

PRYING EYES

Trevor Paglen makes art out of government secrets.

BY JONAH WEINER

In the Nevada sky—above a desert valley where jackrabbits, kangaroo rats, antelope, and cattle munched on cheatgrass—two tendrils of vapor had appeared over Squawtip Mountain. Recognizing these as fighter-jet contrails, the artist Trevor Paglen, who was riding shotgun in an S.U.V., shouted, “Stop the car!” He grabbed a digital camera with a telephoto lens and hopped out, nudging back the brim of his Oakland Raiders cap to bring the viewfinder to his eye.

The jets were too far away to make out, but their contrails indicated serious hotdogging. Flying northerly, the pilots had climbed long, lazy slopes before diving earthward and returning in the direction they’d come from, carving parallel hooks in the sky. The valley was quiet and hot, and the air smelled of sagebrush. After a minute, the contrails faded. Paglen lowered his camera. “Show’s over,” he said, returning to the car. Looking at the camera’s L.C.D. display, he zoomed in on a picture: at the head of a contrail was a tiny isosceles triangle of shimmering light. “Sort of looks like an F-22,” he said, squinting at the screen. “I don’t know what they are.”

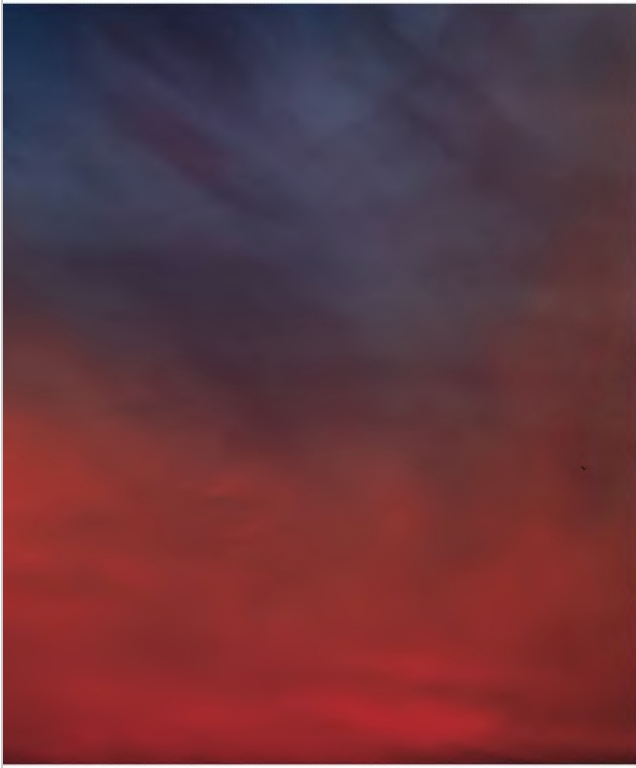
We were on a narrow dirt road on the periphery of the Nevada Test and Training Range, or N.T.T.R., an expanse of restricted land that is home to many classified aircraft and electronic-warfare simulations. Paglen estimates that he has taken twenty to thirty trips to the area, which is roughly as big as Connecticut. The N.T.T.R. includes the Tonopah Test Range, Creech Air Force Base, the Tolicha Peak Electronic Combat Range, and various obscure, officially unacknowledged installations. The most famous, known as Area 51, is a base where pilots audition planes so secret that most people cleared to work within the N.T.T.R. can’t go near it.

Paglen, a former prison-rights activist who has written that secrecy “nourishes

the worst excesses of power,” regards each photograph he takes as the record of a political performance: he insists on his right to stand on public land with a camera. Over the past decade, he has taken thousands of photographs of places connected to the so-called “black world” of classified defense activity, which has grown exponentially since 2001, when the Bush Administration launched its war on terror. He has aimed his lens at a National Security Agency eavesdropping complex in Sugar Grove, West Virginia; a space-surveillance transmitter in Lake Kickapoo, Texas; and a secret C.I.A. prison outside Kabul. Last November, he photographed an Israeli nuclear-weapons facility in the Negev Desert, a risky move that he now calls “very stupid.” (The site had the tightest security he’d ever seen: fencing, surveillance cameras, and armed checkpoints.) Paglen has two graduate degrees—a Ph.D. in geography, from Berkeley, and an M.F.A., from the Art Institute of Chicago—and his academic and artistic interests are fully intertwined. Research for his geography dissertation led him to create the images in his first solo gallery show. In 2009, Dutton published a version of the dissertation as “Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon’s Hidden World.”

Paglen, who is thirty-eight, has close-cropped blond hair, blue eyes, a goatee, and a thin beard that he confines to his jawline with an electric trimmer. An avid surfer, he speaks in a mixture of wave-chaser lingo (“Whassup, dude!”) and the knottier formulations of Continental theory—a result of years spent in graduate seminars, Bay Area bars, and radical artists’ collectives. Alert to the stereotype of the jargon-addled Berkeley crank, Paglen adopts a self-mocking tone if he fears he’s coming off as stuffy. He dresses in a studiously casual uniform of fitted black T-shirt, baggy dark Levi’s, and motorcycle boots, although, for the desert,





Paglen says that his often blurry photographs of drones and classified surveillance sites are "useless as evidence." His aim is not to expose and edify so much as to confound and unsettle. Photograph by Pari Dukovic.

he'd traded the boots for thin-soled leather sneakers.

The Nevada Test and Training Range's black sites are protected by mountainous buffer land, barbed-wire fencing, surveillance cameras hidden among Joshua trees, buried motion detectors, and private-security teams. To take his photographs, Paglen finds viewpoints on public land, such as Tikaboo Peak—a mountain summit, twenty-six miles from Area 51, with good sight lines to the base. His art also depends on serious investigative work. He attends military reunions to hear retired pilots talk and, through online aviation forums and secrecy-themed listservs, communicates with air-traffic controllers, NASA historians, and amateur "plane-spotters," who monitor runways around the world, cataloguing tail numbers.

Although Paglen is mindful of the law, he says that he sometimes faces harassment. Late one night last fall, he and a friend drove down an unmarked road that leads west from Route 375 toward Area 51. He got out just short of the restricted zone's eastern boundary; suddenly, his eardrums began pulsating and a shrill tone filled his skull. "At first, I thought I was imagining it," he said, but his friend felt it, too. When they returned to the car, the sound and the pulsing

stopped. When Paglen stepped out again, they resumed. Security forces were zapping him, he surmised, with a high-frequency weapon, like gardeners using sonic repellents to drive off a squirrel. (The Pentagon says that Paglen's account is "not plausible.")

In the S.U.V., we headed toward a mountain, in the nearby Kawich Range, whose summit, seven thousand feet above sea level, offered unobstructed views of the Tonopah Test Range. Along the way, we stopped to look at a sun-bleached steer skull in a roadside ditch; the animal's spine undulated in the grass like a monorail track. The roar of a jet engine, or several, filled the valley, but the sky was an undisrupted blue. "Creepy, huh?" Paglen said. When we arrived at the mountain, the sun was hanging low, and we unloaded Paglen's gear: the camera, a tripod, a chamois satchel bulging with lenses, and a long black case with metal latches. We'd parked just three hundred feet below the summit, but it took us fifteen minutes to climb the mountain's rocky northeast face, and we were panting when we reached the top.

"Virgin Mary's still here," Paglen said, motioning toward a chipped figurine nestled among black rocks. "That thing's been here since I've been coming." He knelt down and, snapping open the case, removed a 600-mm. Orion refractor tele-

scope—a tool, built for astrophotography, that Paglen frequently uses to take pictures.

Connecting his camera to the telescope with a tubular magnifying lens, Paglen gazed at Tonopah, thirteen miles to the south. To the naked eye, the base was little more than a white streak on the valley floor. In the display on Paglen's camera, the streak resolved into a cluster of airplane hangars, six fuel-storage tanks, two white domes, an air-control tower, and many squat, nondescript structures. Beyond these was a runway from which, an hour earlier, we'd witnessed the takeoff of an unmarked Boeing 737: a military shuttle transporting workers from the N.T.T.R. to a secure terminal at McCarran Airport, in Las Vegas.

"This isn't the closest viewpoint," Paglen said. "But it's the most panoramic." He took a picture and frowned. "The light's crappy," he said. This was funny to hear, because the looming sunset had created a postcard-perfect glow. For Paglen, though, the late-day light and corresponding drop in temperature were making his pictures undesirably clear. He likes it when his photographs capture the swirling visual noise created by convection waves rising off the desert floor, an optical effect he compares to "looking across the top of a fire." When photographing Tonopah, he explained, "I like midmorning, like 10 or 11 A.M., 'cause that's when you have a lot of action in the atmosphere."

Paglen welcomes distortion in his images because his aim is not to expose and edify so much as to confound and unsettle. He said that his photographs are "useless as evidence, for the most part, but at the same time they're a way of organizing your attention." For "Chemical and Biological Weapons Proving Ground" (2006), Paglen photographed a test site in Dugway, Utah, from forty-two miles away. He used a high-powered reflector telescope, but at that distance its capacities were severely strained. The image is dominated by stacks of grayish and bluish striations that could be geological or purely optical. At the midpoint, a row of discrete smudges—bunkers? jeeps? tree stumps?—spans the frame, like a line of uncrackable code.

Paglen said that blurriness serves both an aesthetic and an "allegorical" function. It makes his images more arresting while



"A penthouse on Central Park West... not bad for a second-tier private-school kid from a postwar co-op on Riverside Drive, eh?"

providing a metaphor for the difficulty of uncovering the truth in an era when so much government activity is covert. Scientists sometimes volunteer technical support. He said, “They’ll be like, ‘Come to my lab. We’ve been experimenting with adaptive optics systems and we could probably get you set up with a laser that would account for thermal fluctuations and convection waves, and you could take a clear picture.’ It’s like, O.K., and then what? Now you have a picture of a building. Does that say anything more than what the blurry picture of the building says? Maybe. But, I think, a little less, really.”

After the sun had disappeared, the Tonopah Test Range lit up like a city, and Paglen adjusted his exposure time. He works within rigid constraints: his compositional options are dictated by the available vantage points for a black site, and the aesthetic variables—exposure, light, weather—are both narrow and unpredictable. He took a few shots in the dusk. Paglen was underexposing the pictures by two stops, he said, and the adjustment made “the lights pop.” I thought that the images were *cerie*, but he found them overly decorative, suffering from a “Christmas-light effect.”

Tonopah came into use in the nineteen-fifties, as a site for ballistics testing; in 1978, an Air Force colonel named Gaillard (Evil) Peck chose the location for a program code-named Constant Peg, in which airmen learned to fly secretly procured Soviet MIGs, gauging their capabilities in simulated Third World War dogfights. Tonopah’s remoteness (the nearest town is a thirty-mile drive away) recommended it for such a sensitive program, and the convection waves that Paglen likes offered an additional security feature. Peck, now seventy-one and retired, told me that he visited several surrounding viewpoints on public land to determine if the site was vulnerable to spying. “Even on non-summer days, there’s typically thermal activity coming off of the surface that distorts linear vision,” he said.

In the late eighties, Tonopah housed the secret F-117A Stealth Fighter, and today the base is the home of the 30th Reconnaissance Squadron, whose pilots use remote controls and satellite links to guide a stealth reconnaissance drone, re-

cently declassified, called the RQ-170 Sentinel. A Sentinel circled above Abbottabad, Pakistan, last year, supporting the raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound. In December, Iranian national television displayed a captured American aircraft whose rounded edges, humpback profile, and trapezoidal bug-eye made it look oddly cute—Lockheed Martin by way of Pixar. It was a Sentinel caught snooping in Iranian airspace, likely piloted from Tonopah or Creech. Paglen has taken several photographs of Predator and Reaper drones, but he has yet to capture a Sentinel.

Paglen’s art work has been exhibited at the Met and the Tate Modern; a resident of lower Manhattan, he shares his New York gallery, Metro Pictures, in Chelsea, with such esteemed artists as Cindy Sherman and Isaac Julien. Paglen has made videos and installations, once covering a gallery wall with hundreds of Pentagon code names, but his most beguiling creations are his photographs. He typically produces oversize prints that refer wryly to the frontier compositions of Ansel Adams and Timothy O’Sullivan and also to painters concerned with the breakdown of representation, like J. M. W. Turner and Gerhard Richter. The hazy bands of color in Paglen’s photographs particularly evoke Richter’s habit of smearing his compositions with a squeegee.

Anne Pasternak, the head of the public-art organization Creative Time, which has worked with Paglen, said of his pictures, “They’re beautiful landscape photographs, and he’s intentionally working within that tradition, but there is something absolutely askew about them.” With their air of keeping a secret suspended indefinitely on the edge of disclosure, the photographs can carry an almost erotic charge. Helene Winer, a co-founder of Metro Pictures, says that, when displaying Paglen’s photographs at art fairs, she has noticed their magnetic pull on young men, who approach the booth with a rapt gaze and a barrage of questions.

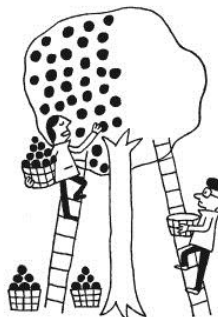
In “Untitled (Reaper Drone),” a 2010 photograph that *Artforum* ran on its cover, a desert sunrise is transfigured into an Abstract-Expressionist tableau of

crimson, periwinkle, and violet. Close inspection, however, reveals on the right edge a small black lump—the killer drone of the title—that, once detected, becomes the ominous focal point. As drones have grown increasingly central to American military strategy, they’ve become a recurring motif in Paglen’s art. Paglen is certainly troubled by the fact that U.S. drones have caused many civilian deaths; but, from an artistic standpoint, drones mean less to him as a new technology for killing than as a new technology for seeing, reconfiguring our sense of vision and distance. “For me, seeing the drone in the twenty-first century is a little bit like Turner seeing the train in the nineteenth century,” he says.

One morning, Paglen and I drove west from Las Vegas on 95, toward Creech, hoping to see some drones in action. Creech is a “white” base, with open hangars visible from the highway. Before Air Force pilots based there can fly drones over, say, Yemen, they practice over Nevada. As we neared the base, three specks materialized on the horizon: two MQ-1 Predators and one MQ-9 Reaper, out for training exercises. The Reapers are newer versions of Predators, capable of longer fly-time and heavier ballistics payloads. Both drones have large, bulbous heads. “If the tail points up, it’s a Reaper,” Paglen said. “If it points down, it’s a Predator.” The closest of the three was flying toward us, low and tilted, like the crop duster in “North by Northwest.”

We turned in to the town of Indian Springs, passing several mobile-home parks and a school. At the town’s western edge, we approached desolate, gravelly foothills of the sort that John Muir might have seen in 1878, when he described Nevada’s ridges as “gray and forbidding and shadeless, like heaps of ashes dumped from the blazing sky.”

As we drove up a steep slope, Paglen told me that he typically framed drones within color-saturated, or otherwise dramatic, skylines. He wanted these portraits to evoke “a kind of abstraction that’s associated with photographing the sky going back at least to someone like Stieglitz,” he said. “It’s about taking what might be a familiar image



and reinscribing it with something else.”

Three-quarters of a mile away, the drones were performing touch-and-go maneuvers: landing on a runway and immediately taking off again. The Reaper has a nine-hundred-horsepower engine, and its thrum, combined with the tinnier whirs of the Predators, created a racket like a NASCAR sprint. “The sky is a dull gray, so I might underexpose it to give it a kind of cobalt blue and bring out that gradient,” Paglen said. “You see how the horizon is brighter than the sky? If I’m shooting and I don’t have anything to work with, that’s the only thing I can use in terms of giving a structure to the image.”

I remarked on how unnerving it was to see and hear a Reaper so close. “We haven’t seen anything yet,” Paglen replied. He was alluding to the imminent increase in domestic drone use: “Ten years from now, they’ll be so ubiquitous it’ll seem quaint to think back to this moment, where we had to drive all the way out here to see them.”

In Paglen’s photographs of military bases, he is an outsider looking in, but he was born an insider, at Andrews Air Force Base, in Maryland, where his father was an Air Force ophthalmologist. Growing up, Trevor moved with his family from Washington, D.C., to bases in Texas and California, finally settling, at twelve, at Wiesbaden Army Airfield, in Germany, where he lived until college. His younger brother Jack, a Hollywood screenwriter (he is currently working on a project with Christopher Nolan), recalls that, as kids, he and Trevor talked endlessly about Chuck Yeager and the SR-71 Blackbird, but that over time Trevor grew ambivalent about military culture. “He was critical of some things and he embraced other things,” Jack said.

Paglen is less measured on this subject, readily invoking resentments from adolescence. “The whole thing was totally retarded,” he said, one night at his apartment, which is just south of Ground Zero; we were halfway through a pair of drinks that he’d mixed in his kitchen. “Imagine you’re in high school and they have motivational speakers come—if you’re in the military, they have some colonel come. And you don’t do very well in the military by having a brain of your own.” Adding to Paglen’s youthful unhappiness, his parents had fierce argu-

ments (“I think they got married too early, like a lot of couples in their generation”), and, after living separately for a year, they divorced. Trevor and Jack stayed with their father in Germany; their mother returned to America with their younger sister and little brother. Today, Paglen keeps in touch with his father, his two youngest siblings, and his mother, who is now an Episcopal priest in upstate New York, but his closest relationship is with Jack.

It’s impossible not to read Paglen’s childhood into his art. Nato Thompson, Paglen’s college roommate, who is a curator at Creative Time, said, “Certainly, there’s a lot to resist, a lot to push up against when you’re growing up on a military base.” Paglen acknowledged that this tension was a factor in his artmaking, but added that being raised on bases afforded him empathy for soldiers and an understanding that the military wasn’t a monolithic dark force.

Both Nato Thompson and another of Paglen’s old friends, A. C. Thompson (no relation), say that, at Berkeley, Paglen didn’t much discuss growing up; he once told A.C. that he was wary of people interpreting his work as “some sort of Oedipal reaction to his childhood.” When I asked Paglen how his attitude toward the military affected his relationship with his father, he waved away the question, saying, “My dad was not one of these stereotypical military people—buzz-cut, rah-rah-rah,” and changed the subject. (He later said that he wanted to keep his parents “out of my public life.”)

In Germany, Paglen skateboarded, became a vegetarian, and played in a punk band. He subscribed to the fanzine *Maximum Rockroll* and, after learning that it originated in Berkeley, vowed to attend college there. He majored in religious studies—“basically doing philosophy”—and dove into the local counterculture, volunteering at 924 Gilman Street, a punk club. He also performed there, in a ruinously loud thrash band called Noisegate, playing the bass, manipulating samplers, and shrieking. With Noisegate, he recalls, “I was thinking about what happens if you’re just working with sound—like, fuck music, fuck tonality, fuck chords.” A. C. Thompson, who worked security at Gilman, says, “It was not unusual for that band to see their audience flee.”

At Berkeley, Paglen lived in a series of

barely converted Oakland warehouses, where dirty dishes piled up in the bathtubs and hot plates with fraying cords stood in for stoves. The roommates envisaged these warehouses as venues for what Paglen calls “conceptual-art-slash-party things”—comfortable living wasn’t the point. For about three years, he wore a dreadlocked Mohawk and cut-off camouflage shorts with combat boots.

Nato Thompson says that Paglen was initially a “brooder”—prone to smoking in corners and ignoring people he didn’t know well—but has “totally shifted” with time, growing “very West Coast and hang-loose-y,” especially since he took up surfing, six years ago. But his girlfriend, Kate Fowle, who directs the nonprofit Independent Curators International, cautions that he is hardly the blissed-out type. The couple, who live together, took a vacation to Miami a few years ago, but Fowle says that it was only “because I forced him to.” She adds, “He’s incapable of just sitting on a beach and turning off his brain.” Jack Paglen says that Trevor is the type to “finish some obscure academic text and then pick up ‘Don Quixote’ for ‘light reading.’”

In 2000, three years after receiving his undergraduate degree, Paglen went to Chicago to attend art school. In one piece he made there, he says, he handed out “maybe a hundred” slingshots, along with paintballs, steel shot, and “ammo” that he’d fashioned from seeds and dirt. His artmaking philosophy: “No metaphor. Action.”

Paglen had begun doing prison activism as an undergraduate, and, from 1998 through 2004, he worked on an art project called “Recording Carceral Landscapes.” Flouting a media ban, he documented the interiors of California penitentiaries by wearing a concealed microphone and posing as a student interested in criminology. Paglen presented his findings at a San Francisco gallery, in a multimedia installation that had the feel of an exposé. He was inspired by prisoner-abuse cases like that of Vaughn Dortch—an inmate nearly burned to death by guards at the remote Pelican Bay facility—to think about how situating a prison on the geographic fringe helped create an atmosphere of unaccountability. It was an early formulation of his blank-spots idea.

While trying to launch his art career,

Paglen decided to pursue a Ph.D. in geography back at Berkeley. He wanted to make art “about how spaces are produced,” he explained, and he couldn’t believe that the state would actually pay him to “read books” for the better part of a decade. One day during his first year, Paglen was in the basement of McCone Hall, rummaging through U.S. Geological Survey aerial photographs of far-flung prisons, when he noticed huge redacted chunks in certain Western landscapes: the footprints of hidden military bases. He took his first trip to Area 51 in the fall of 2003, camping with a friend on snow-topped Tikaboo Peak.

Last year, Paglen rejected a request from Apple to use a photograph he’d taken, of a spy satellite in orbit, as an iPad background. But he is hardly opposed to courting the mainstream. As he puts it, “I pretty much made a conscious decision to make projects a lot of people can relate to.” His 2007 book, “I Could Tell You but Then You Would Have to Be Destroyed by Me,” is a collection, amassed during his graduate research, of delightfully bizarre military patches worn by American personnel involved in covert projects: an alien chomping on a stealth bomber, a topless cowgirl astride an orca. He promoted the book on “The Colbert Report.” (During the interview, Stephen Colbert theorized that “Trevor Paglen” was an anagram for his true identity, “Agent Plover.”) Earlier this year, Chernin Entertainment, the production company that made “Rise of the Planet of the Apes,” hired Paglen to consult on a black-world thriller inspired by “Invisible,” a book of photographs that he published in 2010.

Paglen has little time for artists who don’t take art’s social purpose seriously. He decries what he sees as the cynicism of postmodernists like Jeff Koons, who “wallow in semiosis and laugh at the idea of trying to make any grand statement.” Nato Thompson told me that for a long time he had to drag Paglen to galleries. “He’s interested in *his* art,” Nato said. “Art as a category is not very interesting to him.” Paglen told me, “What I want art to do is help us see who we are now,” adding that most art does not live up to this standard.

In 2005, Paglen began work on “Torture Taxi,” a book-length investigation into the U.S. government’s extraordinary-



“How come the most ignorant among us are always the loudest?”

rendition program, written with A. C. Thompson, who had become an alt-weekly journalist in the Bay Area. (He is now a reporter at ProPublica.) While reporting, they came across the case of Khaled el-Masri, a German citizen who, in 2003, was detained for five months in Afghanistan, at a secret C.I.A. prison known as the Salt Pit. With the aid of satellite photographs, a diagram of the Salt Pit drawn by Masri, and the testimony of other detainees—who said that the prison was a ten-minute drive from Kabul’s airport—Paglen found an old brick factory that fit the bill.

In May, 2006, he bought plane tickets for Thompson and himself on an Ariana Afghan Airlines flight from Dubai to Kabul. “It was a fairly duct-tape-and-baling-wire operation,” Thompson recalls. En route to the old factory in a cab, they stopped to let a goatherd pass with his flock. The man was dressed traditionally, except for a baseball cap bearing the logo of Kellogg Brown & Root, a onetime Halliburton subsidiary—a sign, Paglen thought, that they were on the right track.

Soon the factory came partially into view, behind security walls and barbed wire. Black S.U.V.s were leaving the complex. Paglen started shooting furtively, but, noticing an Afghan checkpoint ahead, he stuck his memory card

under the seat and swapped in a dummy. The guards, however, were relaxed. Through a translator, Paglen asked them about the site, which was about a quarter mile away. It was a “training facility,” they replied, where “lots of Americans” came and went. Paglen’s photograph “Salt Pit,” an out-of-focus image dominated by the beige security wall, went up for sale that November in Chelsea, in an edition of one, for twenty thousand dollars.

President George W. Bush was criticized on the left for vastly expanding the black world, but it has not been reined in by the Obama Administration. Last year, Dana Priest and William M. Arkin, of the *Washington Post*, described an “overgrown jungle” of greedy contractors and bureaucratic logjams. More than eight hundred and fifty thousand people, they reported, now have top-secret clearances. The black budget for 2012 is estimated by *Wired* to be fifty-one billion dollars, with programs ranging from weapons development to domestic surveillance.

Paglen distills his attitude toward the black world into a bleak proverb: “If you create a place where anything can happen, anything *will* happen.” But he doesn’t consider himself an activist, and tries to give his art a non-polemical tone,



"I've been to cities other than New York. They're cute."

perhaps recognizing that the typical gallerygoer doesn't need much nudging toward a skeptical view of military activity anyway. He wants to place viewers in positions of productive uncertainty. "I don't put work in an art gallery because the next day I want people to march in the streets," Paglen says. He tries, rather, to stage disorienting encounters with "the sublime," which he defines as "the fading of the sensible, or the sense you get when you realize you're unable to make sense of something."

Paglen is an odd fit in the community of people who study the black world. In 2009, Steven Aftergood, who directs the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists, posted a negative review of "Blank Spots" on the F.A.S. Web site, calling Paglen's notion of secrecy simplistic. "Paglen is so fascinated by the corruption of secrecy that he misses an opportunity to think more critically and more deeply about the subject," Aftergood wrote. Speaking by phone, he was more charitable, commending Paglen's "idiosyncratic" per-

spective and saying, of "Blank Spots," "For a first take, he did a fine job."

Arkin, the *Post* reporter, owns all Paglen's books, and said that Paglen is capable of "seeing things clearer than the goofballs that write for *Foreign Affairs*." Dana Priest, who first became aware of Paglen's work while reporting on extraordinary rendition, praised him for making a nebulous subject concrete. "Once you put something on a map, you know it's there on this earth," she said. "He was doing that in a way no one else was doing, by tuning it into art."

Paglen described his geographically grounded approach in more cerebral terms, saying that his work exploits "an originary contradiction in secrecy, which is that it has to congeal into the surface of the earth, and the surface of the earth reflects light: if you're going to build a secret airplane, you can't do it in an invisible factory."

As Priest suggested, a single cartographic act can have powerful implications. In 2006, lawyers filed a habeas corpus petition on behalf of Majid Kahn,

a Pakistani-born resident of Maryland who had been detained without charges by the C.I.A. The government argued that Kahn, while detained, may have come to learn "highly classified" information, and therefore could not communicate with counsel. In a response brief, Kahn's lawyers countered that secret detention facilities were "public information" and could be discussed without threatening national security. They cited Paglen's photographs as proof.

At the end of our trip to Nevada, Paglen said that he was unhappy with almost every photo he'd taken there: the weather had been too boring. He saw potential, though, in the shots of the jet contrails. They seemed to offer a secrecy-themed twist on Stieglitz's "Equivalents" series of cloud pictures: "It's these airplanes that are making the clouds, and doing it in restricted airspace."

Having taken far-off pictures of secret things for nearly a decade, Paglen likened making such work, at this point, to "doing pushups." Many artists spend long, fertile careers tilling the same plot of soil, but this isn't his plan, and his most recent project is a distinct leap.

Several years ago, Paglen began photographing spy satellites in the sky, and learned that geosynchronous communications satellites, unaffected by atmospheric drag, will remain in orbit until the sun consumes the earth. The final traces of human civilization, long after the Pyramids are powder, will be a ring of metal junk twenty-two thousand miles above the planet. In 2008, Paglen secured funding from Creative Time, the public-art group, to create something that would be to these relics what bison paintings were to the Lascaux caves: an artifact consisting of a hundred tiny black-and-white images, nestled within a cannister and bolted to a satellite. "The conceit of the project is that we're making something that is going to explain to aliens why these dead spacecraft are here," Paglen explained.

For the project, titled "The Last Pictures," he collaborated with researchers at M.I.T. to devise an object that could theoretically withstand billions of years in space, settling on a gold-plated aluminum cannister carrying a small silicon wafer etched with the images. While designing the cannister, he enlisted the as-

tronomer Joel Weisberg to help him draw a 2012 map of pulsars, whose ages can be determined from their pulsation rates. This would tell aliens of the future when the artifact had launched. Viewed end to end, the hundred photographs—a mushroom cloud, an industrial chicken farm, Trotsky’s brain—form a sombre chronicle of modern human history. Paglen sees “The Last Pictures” as pushing forward the same underlying concerns as his secrecy pictures: the limits of visual communication, the annexation of space. Paglen’s artifact will be stowed away on a satellite called Echostar XVI, which is set to be launched into geostationary orbit later this year. In January, Metro Pictures will mount an exhibition related to the project.

When I met Paglen, he was wrapping up “The Last Pictures” and shifting his attention to another new project, which is more closely related to his previous work. One morning this spring, I picked him up in a rental car at a Brooklyn subway station. We headed for Long Island, where he intended to snoop into some “C.I.A. stuff.”

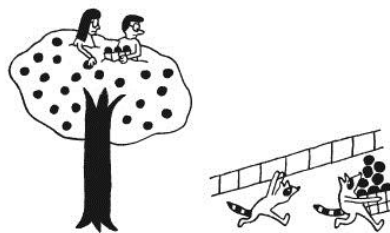
As Paglen settled into the passenger seat, he groaned and asked to stop for coffee. The previous night, his friend Laura Poitras, the Oscar-nominated documentary filmmaker, had come over to his apartment for drinks. She’d invited Jacob Applebaum, the hacker and WikiLeaks volunteer, and they’d stayed up late, talking about William Binney, an N.S.A. whistleblower who helped expose some of the agency’s domestic spying operations. (Poitras is working with Binney and Applebaum on a film.)

Poitras had recently given interviews publicizing the fact that the Department of Homeland Security had detained her at airports forty times, asking her whom she’d met during her travels and seizing her laptop and her phone. Paglen remarked that, thankfully, this had never happened to him. Blurry photographs in galleries, he conceded, might not be perceived by the government as particularly threatening. “But Laura’s stuff isn’t some huge threat, either,” he said. “That’s what’s so worrying.”

We were headed toward two towns in Suffolk County, where Paglen wanted to take photographs of buildings connected to a businessman named Donald Moss. In 2007, Moss’s company, Sportsflight,

was sued for failing to make payments to Richmor Aviation, a charter-flight firm based in upstate New York. During the Bush Administration, Richmor managed a Gulfstream IV, bearing the tail number N85VM, that the C.I.A. seems to have chartered for renditions. The lawsuit against Sportsflight revealed that it had often functioned as a middleman between DynCorp, one of the Pentagon’s biggest contractors, and small companies like Richmor. In the manner of a taxi dispatcher, Sportsflight located and booked the planes that transported “government personnel and their invitees,” as Richmor’s president put it during the trial. (Sportsflight paid nearly a million dollars in damages to Richmor.)

More than fifteen hundred documents were made public in the case: invoices, e-mails, cell-phone logs, receipts. These contained financial data—a typical rendition itinerary seems to have cost the government about three hundred thousand dollars—and structural details of the rendition program. Paglen wanted to collate this information to make a film, or perhaps an installation, in which the program’s mundane logistics would sit in tension with its grislier legacy. “It’s trying to figure out: How does this happen? How do all these different cogs add up?” he said, as we drove east. He planned to shoot locations that were tied to rendition contractors around the country, and to display these alongside lawsuit documents. But the piece would resist offering



the straightforward insights of a typical documentary: Paglen planned, for instance, to display stultifyingly long lists of phone numbers from flight call logs without explanation. It would be a portrait of “the bureaucratic sublime.” The fact that Moss, the Sportsflight owner, was a small, suburban-based cog appealed to Paglen. “I want to show the very ultra-banality of this stuff,” he said.

At 1 P.M., we reached a development in Commack, where modest homes

ringed cul-de-sacs. Moss owned a house here until September, 2003, and Paglen wanted to see what it looked like. He rolled down his window and instructed me to drive slowly. As we passed Moss’s old place—yellow vinyl siding, two-car garage—Paglen took three shots with a telephoto lens. “Now I want you to go around and drive back and out, but on the way out I’ll take photographs,” he said. “This stuff, I want that aesthetic of just, like, snapshots.”

Moss’s current office was in nearby Huntington, in a gray wooden house with green trim and a wide veranda. The neighboring businesses included an accountant’s office, a vacuum-cleaner store, and a day spa. We parked nearby, so that Paglen could shoot the office on foot. He carried both a film camera and a digital camera. In the front yard, visible above high hedges, was a wooden placard bearing the name of Sportsflight and, below it, that of Executive Cleaning Services, a business that Moss’s wife ran out of the same address. The word “Sportsflight” was covered with peeling tape. After the lawsuit, Moss had changed the company’s name to Classic Air Charter, but he hadn’t got around to changing the sign.

A white Jaguar was parked out front; Paglen shot it. Around back was a parking lot with about a dozen cars. A plant and the backs of picture frames were visible on a second-story windowsill. (Paglen said that, if he wrote an article or book related to the project, crossing into journalism, he might contact Moss, but felt no need to do so as an artist.) Two workmen, attending to the façade of a nearby law office, noticed Paglen’s cameras, exchanged looks, and resumed their work.

“Here’s the thing that’s weird about this shit,” Paglen said, after we returned to the car. “We are on a totally ordinary street—totally whatever. We couldn’t be doing something more boring. And yet, you know, I get a bit jittery. Why is that?” It was uncanny to see the black world and the white world integrated so seamlessly: “For me, it’s way weirder than the stuff that’s in the desert.”

We drove back toward Main Street, and as we passed the Sportsflight offices Paglen snapped his shutter eighteen times. The sky was overcast, threatening rain, and his shots had a fragmentary, drive-by look. “Perfect,” he said. ♦