

Kevin Cooley

photograph

Kevin Cooley and Phillip Andrew Lewis: *Unexplored Territory*
Kopeikin Gallery, Los Angeles
By Catherine Wagley 02/02/2014

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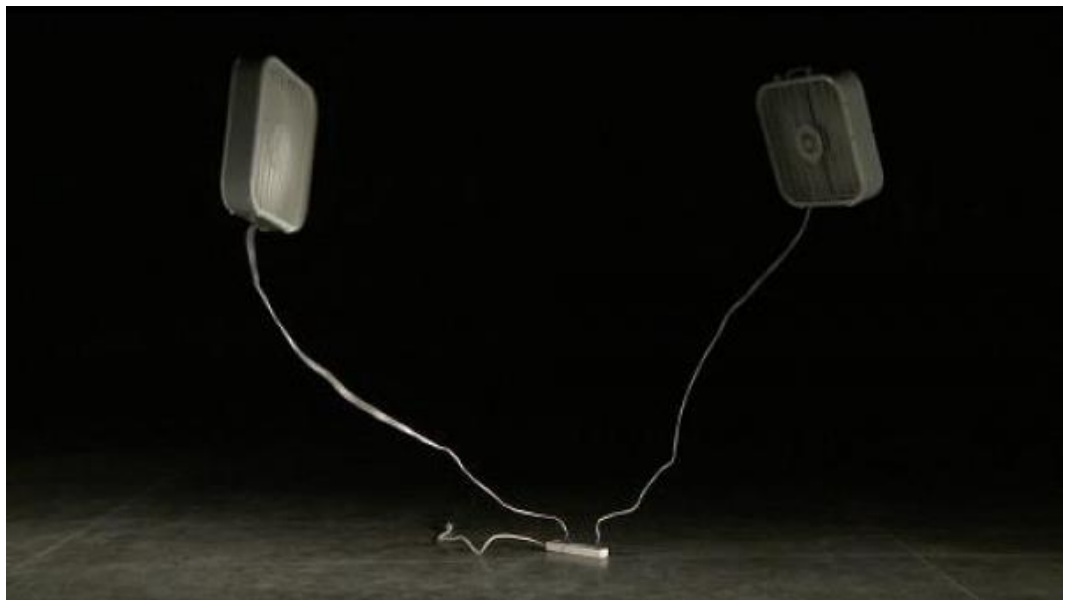
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Kevin Cooley and Phillip Andrew Lewis, still from *We Can Break Through*, 2013. Courtesy Kopeikin Gallery

Unexplored Territory is divided into three rooms at the Kopeikin Gallery that feel like three separate acts, each more dramatic than the last and each more difficult to decipher. The first, which I'll call the clandestine activity act, includes four photographs of spy satellites launching, which Kevin Cooley took at California's Vandenberg Air Force Base in August. Cooley's pictures show just the white smoke against a crisp blue sky. The Silent Chorus, by both Cooley and Phillip Andrew Lewis, consists of two small TV monitors on a pedestal in the room's back corner, showing black-and-white footage of piles of dirt disassembling then reassembling. It's hard to tell whether the artists are critiquing or embracing the neutral aesthetic adopted by these work.

A heavy black curtain separates the first room from a dark middle room, which holds what I'll call the prolonged anxiety act. The 15-minute video *We Can Break Through* shows two white box fans suspended like helium-filled balloons against a dark backdrop. You don't see what

holds the fans up, but you do see the cords plugged into a power strip, tethering them to the ground below. Sometimes, the fans move aggressively — sometimes aggressively enough that they wriggle free from the power strip and slowly come to a stop. You could grab a still from any moment and it would be appealing, but you spend the entire video waiting for a change: does anything ever “break through”?



Kevin Cooley, NROL-65, Spy Satellite Launch, 2013. Courtesy Kopeikin Gallery

Another set of curtains separates the second and third rooms, and the last holds what I’ll call the suppressed disaster act, because of the three 40 x 60-inch prints from Cooley’s Controlled Burn series that dominate this room. Each of these depicts curls of velvety black or white smoke that look thick enough to touch, rising majestically up from glints of red-orange flames. The rectangular frames, and lack of contextual information, make the gorgeously violent plumes seem, paradoxically, like they’re following the rules. While this in-between state is a condition of life, it’s hard not to wish that the glass would break and smoke would drift into the room. Then you’d know for sure that the artists wanted to escape the limits of their own aesthetic competence.