

ARTFORUM

"Trevor Paglen"

By Glen Helfand

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Trevor Paglen, *Near Silver Island Canyon* (undated), 2024, gelatin silver print, 38 × 38".

Trevor Paglen's most recent show at Altman Siegel, "CARDINALS," felt lighter than his previous exhibitions. Informed by his training as a geographer, Paglen has typically adopted an experimental approach to the landscape, seeing insidious government interventions and covert information gathering in the picturesque. His fascination with dark sites—locations technically erased from maps by the military or government—has resulted in works of handsome gravity. The photographs in "CARDINALS" were ancillary or B-roll pictures captured at far-flung location shoots, which have over the years turned into something more meaningful. The term *cardinals* is the air force's unofficial code name for exotic aircraft of unknown origin. Paglen has worked with such monikers before, notably in his video *Code Names of the Surveillance State*, 2014–15, in which the thousands of frequently absurd, humorous code names for insidious US government initiatives scroll across the screen like the end credits of a Hollywood film.

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Captured over the course of two decades, each photograph depicted a landscape with something not quite recognizable in its sky, often a blurry form that resembles a classic flying saucer, that staple of 1950s science-fiction films. With that lurking historical reference, the pictures exuded a sense of nostalgic Americana. *Near Bodie Hills (undated)*, 2024, a 4 x 5" instant film print, featured an Airstream trailer parked among scrubby California terrain—punctuated by an unidentifiable but intriguing little black dot in the upper center of the frame. *Near Silver Island Canyon (undated)*, 2024, was a moody black-and-white, bleak, and blurry vision of a desertlike expanse in Utah, with an amorphous object seemingly fluttering in the center of a cloudbank.

There was a sense of informality to this collection, one inspired by the assortment of formats and techniques used: faded Polaroids, motion-blurred black and white, crisp full-color nature photography. What united them was the unidentified Frisbee-like forms that appeared here and there in the pictures. Together they created a typological riff, pieces of compounding conspiratorial "evidence."

In a gallery talk and in written statements, Paglen claimed the images were undoctored, a hard pill to swallow given the hokey flying saucers that inhabit them, the serendipity that would have been required to capture the mysterious objects, and the precise composition and clarity of some of the photographs. The exhibition trafficked in a conundrum about the veracity of photography. In the age of easily created computer-generated and AI imagery, who would think any picture is straight truth?

Paglen's sixty-six-minute black-and-white film *Doty*, 2024, which screened concurrently at the Minnesota Street Project Foundation, furthers the artist's investigations into the realm of the conspiratorial, the complicit, and the contrived. The film presents a tight close-up of Richard Doty, an air force employee, who recounts tales of an official UFO division and the fantastical things he's seen. According to the film notes, his job is unofficially "mirage man," someone who uses UFO narratives and colorful myths as part of disinformation campaigns. In the film, he speaks of covert strategies, of information-defusing ruses that involve theatrical makeup and actors with bizarre appendages. The film's gray tones and Doty's homely face lend his recounting the air of factuality and directness. Yet his manner of speaking is loose, his tale a colorful yarn. Is he simply employing the government-developed skills he used as an official government con artist on the audience?

The photographs in "CARDINALS" felt lush and cinematic, though driven by the implied narratives provided by the eerie apparitions that troubled their skies. Some of the shots evoked Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), others the emotionally alien territory of Wim Wenders's *Paris Texas* (1984). It was hard not to see Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #48*, 1979, in which a woman with a suitcase stands on the side of a country road. What's hovering ahead of her? Paglen is keenly aware of the power of stories, personal and political, documentary and fiction. His sleight of hand is his ability to make them deeply alluring—and seriously troubling.

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