

INSIDE THE SECRET WORLD OF NSA ART

David Darchicourt worked with the NSA for years as a graphic designer, illustrating top-secret documents about government surveillance. Now he's the unwitting subject of a new exhibit.

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VENICE, Italy – Over 17 years, David Darchicourt worked with the National Security Agency as a graphic designer and art director, illustrating top-secret documents about government surveillance programs. Now he is the unwitting central character in a new exhibition that puts the spotlight on the spy agency's imagery.

Inside the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, a cavernous Renaissance library in Venice's St. Mark's Square, some of Darchicourt's designs for the NSA have been placed on display among historic 16th-century pieces by famed Italian painters like Veronese and Titian.

The former NSA employee's work is featured as part of a project called *Secret Power*, created by New Zealand artist Simon Denny for this year's [Biennale](#) international art show. Denny has brought to life images from the trove of classified files on government spying leaked by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, exploring an often overlooked aspect of the revelations: the visual information they contain.

The 32-year-old New Zealand artist selected a variety of graphics found in Snowden documents published by news organizations, including *The Intercept*, and set about incorporating them into a series of meticulously detailed installations that took him about 18 months to complete.

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Denny obtained an eagle from a taxidermist in Germany and created a three-dimensional version of the [emblem](#) used by the NSA's Special Source Operations program, which handles secret surveillance relationships with American companies like AT&T and Verizon.

He placed the bird flying through brightly lit computer server racks that stand about 10 feet tall, surrounded by other NSA graphics that were revealed by Snowden, such as the wizard associated with a mass surveillance operation called [MYSTIC](#) and a fox burning in a can of

acid, a drawing that was included in [documents](#) about an NSA hacking tactic.

The artist has also reconstructed the Terminator-style metal skull that appears as an emblem for [an NSA program](#) that maps the global Internet. Another piece focuses on documents from the NSA's British counterpart, [published](#) last year by *The Intercept*, that discuss the use of deception and manipulation techniques against targeted groups of people.

But Denny and his team didn't solely rely on the work of journalists to inform the pieces they assembled. They also embarked on some investigating of their own, tracking down Darchicourt, the NSA's former art chief, and turning him into a focal point of the project.

Darchicourt worked for the NSA between 1994 and 2012 and created images for its covert surveillance programs as well as for its public-facing work, such as a series of "CryptoKids" cartoon characters, intended to educate children about the agency.

The CryptoKids feature in a coloring book the NSA produced for children, and they also have their [own section](#) on the agency's website. The animal-based characters include "Rosetta Stone," a globe-trotting, multi-lingual fox who makes and breaks codes, and "T. Top," a computer-obsessed turtle who likes programming and the Internet.

After he left the NSA, Darchicourt became a freelance graphic designer and started using websites like LinkedIn and Behance to network and promote his work, which is how Denny found him.

In the display at the Venice library, the New Zealand artist included a large cartoon-like picture of Darchicourt, details about his background, and examples of his work for the NSA, all of which were mined from his online profiles and portfolios.

Denny also commissioned Darchicourt to draw him a map of New Zealand and a cartoon of a lizard that is native to the country, and featured these in the *Secret Power* exhibit, too. But he didn't tell the former NSA art chief he was being hired to work on a Snowden document-related exhibition; he kept that as a surprise for later.

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Denny says he wanted to place Darchicourt at the center of *Secret Power* as a way to help people think about the authorship of the Snowden documents. Graphic designers working in the visual departments of the agency have inadvertently become, because of the revelations, “some of the most powerful image creators we have,” he says. Yet almost nothing is known about who they are.

“There's been a lot of discussion about these programs, but the visuals of the documents haven't been unpacked,” says Denny, speaking to *The Intercept* on the phone from his base in Berlin.

“The images contain different kinds of information than the text. They give us a hand in understanding more about the culture – the office culture, let's say – behind the surveillance programs, and therefore the kinds of interests and values of the people working on them. They are an insight into the environment the programs are maintained and proliferated within.”

Much of the NSA's imagery, according to Denny, is rooted in depictions of magic, fantasy, military history and Internet meme culture. The agency's documents often contain maps and globes, crudely symbolizing the reach of its spying apparatus. But sometimes the graphics it chooses contain more subtle meanings and cultural references. In one top-secret PowerPoint [presentation](#) on an NSA

hacking operation, for instance, an agency employee inserted an image of a monkey fighting a robot, derived from a role-playing card game called Shadowfist in which conflicting factions wage a secret war against each other.

Denny was not particularly aware of issues around government surveillance prior to the Snowden disclosures, but the revelations piqued his interest. It was a shock for him to learn, in particular, about New Zealand's key role in the Five Eyes, a global spying alliance that the country is a member of alongside the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.

He started researching the topic and found inspiration in New Zealand investigative journalist Nicky Hager's 1996 book, *Secret Power*, a seminal exposé of the Five Eyes network. Denny paid homage to Hager by naming his art project after the book; he also recruited Hager to work with him on the project as a content adviser. (*The Intercept* has recently been collaborating with Hager on a [series of stories](#) about New Zealand's role in the Five Eyes, based in part on the Snowden documents.)

Now, Denny is passing on what he's learned, helping to educate others about the surveillance revelations. His project, which [runs until late November](#) and also features a temporary installation at the Venice airport, has attracted visitors from all age groups.

"We've had a number of people who've never even heard of Snowden in there," Denny says, "and there have been amazing responses in the visitor book talking about the issues. It's a really rewarding thing for me to see – that you can start a substantial conversation through a visual medium with people who are less inclined to read news media."

As for Darchicourt, he says it was "quite a surprise" to learn about how his work was going to be used when he found out about Denny's

project and its link to the Snowden revelations, but the irony of the situation was not lost on him.

“I guess that was one of [Denny’s] little aims,” Darchicourt told *The Intercept*. “To show how he could get my information and use it without my knowledge, the way NSA does.”

Darchicourt says he did not design most of the images from Snowden documents featured in Denny’s exhibition, such as the Special Source Operations eagle. But he acknowledges that he did create the image of a peanut emblazoned with a skull and crossbones used as the logo for **POISON NUT**, a top-secret NSA hacking program exposed in the leaked documents and included in one of Denny’s pieces.

The 55-year-old former NSA art chief is not planning on visiting the exhibition in Venice because he doesn’t want to be seen as somehow endorsing it on behalf of the agency. But he has reviewed photographs, and while he says he neither approves nor disapproves of it, he admits he finds it interesting to see his designs in the Renaissance setting.

“It’s kind of flattering, but it’s also kind of creepy,” Darchicourt says, adding that he’s now considering deleting some pictures from his online portfolios to prevent them from being used by anyone else in the future. “Anything that has to do with the NSA will be removed; it’s old and I don’t really identify with that organization anymore.”

Photos: Nick Ash courtesy of Simon Denny

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