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Landscape Acquired: A Dialogue with Scott Patrick Wiener

by [Mostafa Heddays](#) on March 7, 2014 1

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Scott Patrick Wiener, "Untitled 2 (Spies in the Sky)" (2013) (courtesy the artist)

For those seeking an antidote to the Armory madness this weekend, [Distant Images](#), [Local Positions](#), curated by Wafaa Bilal at the Project Space of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, is an edifying alternative. A sophisticated show featuring a spectrum of artistic practices, the exhibition displays multiple visually challenging, intelligent contributions and comments on the fraught dialogues of space, place, and power. A number of works on view here could independently engender essay-length responses, including Trevor Paglen's "Untitled (Reaper Drone)" (2010), a formalist study inspired by Turner-esque abstraction of the sky-bound specter of a single drone, and Hasan Elahi's "Concordance" (2013) a site-specific monitor array linked to his ongoing [Tracking Transcience](#) project, an immersive self-documentary response to his encounter with the American security apparatus.

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But I was most intrigued by the trio of works presented by **Scott Patrick Wiener**, all of which deal with the landscape as an object of perception. This assessment of perspectival power on landscape wends through many seminal works of American art, from the photography of Ansel Adams to Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson's "Swamp" (1971). Though the encounter between the insidiously political and organically sublime is just what made the works appealing to me, it also raised a great deal of questions — so I emailed the artist. Here are his eloquent, and highly illuminating, responses.

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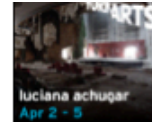


Scott Patrick Wiener, from left to right: "Three Surveys" (2012–13), "Untitled 1 (Spies in the Sky)" (2013), "Untitled 2 (Spies in the Sky)" (2013) (Image courtesy EFA Project Space)

Mostafa Heddaya: Hi Scott — as Wafaa mentioned, I was curious about the source(s) (agency/mission) and location(s) (geographic) in Landscape Acquisition.

Scott Patrick Wiener: Ah, yes, the question of source and place! I'm glad you ask, as the question is an important one. However, it is also crucial that the subject of these places remains unidentified and anonymous so that the violent and sublime dimensions of the scenes are recognizable only as such. This places another kind of relevance on the subject as definable through their aesthetic predispositions inherited through the ages of Western histories in art and photography. (This distinction is important here to separate 'art photography' from its more functional deployments in culture.) It also ties the images to abstract concepts that are undistracted by the appearances of concrete technical data. They are unnamed because we already have names (categories) for them.

The sources for the stills are loosely and cryptically referred to via the parentheses in each title as (*Spies in the Sky*). This is a direct allusion to the Time/Life documentary of the same name (released on VHS in 1999) about airborne surveillance from which they were orphaned (then printed and rephotographed with high speed film). I deliberately chose to work with footage that acted as placeholders in the film and were meant only to illustrate the specter of surveillance from above. There is another determining factor: they all must bear a formal relationship to historical landscape aesthetics and bring to mind the depiction of the sublime in painting (German romanticism, Dutch landscape, Hudson River, etc.) and photography (O'Sullivan, Ansel Adams, New Topographics, etc.), both of which have found their more current expressions as postcards, calendars, desktops, and so on.



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All (video and still images) are tied to sensation and place, or an amalgamation of both, to emphasize a view that overpowers nature resulting from a confrontation with ideas of terror and beauty. Yet, the descriptive image (painting, photograph or otherwise) in our moment tends to favor either data or beauty in the realm of function, information or sensation, and ultimately ignores them as abstractions that bear the mark (albeit obscurely) of the histories that determined them.

In the works at the EFA, I am interested in exploring the possibility of the interconnectivity of the technological imageries of violence and beauty, both of which are firmly planted in the realm of expectation. Roughly translated, to intrinsically connect them as ideological forms of banality.



Installation view, Hasan Elahi's "Concordance" (2013) monitor array

MH: *My other question is related to the dyad you propose between tactics/aesthetics — the 2-channel video piece, which brought to mind Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson's "Swamp" (1971). That piece, though also unsettling/destabilizing, is very differently so: the drone footage voids the immediate intersubjectivity of perception that drives the Holt and Smithson video.*

SPW: I love that you brought up this piece! I completely agree and hope you'll excuse the following digression. The Smithson/Holt film is much less automated and explicitly confronts the subjective dimension of the experience of landscape. Smithson/Holt are also dealing with the director/directed binary, which in this case relates to a gendered power dynamic between maker and made (also spatial control over place and person). With the drone footage, this relationship between operator and operated are totally uncertain and reveal nothing about a specific human subjectivity, much less a tactical purpose. It is this denial that allows the possibility of deciphering a subject of surveillance (which can only be land/sky). If there is a subjectivity at play, it rests on the shoulders of a participant.

Also, *Swamp* particularizes in a way that the drone video does not; in the former the makers are foregrounded, while the latter contains the appearance of a machinic search with the implication that the filming is potentially automated and subjectless so that the recognitions and associations are determined by preexisting socio-historical signifiers (e.g. looking down while moving, film grain, landscape as beatific, surveillance as inherently violent or

traumatic, etc). In short, the video and stills conceptualize the automated to address another kind of automation – the human mechanics of perception and recognition that determine appearances of concretization in the imagery of violence and beauty.



Scott Patrick Wiener, "3 Surveys" (2012)

MH: *There is an undeniably salient political context, but your work is not at all "about drones" in the same way Paglen's might be, for example. So I am trying to tease out some of these formal and historical elements you allude to in the description on your site.*

SPW: You are correct, the work is not so much 'about drones' as it uses the familiar languages of surveillance to address the theme of banality (as expectations of type), which in this installation includes an exercise in producing drone footage. The work relies equally so on the human ability to locate a perceived opposition in both image types. But as we know, there is both a sublimity and/or 'beautiful' dimension to surveillance, whether automated or remotely controlled, and a violence in the imagery of landscape. With the latter, the image is an indication of the human desire to impose ideology and produce evidence of both cultural and/or personal conquest of place in the form of a (now) infinitely reproducible keepsake.

This also addresses another human condition that is about the control over and preservation of personal memory in the photographic, no matter how futile this activity is in relation to death. (I am developing this idea further in *Landscape Acquisition* and other projects.) The former trades in the more ambivalent depiction of tactical violence without a defined human subject (control of the image is more ambiguously and ideologically located in formal systems of organization like 'the state' or 'the military'), but is similar in its drive to survey a place that can translate to vocabularies of the picturesque, although the views directly up and down work to both draw attention to and counter those expectations.

I think the stills rely more heavily on conceptions of beauty, while the video rests on the more sinister notions of surveillance. In both cases, however, their opposites are never more distant than just beneath the surface and connect more emphatically when installed in close proximity to each other.

MH: *This is a long-winded way of asking: to what extent do you conceive of this work as being in dialogue with investigations of (anti-)perspectives on landscape?*

SPW: I am interested in critically addressing the literalism that establishes and determines categories for the identification of 'landscape' and 'surveillance' images as such, so that the works in this ongoing project might "defeat their own objecthood" (I think [Fried's](#) critique of the philosophy of minimalism is appropriate here). The identification of these contradictory image ideals is made apparent by submitting them to each other's will. It is here that I locate the political. These all too familiar categories of violence and beauty have the potential to become agents of one another's opposing discourses, and potentially shed the conservative skin ascribed to them by our culture's formal reductions and desires.

[Distant Images, Local Positions](#) continues at *EFA Project Space* (323 W 39th Street #3, Midtown, Manhattan) through March 9.

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