whitewall

"From Secret Bases to AI Skies: Trevor Paglen and the Techno-Sublime at Jessica Silverman"

By Katy Donoghue

January 20, 2026

Spanning 20 years, "The Horizon Waved, and Nothing Was Certain: 2006–2026" traces Trevor Paglen's investigation into surveillance, machine vision, and the shifting politics of perception.

At ***Jessica Silverman***, **Trevor Paglen** presents "The Horizon Waved, and Nothing Was Certain: 2006–2026," a solo exhibition that brings together new and previously unseen works from four of the artist's most significant series. Spanning two decades, the exhibition examines how systems of power—military, technological, and ideological—shape what can be seen, what remains hidden, and how images influence perception in the contemporary world.

Across landscapes, skyscapes, drone photographs, UFO images, and infrared astronomical works, ***Paglen*** traces the evolution of vision itself, from state secrecy and surveillance to computer vision and artificial intelligence. Photographs of distant military test sites and Reaper drones appear alongside cloud formations overlaid with algorithmic markings and unidentified objects orbiting Earth, revealing how modern images increasingly operate at the intersection of empirical observation and uncertainty. As philosopher Brian Holmes has written, ***Paglen*** transforms art into "a crossroads of critical analysis and cosmic experience," merging political inquiry with the emotional charge of the sublime.

In conversation with *Whitewall*, ***Paglen*** reflects on how ways of seeing have shifted over the past 20 years, why ambiguity has become central to contemporary images, and how his practice continues to navigate the space between documentation, belief, and the unknowable.

Ways of Seeing: A 20-Year Arc from 2006–2026 from Trevor Paglen

Trevor Paglen, "Untitled (Reaper Drones)," 2009 / 2025, Dye sublimation on aluminum print, Frame: 49 1/8 x 63 1/8 x 2 inches, Courtesy of the artist, Pace, and Jessica Silverman.

WHITEWALL: This is your first show with Jessica Silverman. I wanted to start with the conceptual starting point for the exhibition—what was the original idea?

TREVOR PAGLEN: Conceptually, it was sort of—"mini-retrospective" is the wrong word—but it was to take works from really different points in my career and put them together to see what threads kind of emerge, right? And that's only really happened once before, with a big solo show I did years ago. Conceptually, it felt like a good way to introduce my relationship with a gallery. We also had to put the show together pretty quickly, so that was part of it too.

The idea was that if you look at these works together—spanning about 20 years—you start to see these different amounts, or modes, of seeing that have characterized my work.

WW: With that in mind, were you thinking about it chronologically, or were you already thinking about those "modes of seeing" as you were assembling the show?

TP: It wasn't really chronological. It wasn't like, "Here's an example of everything I've ever done." It was more about—yeah—ways of seeing. That's been a really consistent thread in my work for a long time. So it was about looking at that together.

You look at how the world has changed in the last 20 years, how the ways we see the world have changed in the last 20 years, and how the techniques I've developed to try to see the world have changed over that same time.

Trevor Paglen, "Bloom (#957c7e)," 2021, Dye sublimation on aluminum print, Frame: 41 5/8 x 55 1/8 inches, Courtesy of the artist, Pace, and Jessica Silverman.

"The relationship we have to images has fundamentally changed—more than once—over the last 20 years."
—Trevor Paglen

WW: It's wild how much has shifted. Sometimes 2006 doesn't feel that long ago, but it was a totally different visual landscape.

TP: Totally. No iPhones. Barely digital cameras. No social media. It was a really different world. And now, even very recently, we're at a point where people can look at an image and say, "Okay, I think that might be AI-altered." There are new ways that we're learning to be critical of images.

Our relationship to images has fundamentally changed more than once in that 20-year span. First with computer vision—machines that can see the world—and then now with generative AI. That's a really big deal. It might rhyme with things in the past, but something genuinely new is happening. And it's weird.

WW: It feels like we're in the middle of another visual revolution.

TP: Absolutely. I think about perspective in early photography—how radically that changed how people understood the world. And I think we're in two of those moments at the same time right now.

Installation view of Trevor Paglen's "The Horizon Waved, and Nothing Was Certain," 2026 at Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, CA, photo by Phillip Maisel.

WW: Let's talk about some of the earlier works in the exhibition. What is it like revisiting pieces like *Area 52* now?

TP: That image—and the little video of the workers getting off the airplane—was made in the middle of the global war on terror. That era was really defined by extrajudicial killing, secret prisons, secrecy, and aversion to visibility. One of the ways I was trying to engage with that was by tracking airplanes attached to intelligence agencies—planes connected to networks of secret prisons and renditions.

I was trying to see the architecture of secrecy. And when I say "see," I mean literally: going out and trying to photograph places that officially didn't exist. Black sites. That could be a secret prison in Afghanistan or a secret Air Force base in Nevada. These were spaces created outside the law.

What's been really crazy is looking at that work now and realizing that it's all just… everything now. And it's being done in the open.

WW: It's almost "not-so-secret" secrecy.

TP: Exactly. Now it's like, "Yeah, we're going to kidnap these people. We're going to take them to this prison. We don't need a trial. Here's the airplane. Here's the guy doing it." So it's been really striking to see how those architectures that were set up during that period have re-emerged as a huge part of the current moment—just with very different visual politics.

Back then, people didn't want images of these places circulating. Now you've got people taking selfies at military bases. It's completely different.

WW: So things that once felt specific now feel more like recurring structures.

TP: Exactly. A lot of things that felt very specific at the time now feel more like archetypes.

Trevor Paglen, "Near Trojan Point (undated)," 2025, Instant Film, Frame: 11 3/8 x 10 1/8 x 1 1/2 inches, Courtesy of the artist, Pace, and Jessica Silverman.
Trevor Paglen, "NOYFB," 2006, Fabric patch, Frame: 11 5/8 x 11 5/8 x 1 1/2 inches, Courtesy of the artist, Pace, and Jessica Silverman.

WW: That idea of archetypes also comes through in the UFO images in the show.

TP: Completely. I've been making UFO images for a long time. Some of them are things where I know exactly what I'm photographing. I'm at the beach, people are flying something, and I know that if I photograph it with a certain shutter speed, it'll smear into this spherical form.

Other times, I'm in the middle of the desert, in restricted military airspace, and there's something flying around and I genuinely don't know what it is. I've accumulated a pretty big archive of these images.

For a long time—especially in the 2000s—I never showed them. They felt like they were just for me. But now, in this world where images have become these fantastical objects that induce belief or conjure realities, they suddenly made sense to show.

WW: You've spoken about how those images relate to belief and projection.

TP: Yeah. If you look at how political imagery works—especially in recent years—it's often about conjuring a reality rather than documenting one. That felt really connected to UFO imagery. How much of what you're seeing is actually there? How much are you bringing to it?

Different people see the same image completely differently. That's what interested me.

WW: Many of those images are shot on instant film.

TP: Yeah. You can't Photoshop instant film. Historically, instant photography was often used to check exposure before shooting "real" film. But here, that limitation matters. It signs the image in a different way.

Photography used to be considered hard proof. Instant film complicates that just enough—it occupies this strange space between trust and uncertainty.

WW: The *Reaper Drone* images from around 2009 still feel incredibly relevant.

TP: That image is from around 2009, which is when Obama came into office. One of the first things he did was shut down the CIA's secret prison program. But what replaced it was a massive expansion of targeted drone assassinations.

I had been writing about the war on terror with an investigative journalist friend, and we kept asking ourselves: if you're the CIA, why bother running prisons at all? Why not just kill people? And that's essentially the tactic that emerged.

So that work was about tracking the creation of those new modes of warfare—which are also modes of seeing.

Trevor Paglen, "The Watzmann (Scale Invariant Feature Transform; Oriented FAST and Rotated BRIEF)," 2018 / 2025, Dye sublimation on a luminum print, Frame: 49 1/8 x 73 1/8 x 2 inches, Courtesy of the artist, Pace, and Jessica Silverman.

WW: There's a surprising romanticism in those images.

TP: I was thinking about 19th-century painting—Turner, Romanticism, monsters in the sky. What are the monsters in our skies now?

That drone image is, for many people, the last thing they ever see. You look up, and that's it. There's something deeply unsettling about that, especially when you think about how historically, looking up at the sky has been associated with transcendence or heaven.

WW: That conversation continues with *Cloud 395*.

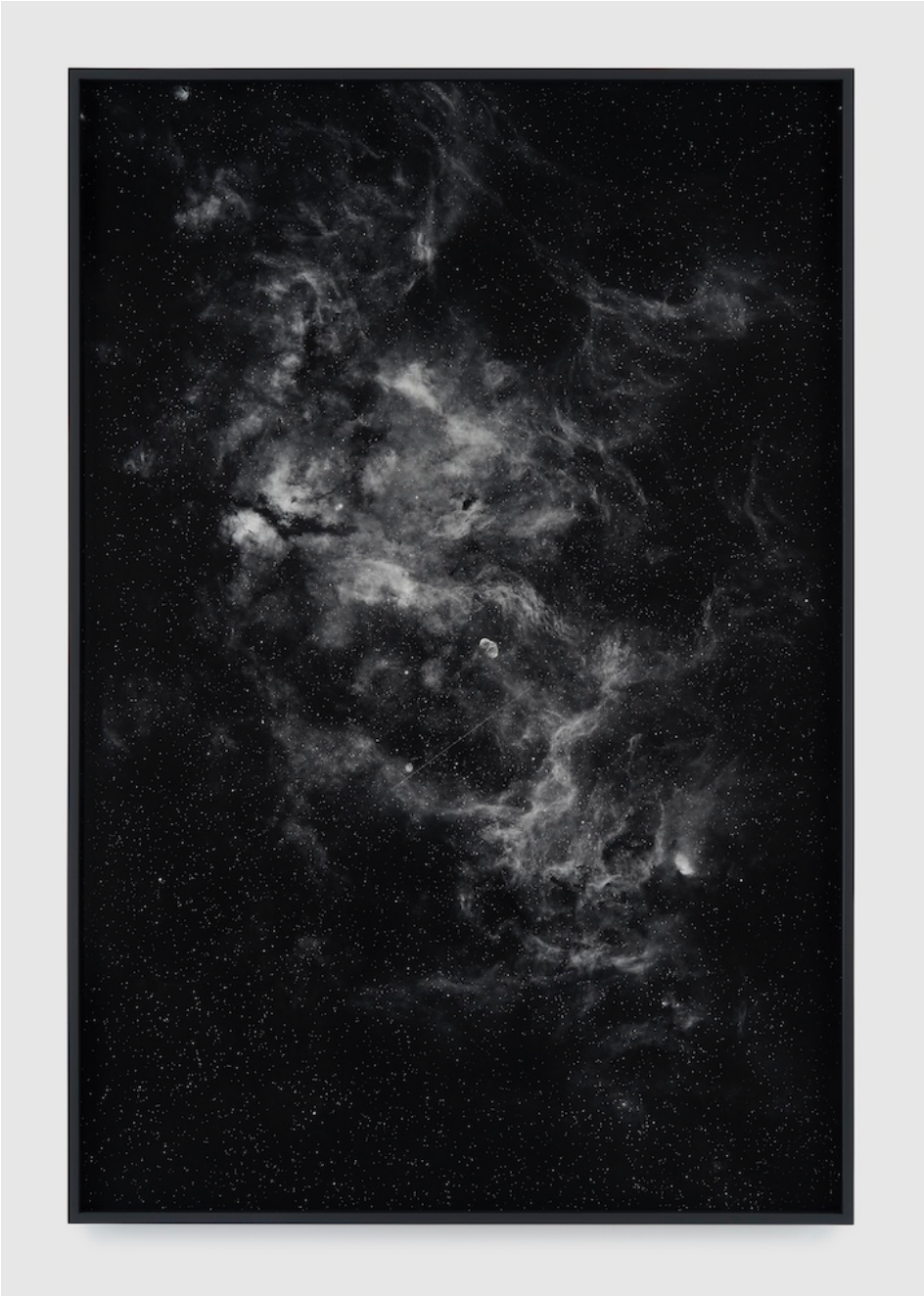
TP: Yeah. Those images involve photographing landscapes and then running them through computer vision systems—like the kinds used in self-driving cars or missiles. We built software that overlays what those systems "see" onto the image.

So you're seeing the human image and the machine image at the same time. And most of these systems aren't designed to interpret abstract things like clouds. So you're stacking different kinds of abstraction on top of each other.

WW: And then there's *The Watzmann*, which references Caspar David Friedrich.

TP: That work uses a very similar technique. Friedrich's *The Watzmann* is a canonical 19th-century Romantic painting. I'm essentially asking: what happens when we look at the same thing 200 years later? Does it look different? Or do we look different?

What Images Do to Us: Perception, Belief, and the Future of Seeing



Trevor Paglen, "UNKNOWN #87991 (Unclassified object near The 13th Pearl)," 2023, Silver gelatin print, Frame: 81 1/8 x 55 1/8 x 2 1/4 inches, Courtesy of the artist, Pace, and Jessica Silverman.

Trevor Paglen, "Near Rozel Point (undated)," 2024, Dye sublimation on aluminum print, 38 3/8 x 30 7/8 inches, Courtesy of the artist, Pace, and Jessica Silverman.

WW: Some of the works push even further—into space.

TP: There are about 350 objects orbiting Earth that no one can definitively identify. Some are natural, some are probably military satellites pretending to be debris.

To photograph them, I built a mobile observatory designed to capture a huge amount of light very quickly, in infrared. These are incredibly empirical images produced through a rigorous scientific process—but you still can't know what you're looking at.

That paradox is really important to me.

WW: Across all of this, "seeing" feels like the central concern.

TP: Yeah. Different lenses. Different eyes. Some human, some machine, some that we build ourselves. But no matter how sophisticated the tools get, the question remains: what do we actually know?

WW: Has your process for starting a project changed over time?

TP: Not really. I jump into something and spend time with it. I try to understand how it wants to appear—what it wants to look like. Eventually, the allegory reveals itself.

WW: Research plays a huge role.

TP: I try to learn about 80 percent of what a mid-career graduate student would know about a field. Then I start bothering people. It's very similar to journalism—but instead of explaining something directly, I'm trying to find an image that stands in for something larger.

Portrait of Trevor Paglen, photo by Jacob Holler.

"I'm interested in being right on the line between something you can name and something you can't."
—Trevor Paglen

WW: What are you working on now?

TP: Neuroscience. I'm trying to understand what happens in your brain when you see different kinds of images. What if an image isn't a representation, but a stimulus that produces a pattern of neural firing?

I'm also thinking a lot about magic—images as acts of conjuring. That feels very connected to generative AI. You type a prompt, and an image appears. It's like "let there be light."

I'm just trying to find ways to understand what the hell is going on.

Trevor Paglen, "CLOUD #395 Maximally Stable Extremal Regions; Hough Circle Transform," 2025, Dye sublimation on aluminum print, 48 x 64 inches, Courtesy of the artist, Pace, and Jessica Silverman.