

Kemper museum finds art in drone warfare and surveillance

By Willis Ryder Arnold

Drone warfare has spread from the battlefields to TV and movie thrillers. And now it's spread to the fine art world. The Kemper Art Museum at Washington University is hosting one of the first museum shows critically examining drones. Yet, say the show's curators, the art isn't bogged down in political rhetoric. It's visually engaging and firmly grounded in contemporary art.



"They do belong more to a fine art tradition, but some are also video games or web-based projects or participatory projects so it really broadens this concept of contemporary art in a really productive way," said Svea Bräunert, a German researcher and co-curator.

Bräunert and Associate Curator Meredith Malone created the exhibition after being inspired by artist Trevor Paglen's work making images of drone flights. The museum owns one work from his series "Untitled (Reaper Drone)." While several museums have tried to tell the story of drone development, their various spy capabilities or have used drones as part of art-making processes, few have attempted to present a full exhibition of works examining the implications drones have for the broader society.

"I realized that contemporary art is the one field that investigates drone warfare heavily and in extremely interesting ways," Bräunert said.

The show features photographs of drone flights, to-scale outlines of a drone outside the building, manipulated instructional flight videos and cloud formations classified as "faces" by facial recognition software. The curators had to balance compelling activism and research with arresting visuals to produce the show.

“A lot of work deals with this topic of drone warfare and surveillance. But to find things that are actually compelling and pushing boundaries aesthetically, as well as being politically engaged, is something we had to find a good balance on,” said Malone.

The show takes drone image capturing and expands it to include surveillance technology like facial recognition. Paglen says both these technologies indicate a shift in visual perception. Instead of making photographs for humans to evaluate, we create images for machines. Drones and automated surveillance systems turn these images into data points analyzed by machines. For Paglen, these technologies are now automated, pervasive and with huge capacities for storage.

“Put together, all of those things can radically transform the relationships we have to cities and by extension transform the kinds of freedoms we have in our everyday lives,” he said.

Paglen shares the curators’ belief that the work address both artistic and political concerns. He says the artistic references made in his own work aren’t always recognized.

“With an image like some of the drone photos, it’s a very self-conscious engagement with (painter J.M.W.) Turner, with (photographer Alfred) Steiglitz, with a history of artists that have looked at the sky. And I’m very consciously making these images to be in dialogue with these artists from hundreds of years ago,” said Paglen.

The show runs through April 24. The full list of artists includes Hito Steyerl, James Bridle, Tomas van Houtryve, Harun Farocki, Trevor Paglen, and more.

Below are examples of other artists’ work from the show.

Trevor Paglen: The artist presents photographs documenting surveillance networks, like geospatial satellites, drones and military communications outposts. The small speck in the bottom right corner is a drone.

Trevor Paglen, “Untitled (Reaper Drone),” 2010. C-print, 5/5, 48 x 60”. Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. University purchase, Bixby Fund, 2012.

James Bridle: The artist’s Instagram account Dronestagram documents images of landscapes from sites of drone strikes.

James Bridle, “Dronestagram,” 2012-15. Social media accounts and digital imagery.

Hito Steyerl: A video features digital imagery and a performance staged at a former site used to focus drone cameras.