

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

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VARIABLE WEST

Blue, Max, "I (Don't) Want to Believe: Trevor Paglen at Altman Siegel," *Variable West*, October 24, 2024

I (Don't) Want to Believe: Trevor Paglen at Altman Siegel



Trevor Paglen, *Near Windy Hill (undated)*, 2024. Dye sublimation on aluminum print, 24 x 30 in. Courtesy of Altman Siegel.

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Trevor Paglen's latest exhibition, *CARDINALS*, at Altman Siegel in San Francisco, is a study of the alienation of mediated life – and aliens. The title of the show is taken from the Air Force's unofficial code name for UFOs, which skitter across the surface of each landscape photograph in the exhibition in all their ovular ambiguity. Paglen, who has made a career of artifying espionage and creating an aesthetics of disinformation (Paglen believes that he has been the target of disinformation campaigns and government psyops) has now assumed the role of the conman. In doing so, he makes a case for photography as the original **psyop**, and disinformation as the metaphysical bedrock of human knowledge. Where people turn to conspiracy theories of all kinds to make sense of a disordered world, Paglen uses the allegory of the UFO conspiracy to illustrate the fallibility of our cognitive impulse to order visual information.

All the pictures in *CARDINALS* are undated and Paglen alleges that he shot them throughout the last two decades of his career, which has been spent shooting a variety of photographic projects in various locations. He's located and documented classified **Air Force installations** and unmapped CIA "**black sites**." He's also taken pictures of "**unids**," unidentified objects in the Earth's orbit (usually foreign satellites). In these cases, Paglen was on a mission to prove something verifiable and upstage the secrecy that steeps contemporary life and enables evils like state surveillance and government-sanctioned torture to proceed beyond the public eye.



Trevor Paglen, *Near Cemetery Road (undated)*, 2024. Pigment print, 10 x 14 in. Courtesy of Altman Siegel.

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In recent work, Paglen has shifted his attention to examine how those modes of secrecy operate. His short film *Doty* (2023), on view at Minnesota Street Project Foundation, next door to the gallery, is an hour long interview with Richard Doty, a self-proclaimed "UFO whistleblower" and former Air Force counterintelligence officer. Throughout the film, Doty alleges to reveal exactly how the CIA disseminates disinformation within the UFO community, while also mounting a case for the verifiable existence of aliens. By the end of the film, it's clear that he is continuing his work in real time – and telling the viewer what he's doing to them while he does it. "What you always want to do," Doty concludes, "is start with fact and end with fact. Everything in between can be bull."

The pictures in *CARDINALS* aren't unsettling at first glance – or even second glance. In fact, most of them are beautiful, lush landscapes, dripping with saturated color palettes or rich black-and-white tones and buzzing with film grain. Even the UFOs – which mostly take on the classic silver disc shape that sticks out like a sore thumb – hardly mar the serene scenes of treetops, mountain ranges and seascapes. In some pictures, they almost go unnoticed, tucked away in cloud formations or passable as a celestial body. Other pictures lean into the uncanny, from flash-illuminated nighttime scenes, a-la horror movie stills, to horizon lines shot at a dramatically disorienting tilt.



Trevor Paglen, *Near Cottonwood Canyon Road (undated)*, 2024. Pigment print, 8 x 10 in. Courtesy of Altman Siegel.

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Trevor Paglen, *Near Spring Bay (undated)*, 2024. Dye sublimation on aluminum print, 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of Altman Siegel.

Paglen stresses that the majority of the pictures in *CARDINALS* are analog, going so far as to enumerate the cameras and kinds of film he used: a handheld medium-format Pentax, a Canon SLR; Kodak Portra, T-Max. Some of them, like *Near Forest Service Road 2N20*, in which a UFO hovers above a barn, are Polaroids, the most verifiable of all film types. He also asserts that the pictures "are undoctored." Yet this is the exact sort of factual window-dressing, according to Doty and Paglen himself, that often accompanies a hoax. By taking Doty's approach, Paglen befuddles the viewer's sense of certainty in order to call their own cognition into question.

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Trevor Paglen, *Near Forest Service Road 2N20* (undated), 2024 Instant film, 4 x 5 in. Courtesy of Altman Siegel.

Short of doctoring, there are plenty of sensible explanations for the aberrations in Paglen's pictures. Most of these possibilities would involve long-exposures: taillights in motion, birds in flight, frisbees arcing through the air. Camera tricks are a hallmark of UFO photographs but the outcome also depends on our brains to show us what we expect to see. UFOs? Stop fooling yourself. Look again at the photographs in *CARDINALS* and the only supernatural thing about them is the process of photography itself. What's unsettling is the break with reality – counterintuitively inherent to all photographs – that these unidentified objects represent.

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Trevor Paglen, *Near Bloody Canyon (undated)*, 2024. Pigment print, 5 1/2 x 8 in. Courtesy of Altman Siegel.

Like a Rorschach test, Paglen's UFOs tell us more about what's going on in our own heads than what may or may not be true of his pictures. Whether or not Paglen is pulling the wool over our eyes, and how he does it, doesn't matter – the irrelevance of truth *is* the point. If these photographs occupy a superposition of both real and false at once then that is only because all photographs do – and, by extension, perhaps all of experience. It's Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* at its most elemental, our experience of reality revealed to be nothing more than a struggle to make sense of shadowy illusions.

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Trevor Paglen, *Near Pole Line Road (undated)*, 2024. Pigment print, 8 x 12 in. Courtesy of Altman Siegel.

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Trevor Paglen, *Near Kidney Lake (undated)*, 2024. Pigment print, 7 x 10 1/2 in. Courtesy of Altman Siegel.

"The most merciful thing in the world," wrote the master of cosmic horror H.P. Lovecraft, "is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents." But the realization of how little we comprehend of the world and ourselves needn't result in madness. To jettison common understanding and an acceptance of reality as, at best, a consensus fiction, offers a solipsistic form of liberation. We may not be able to escape our own subjectivity, but we do have the agency to choose what we believe is real. What was it Mulder said?

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Trevor Paglen, *Near Bodie Hills (undated)*, 2024. Instant film, 4 x 5 in. Courtesy of Altman Siegel.

Trevor Paglen: *CARDINALS*

Altman Siegel, San Francisco, CA
September 5 to November 7, 2024

Doty

1201 Minnesota Street, San Francisco, CA
September 19 to October 5, 2024.

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