

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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# Flowers are not what they seem in Trevor Paglen's latest exhibition

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Bloom (#5f5554). 2020 © Trevor Paglen, courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery.

**“If you had told me ten years ago that I would be making pictures of flowers, I would have said you were out of your mind”**

Mourning, sadness, and fragility underlie Trevor Paglen’s exhibition Bloom, on show at Pace Gallery, London, until 10 November 2020. Vivid renderings of blossoming flowers, which compose a centrepiece of the show alongside sculptures, drawings and digital components, may lead one to think otherwise, but that would be wrong. Fragility is the focus here; a direction for Paglen, provoked by the state of 2020, a year in which a global pandemic exposed the fragility of our lives, our infrastructures, our political institutions, and more. And, significantly, the fragility of forms of sociability, many of which we took for granted.



Bloom (#7b5e54). 2020 © Trevor Paglen, courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery.



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The second thread is an exploration of the alternate forms of sociability, which the pandemic has forced us to embrace — Zoom calls, Skype, FaceTime etc. Technological platforms are not neutral, but are engineered to collect data about us, and employ it in various ways. This is a sustained concern of Paglen's work, which centres upon the systems and technologies — Artificial Intelligence, computer vision, facial recognition etc. — which, increasingly shape and influence society.

These threads blend in Bloom: the series of remarkable, large-scale photographs depicting exuberant flower-formations. Paglen made these during the spring as humanity isolated indoors and the natural world ran rampant beyond. The resulting images may appear real, but in fact, computer vision algorithms, developed to formally analyse the constituent parts of images, conceptualised them from Paglen's original photographs. "If you had told me ten years ago that I would be making pictures of flowers, I would have said you were out of your mind," says Paglen. "Flowers are cliches unlike anything else, however, they are also allegories. They represent life but also death and fragility. They are symbols of mourning but also of joy."



Bloom (#7a5a4e). 2020 © Trevor Paglen, courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery.

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Paglen was compelled by these contradictions; drawn to flowers, partly, because of their ability to represent two elements in opposition to one another at once. Their meanings are slippery, and this related to broader questions the artist was asking himself about meaning-making in the era of Covid-19. “That seems like another dynamic of the present,” he reflects. “A massive planetary reevaluation of the meanings we attribute to images.” The pandemic has skewed the significance of things, enthusing images of our everyday lives with new meaning: aeroplanes, masks, buses, the list goes on.



Bloom (#a5808a). 2020 © Trevor Paglen, courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery.

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And the meanings we attribute to things, in the realm of images, and beyond it, has also been shaken outside of the pandemic with social movements demanding the reimagining of race, policing, and public safety worldwide. Meanwhile, Artificial Intelligence is formulating its own interpretations without human intelligence, as people teach computer-vision-systems, as in the case of Paglen's flowers, how to interpret images on their own. "This is a moment when there are global struggles over the meaning of images: these are times of extreme danger and extreme possibility," says Paglen. "And I guess that is why I have several large pictures of flowers."

Paglen's preoccupation with Artificial Intelligence and computer vision stems from his opinion that they are developments in the history of images, which are on par with, if not greater than, the discovery of perspective at the start of the fifteenth century. "They are certainly greater than the invention of photography," he asserts, "and the reason for that is they fundamentally change how images function in society."

With AI, an image's meaning no longer develops out of the dynamic of an image and the individual interpreting it. Instead, that interpretation is automated, and this "opens up the possibility of what we have now, which is a world in which the vast majority of looking at images is done by machines for other machines," says Paglen. It is this unsettling reality that he addresses in Bloom. Indeed, it is disquieting to realise the flowers are not real, but rather an AI's interpretation of the real thing.

*Trevor Paglen's Bloom is on show at Pace Gallery, London, until 10 November 2020. The show can also be experienced virtually through Octopus: a live web portal connected to cameras placed in the gallery.*



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Bloom (#79655d). 2020 © Trevor Paglen, courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery.



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