

## VISUAL ART

## John Player

by Edwin Janzen



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1. Doug Aitken, exhibition view, *SONG 1*, 2012/2015. © Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2015. Photo: Norbert Miguletz. Courtesy Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt.

2. Doug Aitken, *Sonic Fountain II*, 2013/2015, installation in the rotunda of the Schirn. © Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2015. Photo: Norbert Miguletz. Courtesy Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt.

represents, says Martin Herbert in his catalogue essay, is “an ideology of nomadism-as-disappearance: dislocating not only from others but also, ideally, from the self.” That’s why she says, “We don’t talk about the future much...Anything longer than a day is too much time.”

In *empire (migration)*, the variety of the animal kingdom runs into the standardization of the hotel room. Maybe that stands in for our inability to follow Noah in saving threatened animal species; these hotels won’t survive the flood. Or maybe, in what catalogue contributor April Lamm calls “a portrait of displacement,” we are all seen as alienated, like the migrant or animals cut off from the natural world. All the characters in *SONG 2* may celebrate what Dominic Eichler, whose essay also appears in the Aitken catalogue, calls

“an insane state” in which “the lover can see absolutely nothing except the beloved,” but there’s no evidence of happy coupling; rather, the characters appear lonely against the backdrop of the multitudes going about their lives. *Diamond Sea* isolates us in time, comparing the crawl of geological time with the compressed timescale of human endeavour, as represented by corporate enterprise.

What of the non-film works? *Sonic Fountain II*, 2013, is a technological reproduction of a natural phenomenon—i.e., what you expect of a filmset. Aitken’s light boxes act as isolated stills. The mirror sculptures use lettering bound to echo the Hollywood sign. Aitken intends to include the viewer by reflection so that “the intermediary is taken out of the equation and the viewer becomes the film.” So, somewhat perversely, Aitken’s non-film works reinforce the way his films suggest that life has become cinematic—and privileges spectacle over substance, casting us as isolated viewers, subsuming apparent variety within the formulaic. If that sense of alienation, consistent with the film works, is the overall thrust of Aitken’s worldview, it’s one which could be put across in a dry and indeed, alienating way. Aitken’s particular achievement is to have mastered the medium he deconstructs, enabling us to enjoy a sweet outer cake of entertainment even as we ingest a piquant filling of critique. ■

*Doug Aitken was exhibited at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, from July 9 to September 27, 2015.*

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As the streets and monuments of Rome, Angkor, Istanbul, London, Vienna and so many other imperial capitals testify, each empire inscribes its capital city with a particular architecture of power. The capital of our era’s most powerful nation, Washington, DC, boasts a dizzyingly dense concentration of such inscriptions: obelisks, domes, zodiacs, porticos, mythological allegories, sphinxes. Even its geometrical street grid, laid out in 1791 by Pierre Charles L’Enfant, is part of this symbolic architecture.

Montreal painter John Player examines the architecture of American power, but his is a second, parallel one. His images do not show us DC with its monuments and colonnades, as portrayed in the opening sequence of *House of Cards*, the popular Netflix series.

To a great degree, American power issues from a new kind of architecture, one that’s come, ironically, to resemble what currently houses the millions it subjugates: the suburbs, industrial malls, trailer parks. In its permanent impermanence, this parallel power architecture embodies the institutional analog of the residential trailer park—an endless aggregate of hangar-like warehouses, steel sheds, mirror windows, welded-wire fences and anonymous white trailers, all surrounded by vast parking lots and lawns tended by an army of precarious labour.

The National Security Agency’s installations feature prominently in Player’s work, but not exclusively. One painting portrays a nuclear submarine listening station that could easily be taken for a Christian boys-and-girls camp in the woods. What appears to be a couple of beige lunch boxes in a parking lot are in fact shipping





containers for unmanned aerial drones, while a pair of trailers with tall antennae are in fact drone command posts. A separate set of nine small watercolours in desert hues shows airstrips and other installations in locations from Arizona to Pakistan.

Often Player depicts locations from an aerial drone's elevated perspective; other subjects are seen as though shot through fish-eye lenses. And certain painted elements simulate the mechanized eye, depicting an electromagnetic field or an illuminated heads-up display.

Player joins a growing lineage of artist-trespassers exploring restricted places, a lineage that began, perhaps, with *BIT Plane* (1997–98), the Bureau of Inverse Technology's playful series of flyovers of key Silicon Valley headquarters: Apple, Lockheed, Netscape, Xerox, etc. *BIT Plane* was notable not for what the plane's camera saw—all those HQs might as well have been a bunch of Wal-Marts—but because of its successful transgression into restricted airspace. More recently, US artist Trevor Paglen

has photo-surveilled secret government installations throughout the southwestern US deserts. In contrast to Player's detailed images, the conditions of Paglen's work—long distances imposed by security restrictions, plus the desert's heat distortion—result in blurry, indistinct images, a sort of de facto self-censorship.

America isn't the sole focus of such investigations and like Player, the artist-trespassers who conduct them aren't always Americans. Consider Russian photographer Lana Sator, who collects her images whilst spelunking in abandoned or poorly controlled Soviet/Russian industrial installations; or French artist Laurent Grasso's video simulation of the top-secret High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP) installation near Gakona, Alaska, a favourite of conspiracy researchers.

Why should artists wish to represent secret places? Do images like Player's, which comprise a kind of subversive fantasy of trespass, represent merely gratuitous curiosity, or do they mirror popular revulsion at the rapid expansion of all this secrecy?

For decades, the technocratic dream of surveillance exemplified by Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison, in which prisoners are watched but unable to see their watchers, has been held at bay by the democratic oversight of police forces and secret services. Today, however, governments everywhere are giving away the store to these top-secret trailer park boys. In Russia, Vladimir Putin has facilitated the government's wholesale infiltration by the FSB security services. Here in Canada, Stephen Harper's Bill C-51 treats protesters as terrorists, while compromising citizens' privacy and giving security agencies a host of new powers.

Considering today's tendency toward secret government impunity, Player himself admits to a sense of powerlessness. What contribution can a painter make? The same, maybe, as any individual citizen may do in any country where governments have restricted oversight by citizens: to bear personal witness to what in a democracy is truly abominable—the exclusion of the people from power. While citizens—and indeed, artists—still seek to watch the watchers, the dystopic Benthamist dream of total surveillance remains incomplete. ■

*"New Paintings" was exhibited at Pierre-François Ouellette Art Contemporain, Montreal, from May 14 to June 20, 2015.*

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1. John Player, *Listening Station*, 2014, oil on canvas, 76 x 102 cm. Courtesy the artist and Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

2. Takashi Homma, "Mushrooms from the Forest," 2011, photograph, pigment-based inkjet print. © Takashi Homma. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

3. Nobuyoshi Araki, "Shaky r jin nikki" ("Diary of a Photo-Mad Old Man"), 2011, gelatin silver print. © Nobuyoshi Araki. Courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.