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SPOTLIGHT

Artist Trevor Paglen looks to the heavens in latest SF exhibition

By Max Blue | Special to The Examiner |

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Trevor Paglen, "UNKNOWN #81111 (Unclassified Object Near the Eagle Nebula" (2023)
Courtesy the artist and Altman Siegel.

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'Is there anybody out there?" has long been the refrain of those who turn their gaze to the heavens and wonder at the vast, apparently empty expanse. Artist Trevor Paglen's latest exhibition of photographs from his series "Unids," on view at Altman Siegel, answers this query with an unshakable "Yes." What is out there, though, is both known and unknown and may tell us more about ourselves and our place in the universe than anyone or anything else. The term "unid," coined by amateur astronomers, refers to objects in orbit around Earth that these communities have failed to identify. Many unids, however, have been identified, or at least acknowledged, by the United States — and subsequently classified. While their nature remains secret, the consensus is that many unids are surveillance satellites placed in orbit by the US or other nations (existing U.S. satellites became classified in the 1990s). Paglen has long been interested in surveillance and government secrecy. He never fully dons the tinfoil hat but rather offers it. In an early project, he photographed military bases located in remote areas of the American deserts. In another, he collected military patches associated with secret operations. In "Unids," he turns his gaze on another hotbed of mysterious conspiracy and makes it at once more and less familiar. The four large-scale black-and-white gelatin silver prints included in the exhibition — all around 4 feet by 6 feet — initially appear as a series of breathtaking pictures of the night sky. The celestial views from Mono Lake, near Yosemite, show the majestic cloud forms of swirling nebulae and clusters of explosive individual stars, wringing all the sublime awe from the subject that anyone who has gone stargazing would come to expect. But beauty is a secondary concern for Paglen; it's almost a red herring. Look closer, and you will find a single object in orbit in each photograph, which registers photographically as a short line across the night sky, carrying sinister associations. A photograph traditionally makes an objective claim — but here, it's an unnerving question: What am I looking at? In the text accompanying the exhibition, Paglen offers the best answer he can muster: "We don't know, but someone does." That's almost worse than knowing nothing at all. Space is often representative of the limits of human understanding. Here, the metaphor is extended to include our place not in the universe but in the social order as an equally alien position. In the instances of unids whose identity we can be sure of — surveillance satellites — the answer is far from reassuring. But the discomfort one feels at having the camera turned back at them is just a taste. Paglen's paranoia seems fitting for a time when the globe is more connected than ever, and information is readily available — though not always to the direct benefit of individual citizens. Privacy is often traded away in the name of connectivity and search engine and social media data is mined and sold for profit, both to advertisers and government agencies. The catch is that these entities often aren't interested in users as individuals but rather as datasets, and the inhumanity of the transaction is the most frightening aspect. Maybe you're being watched, but who you are and who's watching hardly matters. "You're here, and it's there," Paglen writes, "and maybe that's as much certainty as anyone can hope for." There's something oddly reassuring about the existential position this attitude reflects. We exist in relation to others, whether we understand them fully or not. That's as true of aliens and spy satellites as it is of our friends and strangers on the sidewalk. In that sense, they do walk among us.