

# War as creation ; Beautiful images convey disturbing messages in 'Art of War' at CEPA gallery

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When people voice their opinions about war on the American airwaves, they tend to do so passionately. And they usually waste no time taking sides.

It goes a little like this: On one side, you have the hawks, whose solution to any conflict is to obliterate the enemy at all costs. On other, the anti-war activists, to whom the very idea of armed conflict is anathema. Each side has its cable channels and radio outlets, and seldom does anyone step across the great ideological divide that separates these fiercely held views.

Somewhere in the vast space between those arguments sits a series of photographs by Berkeley, Calif.-based artist Trevor Paglen, whose work appears in "Art of War," an ambitious series of exhibitions that opened last week in CEPA Gallery.

Each of Paglen's 40-by-60-inch photographs of the night sky is a quiet, ethereal skyscape, capturing an evocatively colored slice of the firmament that could have been produced by the Hubble Space Telescope.

The photographs each contain a small streak of light, which to the first-time viewer might seem to be a shooting star or simply a photographic aberration. But, according to Paglen -- a geographer at the University of California, Berkeley and an internationally exhibited artist -- the streaks are covert spy satellites, which he has meticulously tracked with the help

of a team of scientists and photographed from remote locations across the United States.

Paglen's series, called "The Other Night Sky," is meant to draw viewers' attention to the global network of surveillance that constantly orbits the globe and serves as an integral tool of modern warfare. Unlike a great deal of art made about war, it does not explicitly endorse an ideological viewpoint or political position, preferring instead to illuminate a small part of what makes global conflict tick.

"We tend to think things that are beautiful are good," Paglen said, when asked to explain why he chose to package such an unsettling message in such a classically beautiful form. "So to me, it's more interesting to make a beautiful image of something that is not necessarily good than it is to make an ugly image of something that you think is ugly."

And that, in a nutshell, encapsulates the philosophy of "Art of War," a series of exhibitions by artists exploring specific conflicts around the world and the wider notion of war in general. Though clearly couched in an unabashedly leftist perspective -- there are, for instance, no artists in the show who explicitly endorse war -- the exhibition eschews the vitriolic political and polemical arguments that normally surround the topic. Instead, said CEPA curator and interim director Sean Donaher, it encourages viewers to think more deeply about the views they hold.

"I hope 'Art of War' gives people permission to actually talk about it and not be afraid of politics," Donaher said. "Think about it. If you could get a room full of people together and use artwork as a launching point for discussion that doesn't start on the poles?"

Donaher said he chose projects for the show not based on whether he agreed with the artist's political viewpoints, but simply on the quality of the artwork. The exhibition's goal, Donaher stressed, is conversation rather than conversion.

Another artist in the show, Daniel Joseph Martinez, produced an installation of large panels coated in several layers of gold-flake auto paint, each containing the name of an organization that has used violence to accomplish political goals, regardless of what those goals are. In the resulting work (shown at the high-profile 2008 Whitney Biennial in New York City), an organization like the CIA can appear next to, for instance, Al-Qaeda, an approach sure to raise eyebrows and cause viewers to ask questions. That, Donaher said, is as it should be.

The show features an ongoing project by Walid Ra'ad that deals with the Lebanese wars of the last quarter-century, Australian artist Tom Nicholson's photographic reflection on a rebellion in East Timor that was quashed by the Indonesian government and Martha Rosler's collages of domestic scenes that explore Americans' perception of global conflict from the comfort of their own living rooms.

The exhibition will also feature several musical and theater performances, including a play performance piece and composition to be performed during the exhibition's summerlong run. These ancillary events, Donaher said, are an attempt to broaden the exhibition's reach to audiences that might not otherwise consider a show of such seemingly daunting conceptual art.

In the end, the show's aim is modest. For Donaher, and for the participating artists, it boils down to looking at the debate about war, taking a step back and pausing to regard that big space in the middle of two political extremes.

"It's easy to veer to the extreme in one way or the other," Donaher said. "But there's a whole hell of a lot in between."

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