ARTFORUM

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## Trevor Paglen

BELLWETHER

Trevor Paglen's "Black World" broaches the deadly extremities of our neoauthoritarian state, which since the inception of perpetual war half a decade ago has been pursuing its announced goal of "global military supremacy." Paglen employs techniques borrowed from astronomy to photograph, at times from miles away, some of the

military industrial complex's most secret installations. These include a CIA torture prison in Afghanistan (shown in *Salt Pit, Shomali Plains Northeast of Kabul* . . . , 2006) and the infamous Area 51 of conspiracy lore: a Connecticut-size covert research facility in the south Nevada desert one of whose Air Force names is "probably," as Paglen notes, Detachment 3, Air Force Flight Test Center. This nominal ambiguity is itself indicative of the interminable vagaries attending our nascent police state,

whose propaganda aims to deprive us of the ability to determine power's true aims, motives, and actions. If nothing is certain, it seems, all is permitted.

Paglen, coauthor of the recent book *Torture Taxi* (2006) and a chronicler of the US government's torture campaign, has determined that the company that owns the fleet of jets that transports workers into and out of Nevada and Southern California test facilities (the subject of *Janet Pass By/Cactus Flat, NV/Distance~19 miles, Control Tower/Tonopah test range, NV/Distance~18 miles, and Control Tower/Cactus Flat, NV/11:55am/Distance~20 miles*, all 2006) visits many of the same locations as one that owns the planes used to fly prisoners to foreign countries for "interrogation," "extraordinary rendition," or that more recent and pithier euphemism for torture,

"pressure." It's our slippage into this form of debasement that "Black World" confronts.

Paglen intends his photographs to depict nondescript military sites as a meditation on "the limits of vision, abstraction and the nature of evidence," and indeed there's a quotidian quality to the Area 51-related images that contrasts with the horrors implicit therein. That secrecy and authoritarianism have become the norm is obvious in the eight-minute video loop *The Workers/Las Vegas, NV/Distance~1 mile*, 2006, in which blandly attired Area 51 employees file past Paglen's remote lens as though leaving a mall. Meanwhile, parts of the remote facility are housed in utilitarian prefab buildings that from the outside appear no more remarkable than a machine shop.

*Symbology Volume I*, 2006, is a set of twenty fabric emblems collected by Paglen from his contacts among military personnel working on "special," "black," or classified military sites and operations. In their imagery, the deadly intent of these secret projects emerges, though it is muted by a cartoon aesthetic replete with allusions to black cats, the grim reaper, and the "alien" mythology surrounding Area 51. In one patch three cobras encircle the earth, fangs bared at the viewer in attack posture. In another an oval-eyed alien figure clutches a stealth aircraft; Paglen's forthcoming book on these patches explains that the caption below it is a Latin phrase whose English translation is "tastes like chicken." On a number of patches are expressions that translate, roughly, as "if I told you I'd have to kill you," and "stay away, you uninitiated rabble." In these clever conflations of the cute and the lethal, even the industry of mass death has been kitschified.

The inescapable presentiment here is that we've aestheticized the abhorrent on our way to what writer Charles Upton sees as the final age, that "of the anti-human." Yet such despair is countered by the heroism inherent in Paglen's project, which offers us a heretofore forbidden glimpse of the war state's mechanisms, images as emblematic of our era as that of the naked Vietnamese girl scorched by napalm was of its. The horror now seems all the greater in that we largely refuse or are refused the sight of it. Which is why Paglen's art matters.

—Tom Breidenbach



Trevor Paglen, *Control Tower/Cactus Flat, NV/11:55 am/Distance~20 miles*, 2006, color photograph, 30 x 36".