

METRO PICTURES

Tyler Coburn, "Future Great: Trevor Paglen," **ArtReview**, March 2011



Trevor Paglen:

Trevor Paglen may have a masters in fine art and a PhD in geography, but the American artist also embodies the ethos of any private citizen-cum-amateur detective, deploying the available means to bring visibility to an increasingly opaque field of American military operations. Retracing paths carved by frontier photographers such as Timothy O'Sullivan (during nineteenth-century topographical and military surveys, for example), Paglen sets the canonical sites of the western United States against skies carved by latter-day reconnaissance vessels: classified American satellites (189 in all) that the artist tracks, with the aid of fellow amateur astronomers and a computer-controlled motorised tripod (see

the series *The Other Night Sky*, 2007). For a separate body of 'limit telephotography', Paglen trains his lens on CIA 'black sites' such as Afghanistan's 'Salt Pit' and Nevada's Tonopah Test Range (alias 'Area 52'). Due to the sites' remote locations and the surrounding expanses of restricted land, Paglen produces what he calls 'landscapes that cannot be seen with the unaided eye', using high-powered telescopes from up to 60 miles away. Several of the resulting images may as well be abstracts, as atmosphere and heat convection conspire to keep the artist's targets hidden, paradoxically giving a more telling account of governmental secrecy through their prohibitive aesthetics. Beyond his photographic work,

Paglen's writings detail the history of state secrecy, tracing a line from the 1949 Central Intelligence Agency Act that provided 'the only statutory basis for the black budget' through to the present-day activities of the now four million people in the US who work on classified projects. In one chapter of his book *Blank Spots on the Map* (2009), Paglen spies on black-world aeroplane shuttles from a Vegas hotel room – one of many amusing and disturbing anecdotes about a covert network often hiding in plain sight and certainly stranger than fiction.

by
Tyler
Coburn