

JEFF CAIN

Born 1975, Plainview, Texas
Lives and works in Los Angeles, California

IN JEFF CAIN'S *RADAR BALLOON* (2005), a simple modification to a grade-school science project triggers a dramatic response from some of the most sophisticated military equipment in the world. The video begins in an otherworldly terrain in the Mojave Desert near General Atomics, a military subcontractor that manufactures the Predator Drone Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. The landscape is nearly empty except for rattling wind, brittle sunlight, and a lone figure in the near distance conducting an experiment on the properties of heated air. Holding one end of a fifty-foot-long weather balloon, he fills it by catching a gust; with a snap, the crackling plastic assumes the shape of a cylinder, tethered on one end to keep it secure.

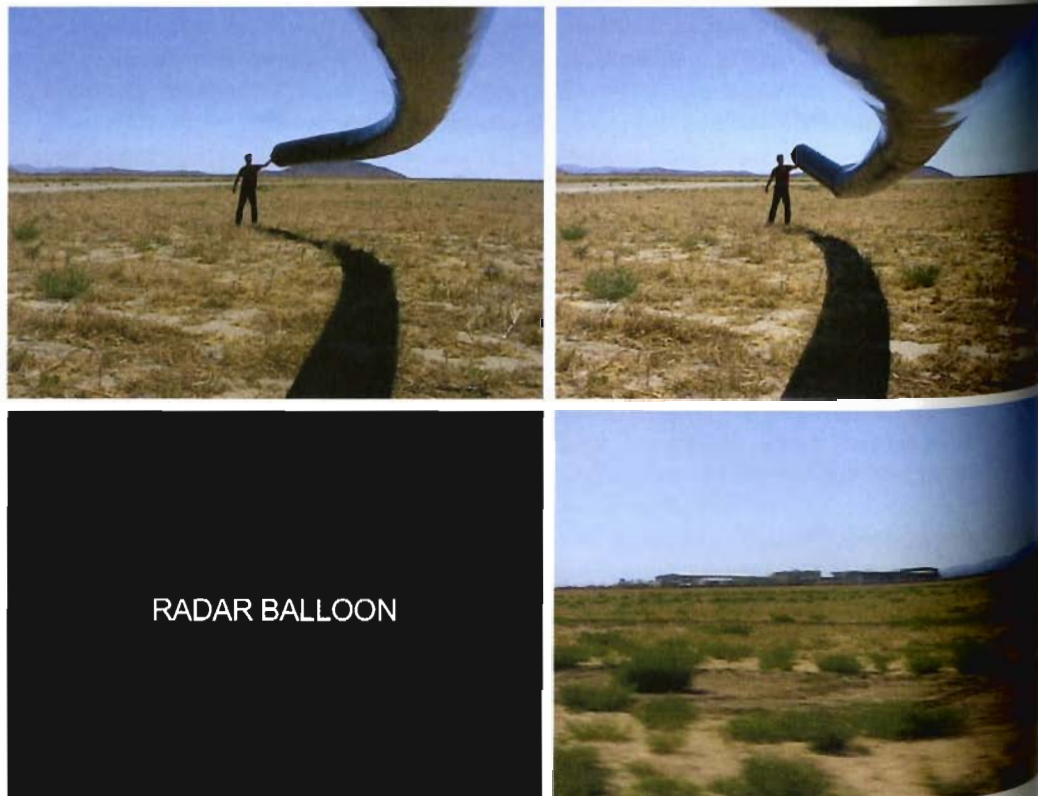
As grade-school science students know, dark materials readily absorb heat. The air inside the black balloon quickly becomes warmer than the air outside, and the balloon begins to float. The lone scientist moves to release the tether, and the balloon seems to come alive; it curves and bends and snakes around, floating slowly, like a prehistoric deep-sea creature riding ocean currents. We watch this ballet, this unexpectedly graceful, animated object gliding along as if in slow motion.

We are jolted from our reverie by a bit of text that notes, "The directions emphatically state that you should leave your balloon tethered, as a flying object this size registers on the FAA radar." With this information, Cain's seemingly friendly gesture — releasing a beautiful balloon in the bright sunlight of the desert to "make contact" with General Atomics — takes on a provocative and less than innocent aspect.

The force of the United States military is unleashed, and drones — apparently the type known as Predators — appear like giant bees, or prehistoric airborne dinosaurs, heading east in pursuit of the balloon; all this, despite the fact that the facility reportedly is not located under restricted airspace. The speed, cost, and intensity of this action give a new twist to the pure research of the experiment.

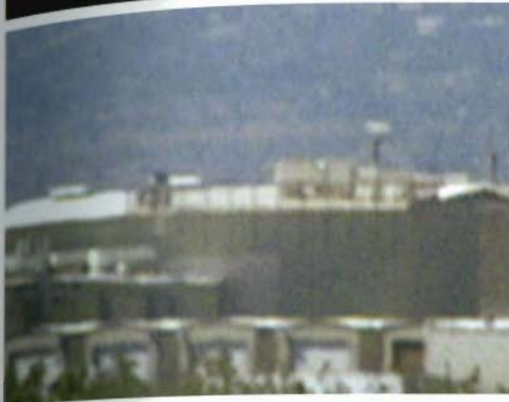
Radar Balloon is a project of Shed Research Institute (SRI). Two years after receiving his Master of Fine Arts degree from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Cain founded and launched SRI as a platform from which to pursue artistic inquiries and develop and embed art projects in unlikely venues or situations and to document such investigations initiated by others. SRI has no fixed address but has offered programs in a variety of places that include art galleries, doughnut shops, deserts, and more. SRI grew out of the short-lived Wedge, a similarly spirited alternative enterprise (albeit one that focused more on installations) located in a small triangular-shaped space in the old Woman's Building in Los Angeles. Cain founded Wedge in the late 1990s and ran it for two years, until he enrolled in graduate school in 2001. Cain's videos and installations, as well as his work with Wedge and SRI, reflect his commitment to pursuing a solo studio practice as well as developing collaborations and productions with other artists.

Irene Tsatsos



pp. 66–69
Jeff Cain, stills from *Radar Balloon*,
2005. Single-channel video, color,
sound; 7 min., 11 sec.

The Gray Butte RCS facility is located approximately 25 miles due east of Palmdale, on the Los Angeles-San Bernardino county line.



Originally built in the 1970's to develop radar evading stealth airplanes, Gray Butte was the first of three secret Radar Cross-Section (RCS) test facilities built in the Antelope Valley.

In 2000, Gray Butte was bought by General Atomics, a medium sized company in the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) industry. UAVs, or drones, have been increasingly used by the US military in combat for remote espionage and weapons deployment.



The following is an experiment in sending a weather balloon from a children's science project to establish contact with General Atomics.



Sometime in the morning when the air is cold and the sun shining, fill the 50 foot plastic bag with air.





Let the balloon sit in the sun until the air inside warms.

With the trapped air warming faster than the outside air, the balloon will rise by itself.



The directions emphatically state that you should leave your balloon tethered, as a flying object this size registers on FAA radar.





The first aircraft resembled the Predator drone developed at Gray Butte RCS.

In all, three drones were spotted heading east after the balloon.

