Harun Farocki’s “Eye/Machine III” strings together footage made primarily by and for machines. Black-and-white landscapes viewed from above by missile scanners so they can hit their targets, a hallway surveyed in psychedelic lines by the eye of a robot tasked with moving through it, a bridge rebuilt three-dimensionally by a laser scanner housed in a yellow metal box. Partway through the video, currently playing at Gallery 400, an intertitle claims:

“If such images possess beauty — this beauty is uncalculated.”

It’s an odd statement to come across in an art gallery, even one that like Gallery 400 regularly shows edgy and highly political contemporary art. Farocki, a celebrated German filmmaker who died last year at the age of 70, is the subject of a timely and challenging two-person show here alongside Trevor Paglen, an American artist and geographer three decades his junior. The exhibition originated at the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where it was curated by Niels Van Tomme.

Farocki’s declaration stands out less for how accurately it describes the found images that make up his own work — though certainly it does — and more for how untrue it is of Paglen’s. This is the kind of compare-contrast that tandem shows exist to conjure: What’s similar, what’s different? The similarities can be useful if obvious. In this case, both Farocki and Paglen concentrate on the changes that technology has wrought on vision, often through militaristic development. Cue title: “Visibility Machines.” The differences can be peculiar but penetrating. Paglen, who holds a Ph.D. in geography and is the author or co-author of books on topics ranging from military symbology to CIA rendition flights, makes strikingly handsome pictures that flirt knowingly with various art genres, from classic landscape photography to abstract painting.

This can be confusing, because aesthetics doesn’t seem to otherwise matter to Paglen’s project, which is not at all about using high-tech, long-distance photographic equipment, intense research into declassified archives and collaboratively collected data on unacknowledged spacecraft to create glossy images. The images are just the pretty, shiny tip of the iceberg. It’s about using all those resources and more to find and document state secrets: an Air Force installation in Nevada that isn’t supposed to be there; a chemical and biological weapons proving ground in Utah; the enormously powerful radar system that surrounds the United States and is known as “The Fence”; classified American reconnaissance satellites that orbit our planet.

Problem is, having gone to the extremes of research needed to locate places and programs and objects that the government wants to conceal, it’s very nearly impossible to get close enough to take a legible picture of them, never mind one that follows conventional compositional rules. But photographs are evidence, and in trying to prove the existence of a clandestine world, evidence counts.
So Paglen takes a different sort of picture, one made using reconfigured astrophotography equipment, one that takes account of atmospheric conditions and temperature differentials. The end results tend, strangely enough, to look more like J.M.W. Turner’s cataclysmic storms or Mark Rothko’s moody color fields than anything so precise as the White Sands Missile Range in Alamogordo, New Mexico seen from a distance of 35 miles. Which is to say that they look beautiful, and very much like something that belongs in a museum. Or something that was hoping to sneak in.

This is what things look like when the government swears they don’t exist.

Farocki shoots straighter. He can, having figured out over the years how to get official access to the footage and locations that interest him. This has included the Twentynine Palms military base in California and Fort Lewis in Washington State. In each of these places he filmed soldiers seated at computer terminals, playing video games meant to simulate scenarios set in Iraq or Afghanistan. Some were training for battles to come, riding around together in a virtual tank with a gunner on top. Others were being treated for war-related psychological injuries, the immersive video environments intended to trigger traumatic memories that could then be worked through.

In the resulting film, “Serious Games 4,” Farocki pays special attention to the quality of the computer-generated images, analyzing them the way an artist or an art historian would. He notes the mood of the sky, which can be altered for therapeutic purposes, and the shadow of an armored vehicle, which is accurately determined by the position of an imaginary sun in the combat sequences. He doesn’t say much about the eerie parallels with teenage boys playing video games in rec rooms — it’s as clear as it is terrifying — but he does question the lack of shadows in the therapy images. It turns out the budget for postwar virtual realities is lower than prewar ones. Memories, in any case, may not have shadows.

In “War at a Distance,” an excerpt of which screens here, Farocki offers further aesthetic commentary on imagery made for militaristic purposes. Snippets of propaganda and training films from World War II are shown to be more than just informative — triumphalist music and shimmery seas aren’t needed to communicate the correct trajectory of a guided missile. They’re there to present war as something exciting and magical.

Harun Farocki reveals that magic for the black art that it is. Trevor Paglen, meanwhile, uses magic to reveal black sites.

“Visibility Machines” runs through March 14 at Gallery 400, 400 South Peoria Street, 312-996-6114, gallery400.uic.edu.

c tc-arts@tribpub.com

Twitter @chitribent