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An Artist's Maps of Imperialism and Greed

Dan Mills delves into the devastating numbers of threatened populations around the world and then converts them into chaotically beautiful cartographies.



Carl Little August 10, 2019



Dan Mills, "What's in a Name? (state names + the number of major geographic features named after indigenous people & words marked with red)" (2018), acrylic on collaged map laid down on board, 65 x 83 inches (all images courtesy of CMCA, photos by Luc Demers)

ROCKLAND, Maine — A recent fundraising packet from Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders includes a folding map of the world with the headline, "We find out where conditions are the worst — the places where others are not going — and that's where we want to be." On the reverse, the humanitarian organization highlights seven

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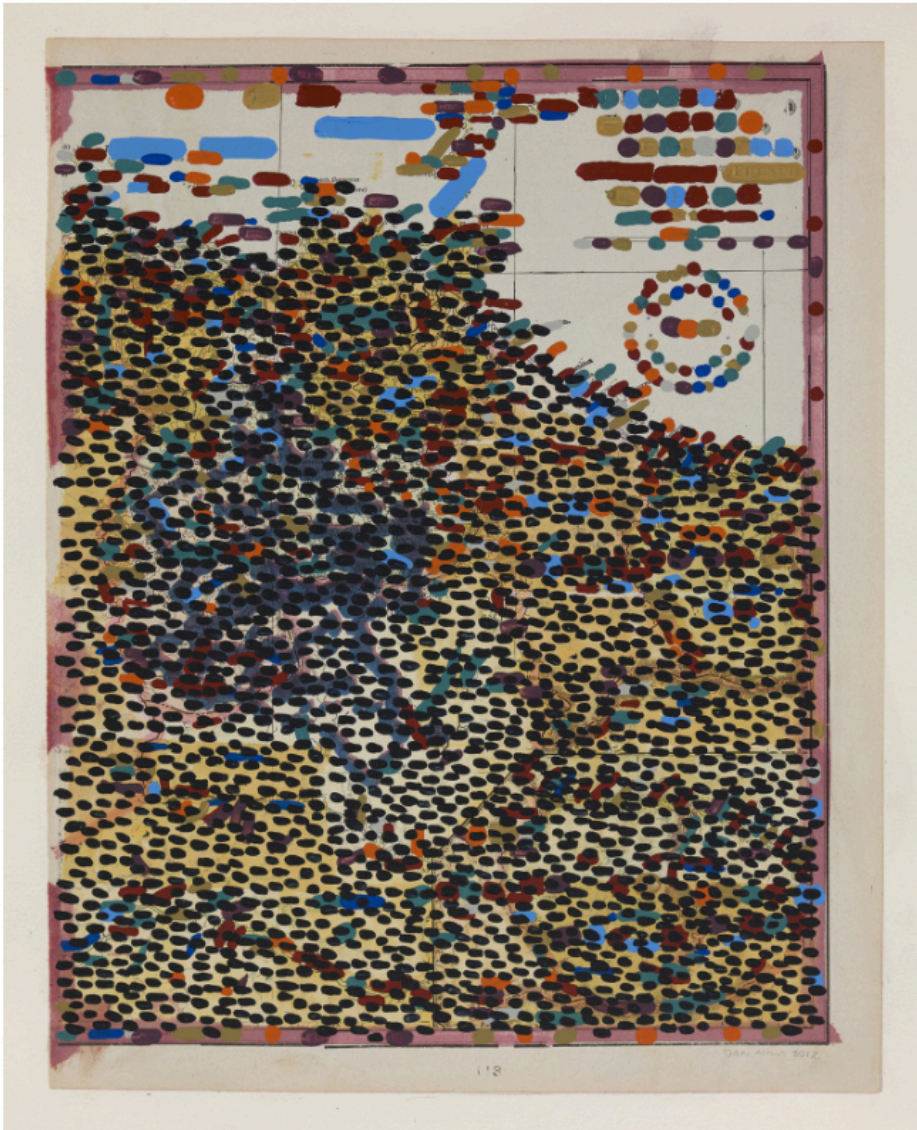
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situations or spots in which it is “heavily invested,” including the Rohingya refugee crisis, South Sudan, Yemen, and the Central African Republic.

The global numbers related to conflict and displacement are staggering. According to the UN Refugee Agency’s annual “Global Trends Report” released in June, nearly 70.8 million people were displaced at the end of 2018, with around 13.6 million newly exiled during the year. The agency reported that developing countries are the most affected. Another organization, the Global Footprint Network, recently reported that the world reached a terrifying milestone: July 29, 2019, was Earth Overshoot Day, “the point each year at which humanity starts to consume the world’s natural resources faster than they can be replenished.” It’s the earliest date yet since the day was first recognized in 1970. While wealthy nations live beyond their means, says the report, poorer nations suffer the brunt.



Dan Mills, “Amazon Region (with the estimated number of indigenous nations and tribes at European contact marked with black)” (2018), acrylic, watercolor, gouache, and ink on map laid down on paper

These are the kinds of data and reports artist Dan Mills seeks out for his collaged maps. A group of 30 of these pieces is featured in [*Dan Mills: Human Topographies*](#) at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art. Mills delves into the devastating numbers and then converts them into chaotically beautiful cartographies. The central paradox of his map pieces is that, even as they record the woes of the world, they are stunning and seductive. The visuals engage; the numbers appall.

Mills overlays vintage printed maps, many taken from atlases, with a range of data sets related to shifting demographics around the world. The figures are not neatly composed, as in a traditional map; they're messy, seemingly in order to match the disorder they reflect. And while numbers are sometimes stenciled on the maps, more often the information is conveyed through a range of colorful markings — for example, clusters of dots that swarm over a continent.

One of the largest — 92 by 144 inches — and most recent pieces in the show, “Current Wars & Conflicts... (with, by continent, Belligerent and Supporter groups marked with letters, and Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced, Refugees, Stateless, and Killed marked with a letter for every million),” from 2019, exemplifies Mills’s approach. Using data gleaned from various reports, he presents a world map chock-a-block with stenciled B’s, K’s, S’s, and other letters swarming across the continents, piling up at the bottom of the map and filling up the oceans in between. Each letter represents a million people, a fact that makes this presentation all the more overwhelming.



Dan Mills, “Current Wars & Conflicts... (with, by continent, Belligerent and Supporter groups marked with letters, and Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced, Refugees, Stateless, and Killed marked with a letter for every million)” (2019), acrylic on paper laid down on board, 92 x 144 inches

Sometimes the underlying map is all but obscured by the marks. In “Amazon Region (with the estimated number of indigenous nations and tribes at European contact marked with black),” 2018, you can glimpse a few quadrant lines, but otherwise nearly the entire surface is covered with markings that resemble redactions. The region has been obliterated by its connections with Europe, Mills seems to be saying, its peoples effaced by colonial contact.

Mills’s overlays partake of a variety of aesthetics and art-historical precedents. Take “Contest – South Africa (with nationalist colors directed towards the countries people migrated from),” 2018: From a distance, the expressive strokes of acrylic roughly brushed across the country might recall a Howard Hodgkin painting. The line between painting as painting and painting as political statement is thoroughly and becomingly blurred. By contrast, Mills taps into classic geometric-abstract painting — Kenneth Noland comes to mind — in “Magallanica (everyone wants a piece of it),” 2018. Here, a dramatic, colorful pie chart radiates from the center of Antarctica. It’s a dazzling representation of greed.

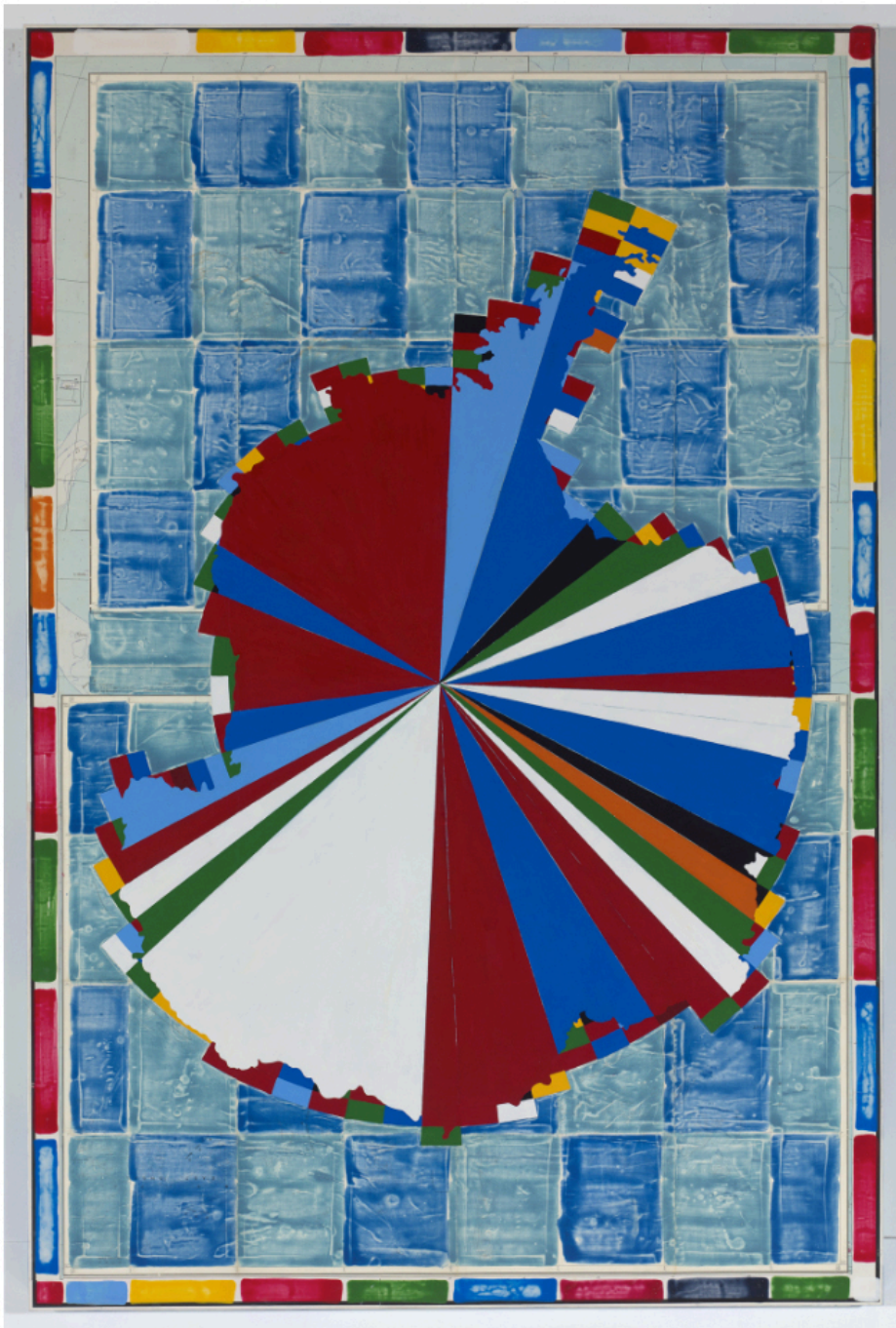


Dan Mills, “Contest – South Africa (with nationalist colors directed towards the countries people migrated from)” (2018), acrylic, watercolor, and ink on map laid down on paper, i. s. 10 ¼ x 13 ¼ inches

As Jane Costlow, Clark A. Griffith Professor of Environmental Studies at Bates College, explains in a wall text, the title “Magallanica,” or Magellan’s land, was Spain’s early name for this *terra incognita* that has drawn explorers over the centuries and, more recently, tourists and scientists. “Maps of Antarctica must now be redrawn yearly,” Costlow notes, “in a recalibration that has nothing to do with sovereign borders and everything to do with melting ice.”

In 1999, the National Geographic Society published the seventh edition of its *Atlas of the World*. In his review in the *New York Times*, John Noble Wilford noted how sophisticated technology, such as satellite imagery, was helping cartographers become more precise in their delineations, allowing them to keep up with ever-changing borders and names. “Some of us,” he states, “can remember schoolroom maps where at least half the lands of the world were colored pink, denoting the British Empire, ‘on which the sun never set.’”

Mills is old school in his map-making; if his data is precise, his renderings of it can bring to mind paintings you might find in an antique shop. In “What’s in a Name? (state names + the number of major geographic features named after indigenous people & words marked with red),” 2018, a vintage map of the United States and its territories is decorated with rows and ribbons of small colorful marks. Many of the individual states are painted in red and blue, as US maps are often color-coded today to denote political leanings.



Dan Mills, "Magallanica (everyone wants a piece of it)" (2018), acrylic on collaged maps laid down on board, 62 x 43 inches

Mills has been exploring maps since 1992 when the quincentennial of Columbus's arrival in North America inspired him to consider how the world is shaped by imperialism and greed. The American invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq provided further fuel to his cartographic inventions, leading to the publication of his *U.S. Future States Atlas: An Atlas of Global Imperialism* in 2009.

His agenda, if you will, is to lure the viewer with his remarkable visuals and then lay some staggering data on her/him. This M.O. calls to mind Robert Shetterly's ongoing *Americans Who Tell the Truth* series, portraits of activists, humanitarians, historians, artists, and others who have challenged figures and structures of power by addressing urgent sociopolitical and environmental issues. By showing his portraits of people, including Cesar Chavez, Terry Tempest Williams, Walt Whitman, and Martin Luther King, Jr. in classrooms across the country, Shetterly seeks to raise awareness of these individuals and their impact on our lives. Perhaps Mills's maps should accompany these portraits, replacing the standard depictions of the world with ones that get at the truth of populations and places under threat by means that are both convincing and beguiling.

Dan Mills: *Human Topographies* continues at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (21 Winter Street, Rockland, Maine) through October 13.

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