

Eerie Photos Capture Fear and Paranoia in Washington DC

By Laura Mallonee. 05.26.17.



Something strange is afoot in Washington. Nondescript white vans loiter in quiet neighborhoods. Office workers hustle boxes of documents into a mobile shredder. Burly men with earpieces and no-nonsense demeanors come and go in black SUVs with black windows. [Mike Osborne](#) suspects a conspiracy, and he's determined to get to the bottom of it.

Osborne uses mundane scenes to create a plausible world of conspiracies and malfeasance in his ongoing series *White Vans, Black Suburbans*. With just a bit of cynicism and a preference for black and white, even the most ordinary of things—a morning newspaper, a protester holding a sign, a dinner party seen through a smudged window—become strangely ominous. “You know how in every cop thriller or spy film, they have this board where they have all the images tacked on with yarn connecting them? That’s one way I’m thinking about this project,” Osborne says. “The images are a potential dossier. You put all these things together and they suggest some larger meaning.”

Not that Osborne buys into conspiracy theories. But he’s fascinated by those who do. It started a decade ago when he was a grad student at the University of Texas. He spent some time photographing Alex Jones (yes, [that Alex Jones](#)) in Austin. The fascination deepened when Osborne moved to Washington, DC, in 2012. He lived just blocks away from politicians like John Kerry and Madeleine Albright and saw even their gardeners enduring a check with a metal detector. Everything about the city exuded a sense that nothing is as it seems. And then came the 2016 election, with its bizarre claims of a [child sex ring](#) and [spirit cooking](#) and so many other conspiracy theories. “I thought about what would interest me if I had a conspiratorial mindset,” he says. “How would I go about visually decoding what I was seeing on a daily basis?”

He began documenting anything that someone might deem suspicious. A cryptic sign advertising “DoD cyber training.” A hooded figure stealing down a sidewalk. An F-16 crash site in the woods of Maryland. He attended political rallies and shot buildings like the NSA and FBI headquarters. The images resemble surveillance footage, creating the sense that you’re looking at something someone doesn’t want you to see. You think they’re mundane scenes. But are you sure? “I think my interest plays off that dichotomy of being near a locus of power and yet not being near to an understanding of how power is being exercised,” he says.

White Vans, Black Suburbans feeds off that tension. It’s also timely, given what’s happening in Washington. It’s not just the conspiracy theorists. Everyone’s a little paranoid these days.



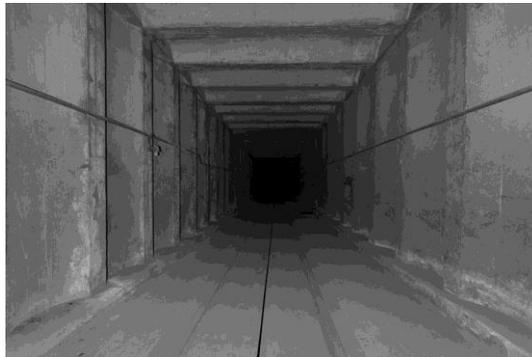
A light illuminates a room



Men in suits



The Washington Post announces firing of James Comey



A shaft stretches beneath Dupont Circle



A road leading to a Russian dacha seized by federal agents



A black suburban waits in front of the US Capitol