

# GOD'S-EYE VIEWS

From sweeping natural vistas to urban sprawl to hints of government secrecy, Southwestern aerial photography exposes the region's social terrain.

by Jackson Arn

Although I was born in Arizona, I didn't really become aware of the Southwest until I was about 7 years old, the first time I got a window seat on an airplane. This is, I must admit, an odd way of making a place's acquaintance. You're limited to just one of your five senses, and all the most iconic bits of the terrain are blurred, shrunken, or invisible: not a single paloverde tree is in sight, the saguaros are a patchy stubble, the purple mountains lose their majesty when they cease to tower over you, and even the grandest canyon surrenders power when reduced to a random fissure far below.

This would have been in the early 2000s, when the Phoenix metropolitan area had a million fewer people than now, and downtown was a set of vacant gray-brown squares, not the cluster of bluish glass cubes it has lately become. Few cities, and definitely not turn-of-the-millennium Phoenix, are built with much thought given to how they look from the air, and they're at their most naked and ridiculous from that perspective: to look down on them is to *look down on them*.

But in the dry, frank light, without rain or fog, you can see how everything fits together, and how it doesn't: mountains and ruddy canyons and terra-cotta roofs and eerily evergreen golf courses. The colors are loud and shrill — camp without the wink — but so unapologetic that they achieve a certain grandeur, and there's something touching about seeing a massive city in the middle of a massive desert, where millions of *Homo sapiens* were never meant to live but do anyway. Taking off from the Phoenix airport is usually enough to give me

Emmet Gowin: *Yucca Flat, The Large Circle Road, Looking North, Area 2, Nevada Test Site, 1996, gelatin silver print.*

an attack of horror and awe and affection and pity and belonging and not belonging, and I must have felt some of those things as a kid too, even if the right words didn't come until later. It's a view of the world both impossibly grandiose and impossibly humbling, superhuman and subhuman, which helps explain why it's labeled "God's-eye" and "bird's-eye" both.

There is something appropriate about seeing — really seeing — the Southwest from a plane. Like any geographic territory, the Southwest is as much an idea as it is a physical place, continuously reimagined and redrawn throughout history. (Should West Texas count? Nevada? Southern California? How much of Southern California?) But as an idea, it has always been as much God's-eye as ground-level, whether for 19th-century mapmakers who chopped it into squares, 20th-century engineers and architects who designed and built upon it, or 21st-century tourists, real estate speculators, and blackjack players who jet in from around the world, part with their money, and jet out.

If, as many maintain, America is an image economy — one in which visual representations often seem as real, and as valuable, as the things they represent — then the Southwest has been ahead of the curve for quite some time. Fertile soil and fresh water being limited, the area depends, to an unusual degree, on pretty pictures to reel people in: last year, Grand Canyon tourism brought the local economy more than \$700 million, and most of those tourists have little else to show for it but pretty pictures of their own. The selfied sunsets that helped make Scottsdale the bachelorette party capital of the country are the same ones, albeit

with more smog, that once mesmerized Georgia O’Keeffe, and the more people who fly to the Southwest to take sunset selfies, the bigger the cities grow, and the more drone shots are required to plan the growth that keeps the dollars flowing.

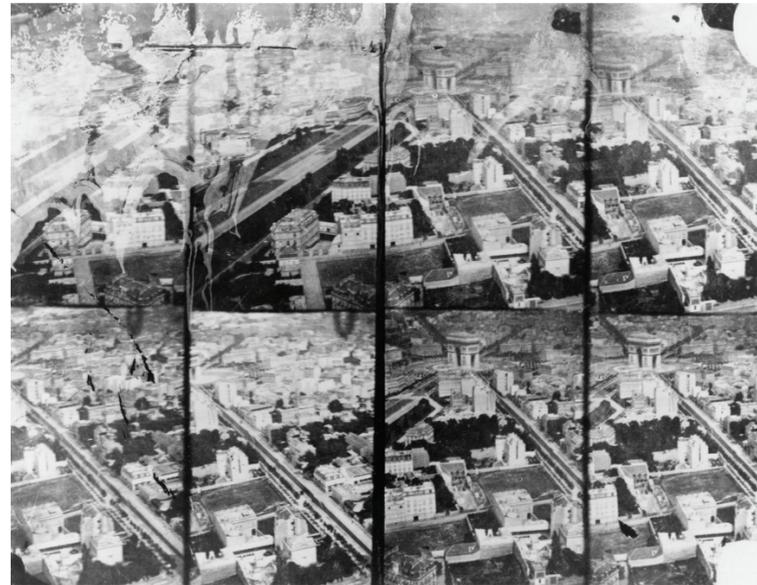
Southwestern aerial photography (let’s call it SAP) plays a curious role in the region’s image economy, then: epic but not quite iconic, a little sublime and a little mundane. I suspect that’s why, after nearly 30 years of living in or frequently visiting the Southwest, I am basically immune to sunsets but still enthralled by SAP. Consider how odd this is. I no longer blink twice at coyotes or saguaros. The only time I still pause to savor “painted” mesas is when I’m hosting a friend from out of town. Mention the Grand Canyon, and the first thing I think of is a dentist’s waiting room poster—embarrassing, I know, but it’s the kind of problem our overwhelming traffic in images causes. Babette Mangolte puts it well in *The Sky on Location*, her 1982 documentary about the Southwest’s natural beauty: “Whatever we are seeing, we think we’ve already seen it in pictures, in books, and we confront what we see with what we already know.”

And yet, I’ve already seen what the Southwest looks like from the sky, and I’m still transfixed, both by what I see and by what others have photographed. The views seem completely familiar and completely enthralling.

**TO PUT IT SUCCINCTLY: IN AESTHETICS, “HUH? Wow!”** is preferable to “Wow! Huh?” This rule, courtesy of Ed Ruscha, goes some way toward explaining why SAP has been a source of inspiration for artists as different as Trevor Paglen, Robert Smithson, Ansel Adams, Emmet Gowin, David Maisel, and—if we’re counting his shots of Los Angeles parking lots—Ruscha himself. There’s something for everybody: a strong dose of adventure but also some hard-nosed utilitarianism (every aerial photograph is in some sense a map, and every map is in some sense a tool) as well as a certain melancholy brought on by the decline of the old and the onslaught of the new. When none of these factors insists too aggressively on dominance, the result can be an image in argument with itself, one in which the “Huh?” becomes an inexhaustible source of fascination.

You can already sense this argument, curiously enough, in the life and work of the first aerial photographer, Nadar, who shot the greater Paris area from a hot air balloon in 1858. Flying in a balloon to photograph your environs sounds glamorously pointless (not for nothing was Nadar one of the inspirations for Phileas Fogg, the dashing Jules Verne character who circumnavigates the globe in 80 days on a bet). But Nadar was a shrewd businessman too, convinced of his images’ military and civilian applications. (So convinced, in fact, that he tried to patent surveying uses of the aerial-view technique three years before he’d gotten them to work.) Soon, Baron Haussmann was consulting the pictures to gut the old Paris and install yawning boulevards and squares, a change Nadar himself was grumbling about as early as 1867: “It is no longer Paris, my Paris that I know.”

The same thing happened, only on a much bigger scale, in the Southwest in the early 20th century. The



From top: Photo Nadar/Getty Images; SSPL, via Getty Images; Previous spread: Courtesy Pace Gallery/©Emmet Gowin

Photo Justin Sullivan/Getty Images



first aerial photographs of cities there (Albuquerque in 1913; Tucson, 1929, etc.) tend to tilt slightly. Pondering their cocked angles today, you imagine the risks the pilots took, the planes’ relative newness and flimsiness, the bravery it took to lean and shoot. City planners, meanwhile, used SAP to expand the region’s cities into ever more sprawling versions, until eventually, the adventurousness of early SAP became irrelevant. Views-from-above led straight to our domesticated present, in which every square inch of the United States has been mapped, and the Southwest, for all its charms, has become just another item on a long menu of destinations. To look at these photographs a century later is to feel adventure and incipient banality both. And maybe the banality isn’t purely a product of hindsight, either: in his 1969 essay, “Aerial Art,” Robert Smithson noted how flight takes you “from the dazzling to the monotonous in a short space of time.” Four years later Smithson would die in a plane crash, one of the least monotonous things that can happen to anyone in the sky, but he was right—ask any pilot who has reported symptoms of fixation (the airborne equivalent of highway hypnosis) caused by a mind having been numbed to the miracle of flight.

Not that monotony can’t be miraculous too. Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*—the aerial film he and his collaborators shot in 1970 of his basalt rock earthwork of the same name in Utah—is a monotonous work.

Above, Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, on the shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

Opposite top, self-portrait of Nadar shot in his Paris studio, 1875, wet collodion plate.

Opposite bottom, Nadar: *Eight Aerial Views of the Arc de Triomphe*, 1860, wet collodion plate.

It’s also monumental, cosmic, and epic, and these contradictory qualities make a strange melody as they interact. Smithson’s narration alternates between the dryly literal (excerpts from *Black’s Medical Dictionary* and crystallography papers, enumerations of the earthwork’s materials: “mud, salt crystals, rocks, water”) and the richly poetic (excerpts from Beckett and science fiction), though they’re delivered in more or less the same flat tone. *Spiral Jetty*, the physical construct, looks monumental when Smithson’s helicopter soars higher or lower, but at other times, without much else in the frame to provide scale, it seems small, even plain. The film throbs with color (Smithson chose to build an earthwork on the edge of the Great Salt Lake in part because of the blood-red algae in the water, and some of the shots look like they were steeped in it) but concludes with a long shot of Italian photographer Gianfranco Gorgoni’s black-and-white image of the earthwork, which hangs in a studio so dim it, too, could almost be black-and-white.

You could argue that Smithson wanted to end the film on a modest note. Even if the final scene begins modestly, however, Gorgoni’s photography takes on an unlikely monumentality as the camera glides closer. It is as though this single image has absorbed all the energy of the last 35 minutes, like a stone that stays warm even after the sun sets: it seems to encapsulate the power of the real *Spiral Jetty*. Smithson could almost be instructing



Ansel Adams: *Freeway Interchange, Los Angeles*, 1967, gelatin silver print, 10 3/8 by 9 1/8 inches.

us how to look at the peculiar thing he's made: with awe, certainly, but not unrestrained awe (a healthy dose of "Huh?" to wash down the "Wow!"), keeping in mind at the same time the earthwork's grandeur and slightness in the grand scheme of things.

I'm not sure if Smithsonian had seen *Freeway Interchange, Los Angeles*. Ansel Adams's 1967 aerial photograph of an already notoriously ugly tangle of highway infrastructure, when he wrote "Aerial Art," but it mixes a similar set of ingredients. Adams, then 65 and already a legend, had made his reputation as a conservationist photographer of the West and Southwest in the FDR years; Arizona residents hang reproductions of his Grand Canyon prints on their walls the way Catholics hang crucifixes. On the surface, *Freeway Interchange* would seem to be a renunciation of all this. Most notably, the Southwest is now depicted as congested instead of majestically empty—a place with people in it, lots of them. The desert has become a concrete thicket, and the endless variety of nature has given way to the unbroken sameness of urban sprawl. Coming from the man who made the desert look ravishing enough to draw countless Americans to come see it for themselves, the photograph seems to rue its own predecessors.

Yet this isn't a complete renunciation. Adams dressed *Freeway Interchange* in the same shimmering, silver-print chiaroscuro he had used on cliffs and sand dunes some two decades earlier—the roads may be monotonous, but

from the air they have the texture of a knotted tree and the shape of a river delta and, on top of this, an inadvertent, stumbled-upon charm. It is a reminder that humanity is a part of nature, however much it might prefer otherwise, and this in turn alerts us to how unnatural the younger Adams's view of nature could be (the Grand Canyon, for example, hasn't been empty for some ten thousand years). With aerial photography, Adams deleted a definition of beauty he had helped write and then scribbled a new one, a beauty that is more dazzling for having some monotony mixed in. A desert sublime that cannot accommodate cars hardly deserves the name.

**MORE RECENT SAP TENDS TO TREAT ITS SUBJECT** with greater foreboding—fair enough, given the state of the climate—but does not give up on the possibility of the sublime altogether, even when this requires some digging. The phrase "apocalyptic sublime" has been

Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, Arizona/©The Ansel Adams Trust

Courtesy Eshyann Houk Gallery, New York/©David Maisel (2)

applied more than once to the work of David Maisel, who since the 1980s has made a career out of traveling to mines, military compounds, and other remote corners of the Southwest to photograph what he finds. It took a full decade of petitioning before the military allowed him to visit the Dugway Proving Ground—a military facility in Utah the size of Rhode Island, and once highly classified—and the resulting aerial views quiver with revulsion and excitement both, though maybe the excitement lingers longer.

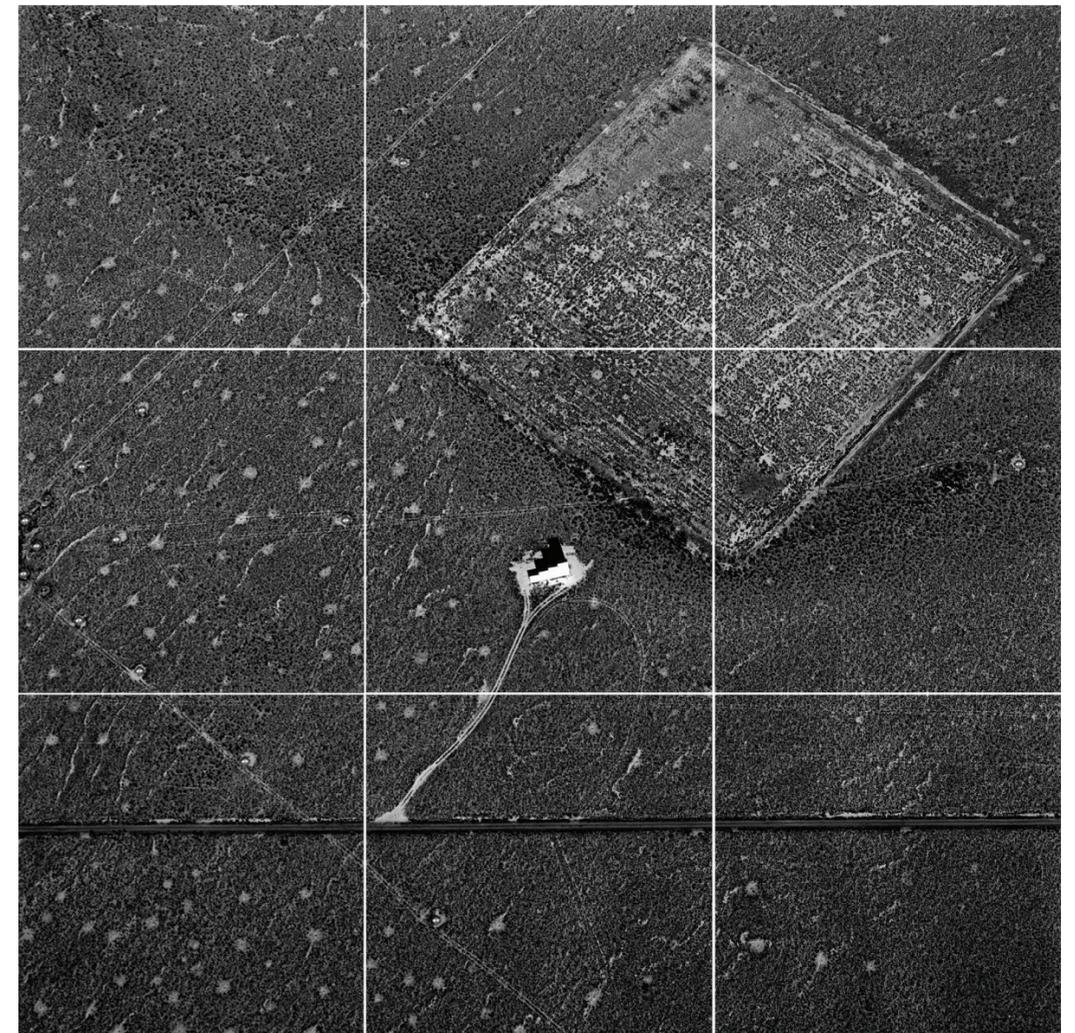
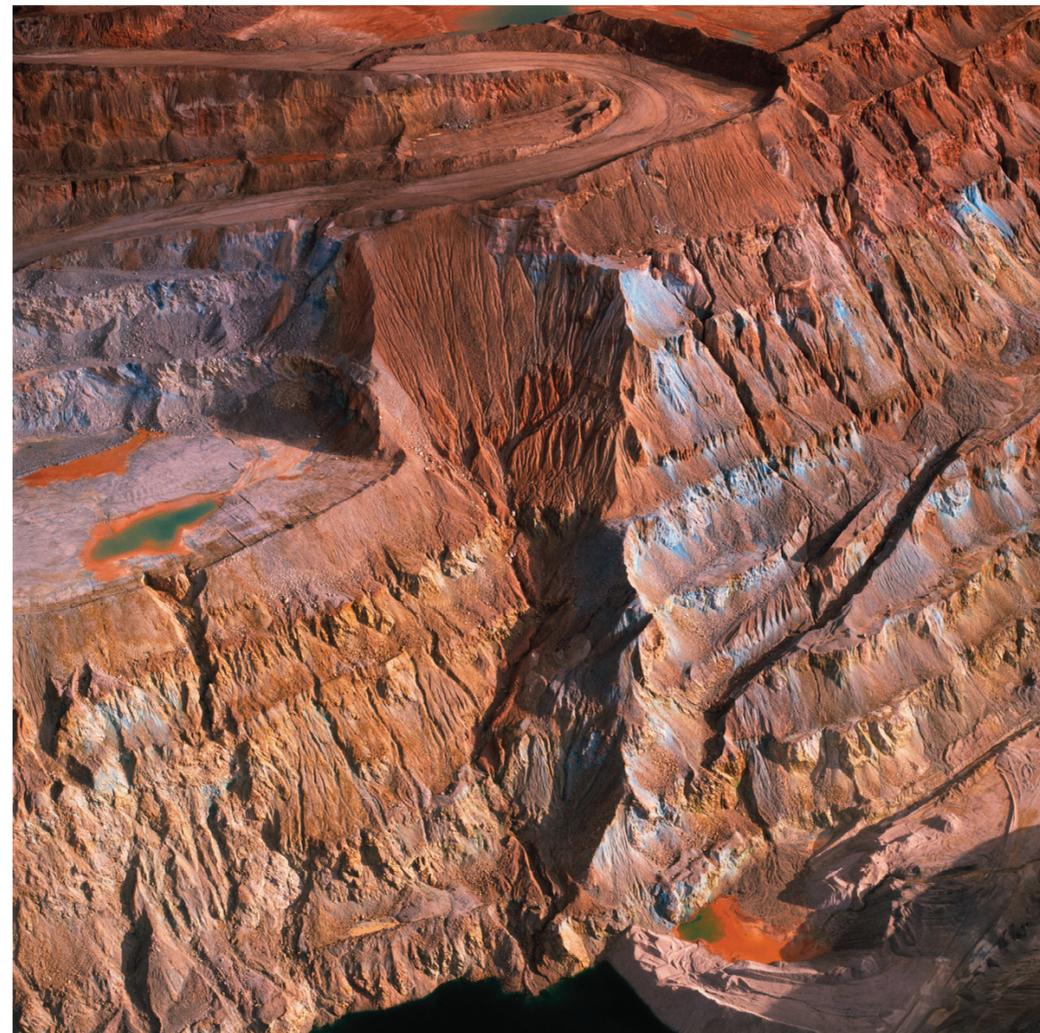
Superficially, Maisel's 2014 photograph *Visual Guidance Pattern\_02, Dugway Proving Ground, Utah*, for instance, is not so far from Gorgoni's *Spiral Jetty* shot (indeed, Dugway itself isn't so far from *Spiral Jetty*). Both are black-and-white, and distinguished by rough geological surfaces and stark geometric forms. Maisel's is a diamond, the remnant of some unexplained but presumably horrid military test. But his nine-element grid is the more blatantly monumental work, and not only because

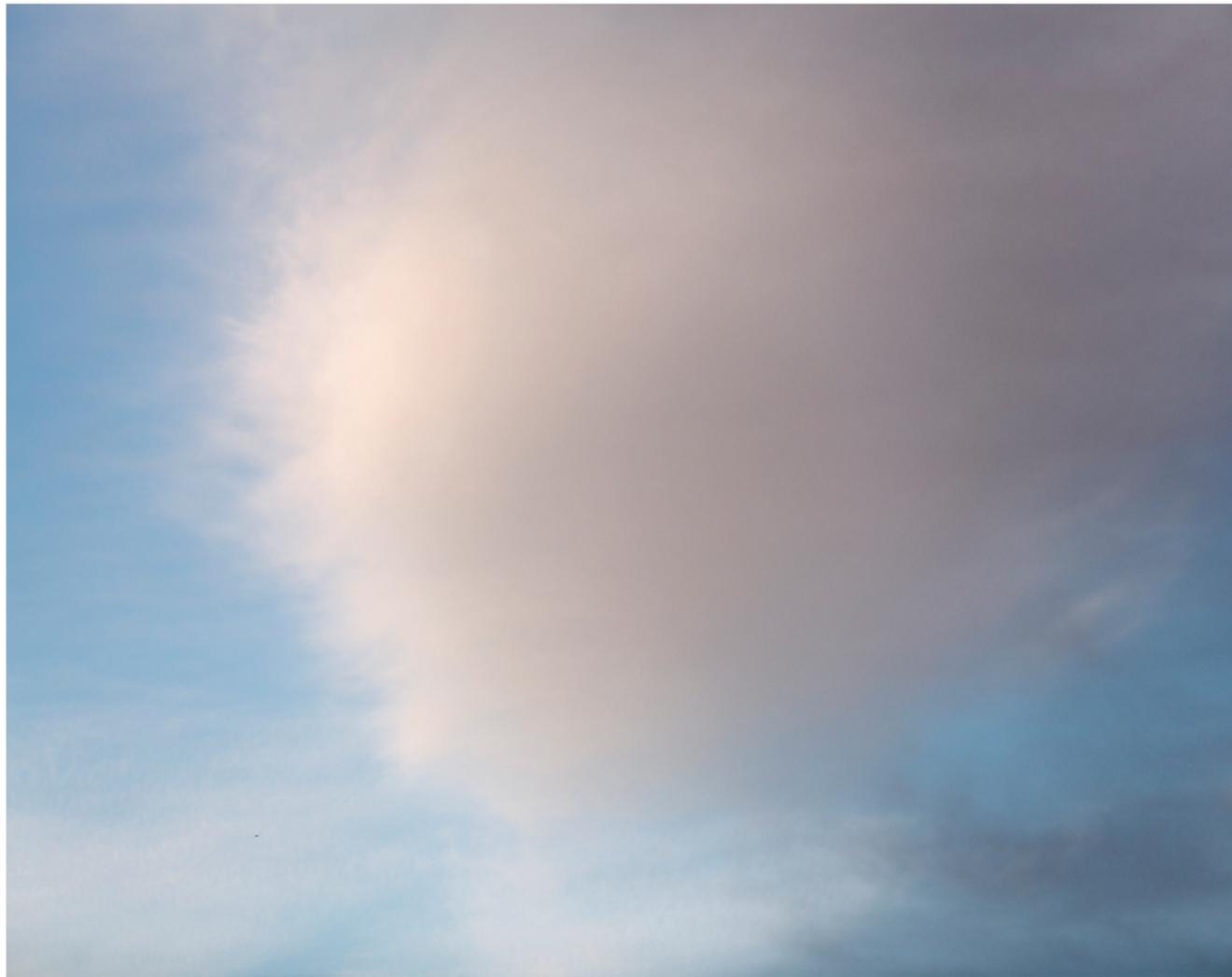
Below left, David Maisel: *The Mining Project, Inspiration, Arizona 11*, 1989, pigment print, 48 inches square.

Below right, David Maisel: *Visual Guidance Pattern\_02, Dugway Proving Ground, Utah*, 2014, dye sublimation prints on aluminum, nine panels, 40 inches square each.

Maisel specifies that installed dimensions of the image be a minimum of 10.7 feet square. There is a feeling of real triumph, of "I was there and you weren't" in his decision to feature a grid, its lines marking territory much as the military-industrial complex did its own in the Utah desert. Maisel fought hard and won: after years of trying, he found an unfamiliar part of the Southwest: how many Americans born after 1950 can say that?

Actually, there are lots of unfamiliar parts of the Southwest left; they just happen to be government sites that civilians aren't permitted to visit—what Trevor Paglen has called "blank spots on the map." For a certain kind of photographer, shooting these places from the sky seems like exploring an exotic frontier as aviators did a century ago, though now the adventurous part is negotiating with the government, not flying the plane. The government watches us all but, at various sites in the Southwestern desert, is touchy about being watched itself, so there's a satisfying tit-for-tat to photographing





Trevor Paglen: *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2010, C-print, 48 by 60 inches.

these sites, one probably best articulated by Paglen in an interview for the TV series *Art21*: aerial photography, he said, “implies that you can see this, it’s transparent, we can understand it.... You, as a member of the public, should be able to exert the same kind of power over this institution that we can symbolically do by looking at a photograph shot from this perspective.”

Paglen’s drone series, taken in the Nevada desert throughout the 2010s, has a curious place in contemporary SAP; to begin with, it’s not SAP at all. At a glance, these landscapes feature the kinds of sherbet-colored sunsets you’d find on a motivational poster. But the little black specks, hiding somewhere in the frame like hairs in a bowl of soup, add a touch of distance, putting things in quotation marks: each black speck contains a camera that stares down at you while you stare up at it in the candy-colored sky. Paglen shows us the drones in flight, not the views they garner, making this still very much a series *about* SAP; one could almost say it’s Southwestern-aerial-photography photography,

providing us an opportunity to scrutinize the surveillance state the way it scrutinizes us. Thus, Paglen makes explicit what Maisel implies: given that power in the 21st century entails looking and not being looked at, redress must involve democratizing the act of looking, make it go both ways – an eye for an eye.

Raising awareness of ubiquitous surveillance is an important job, and it’s hard to deny that the public would benefit from more transparency. But I also wonder if talk of transparency and declassification offers at best a kind of false enlightenment: credulous, would-be heroic photographers scampering after secrets the government no longer really cares about anyway. Maisel was able to shoot Dugway, after all, only because the government permitted him to do so, and when his series was finally bound and published, it came with a hearty endorsement courtesy of President Clinton’s secretary of the navy. There must be other classified sites in the Southwest that Maisel and Paglen haven’t gotten to yet, and perhaps even this likelihood blurs the

Courtesy Pace Gallery © Trevor Paglen



Trevor Paglen: *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2010, C-print, 48 by 60 inches.

larger, more depressing issue: we’ve reached the point where our overlords no longer seem to rely on secrecy so heavily, where they seem not to mind being looked at so much. It’s hard to stay jazzed about the power of transparency – even symbolic transparency – now that the Dugway Proving Ground has its own Facebook page.

On paper, Gowin’s photographs of the Nevada Test Site, where more than a thousand nuclear bombs were detonated during the Cold War, may sound like SAP of the naive, secret-spilling variety – the site was classified for half a century, and visiting there cost Gowin many frustrating years of haggling, which ended well after the facility had ceased to be of any use to the military. But there’s little to no “eureka!” when you look at these photographs. The blast craters could be a mile wide or a foot, since there’s nothing to provide scale, and the deformations might as well be earth mounds: they’re so hypermodern they’re ancient.

The threat of nuclear war never went away; it just got replaced by the newer, hipper threat of climate change.

Courtesy Pace Gallery © Trevor Paglen

The Southwest has a warm friendship with both: it’s the place where the nuclear age began and, seeing as it’s the hottest and driest it’s been since 800 CE, probably the place that most closely approximates what the rest of the country will look like in a hundred years. There’s something definitive and genre-summing about Gowin’s images of dry, blighted ground, then; they don’t spill any secrets or even reveal anything terribly new, but they do make an uncomfortable point uncomfortably plain, the same point I’ve been dancing around throughout this article. It doesn’t matter whether the site is secret or not: *any* aerial photograph of the contemporary Southwest – my beloved birthplace, the most beautiful part of the world I know of, and the avant-garde of so much that is awful about the world – is a photograph of the apocalypse. ●

**Jackson Arn** is a writer based in New York.