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"Trevor Paglen: Cardinals' Review: Is the Truth Out There?"

By Brian P. Kelly

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Trevor Paglen's 'Near Lichau Creek (undated),' Pace Gallery

New York

Before claims that 5G towers were being used for mind control or that the government was adding chemicals to the water that turned frogs gay, you could find plenty of questionable tales of odd phenomena of a more innocent kind. There was even a sort of regional pride behind certain cryptids: Folks from the Southwest had the chupacabra, West Virginians told stories about Mothman around the camp fire, and Garden State residents were so proud of their local creature that they named their hockey team after it.

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UFOs, however, transcend both time and place. In 1947, a wave of flying-saucer sightings across the U.S. made headlines; photos of floating discs from the '50s have become iconic; and in 2022 Congress held hearings on UFOs (or, in contemporary parlance, the less fun "UAPs"—unexplained aerial phenomena). Now they're the focus of Trevor Paglen's new show at Pace, "Cardinals."



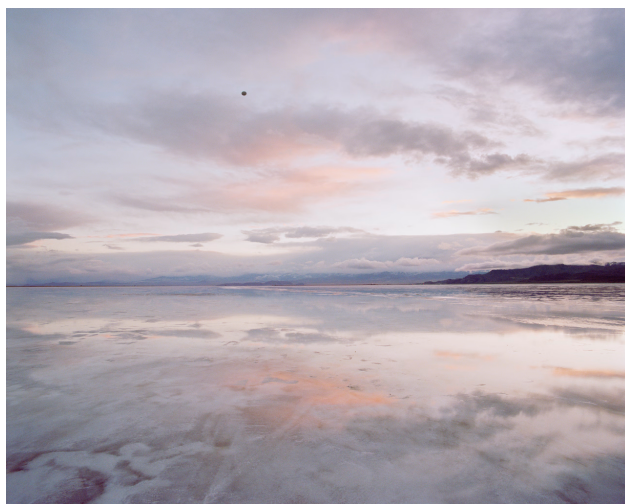
Trevor Paglen's 'Near Waford Spring (undated).' Pace Gallery

That's not immediately obvious when you encounter the roughly dozen photographs in the exhibition. Scanning the gallery one could dismiss this as a show of pleasant but unremarkable landscapes. Clouds billow, trees stand stately and tall, and expanses of still water reflect voluminous skies. But move closer and small, mysterious objects become visible in the heavens.

These UFOs, UAPs or cardinals—a military term dating from the '80s that refers to extraterrestrial aircraft—were captured by the artist over the past two decades during trips to the American West. While people across the country have claimed to encounter UFOs—the well-known "swamp gas" incident occurred in Michigan, for example—the West holds a special connection to these incidents, conjuring in one's mind arid Roswell, N.M., guarded government facilities, and remote military sites where classified aircraft are tested. Above the scrub and distant mountains somewhere "Near Waford Spring" a hazy oblong form floats. The pink-tinged evening sky of a location "Near the Utah Test and Training Range" is punctuated by a hard-edged, dark circle. About an hour's drive away, "Near Dugway Proving Grounds," a similarly pretty sunset is interrupted by a similarly dark splotch.

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Trevor Paglen's 'Near the Utah Test and Training Range (undated)' Pace Gallery

The ambiguity of these intrusions into the natural landscape is part of the point. These are documents that drive us to skepticism in an age where truth has never been more under siege. In a time of AI-generated images and videos, ever more convincing deepfakes and "alternative facts," Mr. Paglen (b. 1974) has chosen a subject that stands outside of politics. One's view of whether life exists "out there" doesn't map neatly onto the traditional left-right spectrum. As a result, he impels us to scrutinize, to truly question what our eyes see and consider the gravity of what it would mean if the objects in these photos were real.

Mr. Paglen states in the exhibition materials that all of the pictures here are unaltered, and there's a homespun, hobbyist feeling to these works that lends them veracity. A grainy series shows something emerging behind tree branches and into the sky. Another seems like it was taken out the passenger window of a moving vehicle. A different picture was shot at a sharp angle—the barn in one corner looking as if it's about to slide out of frame—that suggests the image was captured hastily, snapped just before the saucer zipped away.



The artist's 'Near Black Point (undated)' Pace Gallery

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But study these images and the artist's assertion seems more and more doubtful. The saucer in "Near Windy Hill" looks like something out of 1950s sci-fi—a sleek pointed oval with a bubble on top that is suspiciously similar to the ships from "Invaders From Mars" and "Forbidden Planet." The craft in "Near Promontory Point" is much the same as the one captured in a famous photo of a UFO in Passaic, N.J., in 1952, and even the tilted framing of the shot and its grain-rich, black-and-white format echo that earlier picture. Has he really managed to capture some of the clearest evidence of ETs in recent memory, or is what we're seeing merely magic worked by Mr. Paglen in Photoshop and the dark room?



'Near Promontory Point (undated),' which shares similarities with a famous photo of a UFO in Passaic, N.J., from 1952. Pace Gallery

Mr. Paglen's art has long focused on surveillance, government secrecy and technology. This body of work isn't a step away from those heavy topics, despite its lighter subjects, but rather a challenge to viewers to consider the ways we fall victim to disinformation in an era where fabrications are more convincing than ever. That he does so without directly referring to the morass of contemporary politics or technological trends is a brilliant sidestep that makes his point all the more approachable. He's the dubious Scully to the public's trusting Mulder. When we say, "I want to believe," he asks, "Are you sure?"

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