

Graphic images of a darker, more sinister kind — semi-official patches woven with emblems representing secret American military operations — are collected for the first (and maybe the last) time in Trevor Paglen's **I COULD TELL YOU BUT THEN YOU WOULD HAVE TO BE DESTROYED BY ME: Emblems From the Pentagon's Black World** (Melville House, \$22.95). Of course, issuing patches for a covert operation sounds like a joke — I fear for my life just flipping through the pages — but truth be told, these days everything is branded. As Paglen, an artist and co-author of "Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights," says in his introduction, these patches represent "what people in defense circles call the 'black world' of classified projects," including test flights of futuristic stealth fighters ("low observables") taking place at the Air Force's secretive bases, like the one near Groom Lake in Nevada (Area 51).

Military symbols are frequently replete with heraldic imagery — some rooted in history, others based on contemporary popular arts that feature comic characters — but these enigmatic dark-op images, in some cases probably designed by the participants themselves, are more personal, and also more disturbing, than most. Take the image for "the 416th Flight Test Squadron's Special Projects Flight working on advanced technologies for the F-16 Combined Test Force at Edwards Air Force Base." Atop a cartoon of a dragon menacingly peering through the clouds is the phrase "*Procul Este Profani*," which, as Paglen tells us, derives from the "Aeneid": when Aeneas "arrives at the Temple of Apollo, the prophet Sibyl utters the words '*Procul, O procul este profani*' before the pair descend into Hades." He notes that members of the unit translate this phrase as "Keep your distance, you who are uninitiated." Using a more comic approach but saying the same thing, Project Zipper employs a yellow happy face wearing sunglasses; the smiling mouth, in the form of a zipper, illustrates the slogan "We Make Threats Not Promises." This patch, Paglen says, "represents an unknown project undertaken by the 413th Flight Test Squadron." Then there is the E.W. Directorate patch (made for the Electronic Warfare Directorate, "the primary E.W. test organization at Edwards Air Force Base"), which has the image of a shady-looking crow wrapped in a cape and holding lightning bolts.

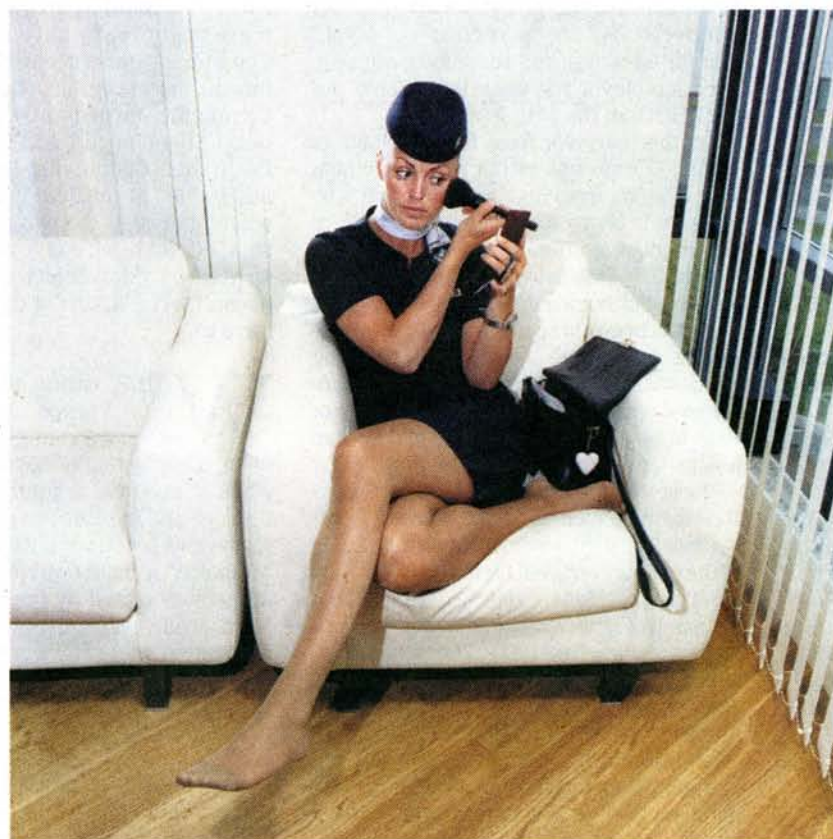
For those who wonder why classified programs even allow such highly visible insignia, Paglen writes, "Many members of the black world are proud of the secrets they hold, and of the clandestine work they've done." These patches are essentially their gang colors.

Like test pilots, flight attendants for commercial airlines wear distinct colors and iconography. Although most basic attendants' uniforms, regardless of the airline, are styled in much the same way, scarves, aprons, hats and other accessories serve to distinguish the different carriers. In **FLIGHT ATTENDANTS** (PowerHouse Books, \$35), with photographs by Brian Finke and short essays by Alix Browne and Alison Nordström, these international airborne hosts and hostesses are captured in vivid color, as though for a fashion supplement.

Finke — who documented two other emblematic American groups, cheerleaders and football players, in "2-4-6-8" — became obsessed with a "nomadic tribe, distinguished by its own language, mannerisms and uniforms," writes Browne, the deputy style editor of *The New York Times Magazine*. Yet few professional groups have been more stereotyped than stewardesses, and the playful, startling photographs in this book do little to counter the notion that rather than representing a cross section of the population, female flight attendants are all pretty, perky fashion plates. □



Vietnam War protesters in Washington, D.C., 1970; from "Peace: The Biography of a Symbol."



An Icelandair flight attendant as photographed by Brian Finke.



Patches from the "black world" of secret Pentagon projects, from the collection of Trevor Paglen.