When I was in college—a million years ago—the time wasting activity of choice was the game of RISK. Our dormitory lounge was filled almost twenty-four hours a day with students working school week in the pursuit of world domination. The players of this board game are each equipped with a set of armies that they may deploy across a map of the world with the objective of knocking off the armies of other players and gaining stronghold in each of the six continents.

In RISK, many tactics are possible, but the goal is never in doubt: it is nothing less than control of the world. According to any means possible. Diplomacy is a potential tool, or two or more players may join forces to wipe out a third, but all alliances are tenuous and easily ruptured once the weaker players are eliminated. In the end, the most effective way to extend one’s territory is simply to occupy a country and declare it one’s own.

The will to power, playfully manifested in RISK, also underscores Dan Mills’ exhibitions (2001) at Zilka Lieberman Gallery and US News. Some sketches and related materials at the Chicago Cultural Center. Two exhibitions of Dan Mills’ work deal very differently with the seductions of imperialism.

For the US News (2001), Mills reworked the map of the world to suggest how America might justify the annexation of virtually any country with some kind of resource or geopolitical advantage. As in RISK, these pernicious geopolitical tendencies are presented with a certain degree of irony allowing the artist to draw out their consequences to absurd, albeit jocular extremes.
While the maps in the Atlas are heavily annotated, Ques takes the opposite tack. Here, Mills starts with colonial maps (and Mills makes the point that most maps, in some way, contain evidence of colonization and conquest). These are reworked in ways that transform text - including place names, keys and ancillary information - into abstract forms and colors according to rules and systems that he chooses not to divulge.

Both series are the outgrowth of previous series of work. These include the Wapiti (2003), which provide a step-by-step set of alterations to the map of the United States into objects such as military helicopters or assault weapons. In another previous series, the American Bestiary (2005-07), the images of several American political leaders associated with the Invitational Art Program model with unfamiliar popular comic book characters - from the archetypal Condoleezza Rice emerges with the wicked but snobby Natasha Fatale. George Bush is provided several alter egos including a corporate drill leader Ronald McDonald and the adverts Alfred E. Neuman. And of course Dick Cheney faces with Darth Vader, expressly maintained he actually resembles around friends and family. (Both series were exhibited at Zolla/Lieberman Gallery in 2007.)

In the Landscape of War series (2004-06) both images and military weapons are transformed into decorative monochromatic, a comment on the militarization of our mass destruction impulse.

Imperialism lies at the heart of the American experience - it permeates our history, encompassing the internal struggles of Native American, President James Monroe's 1823 Monroe Doctrine, which declared the American interest in European interference, and the widespread acceptance in the 19th century of America's Manifest Destiny, a philosophy used to justify the nation's relentless westward expansion. Unfolding all these moments was the essence of the notion of American Exceptionalism, which declares that the special history of the United States endows it with a moral superiority that can be used as justification for all its "wars of civilization" projects.
After the failed adventure in Vietnam, imperial ambitions went underground, though American interventions in the 1980s and 90s in places like Panama, Somalia, Grenada, and Iraq revealed that the impulse was anything but eschewed. With the advent of the second Bush administration, overt calls for America to actively further the proliferation of freedom and democracy (as well as capitalism) worldwide once again became fashionable. The notion of an American Empire no longer seemed heretical to influential two-cents’ like William Kristol and Robert Kagan, especially following 9/11, when appeals for the spread of the American way of life to the rest of the world have again become the basis for American military policy.

It was during this tumultuous period that Dan Mills began his US Future State Atlas, a project that underlies much of the work he did. Ultimately published in book form by Parrish Press in 2009, it was begun in early March of 2003, that turbulent period between the commencement of the war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq (see cover image on right page). Mills was inspired by the realization that, with the right language, it would be possible to justify just about any imperialist intervention into the affairs of sovereign countries.

The US Future State Atlas provides animated maps of each of the new territories to be subsumed under the umbrella organization Mills has dubbed United States Global or USSG, which, along with the USA state becomes the United States Empire, or USE. The maps set the current contours of the world to be annexed country/land alongside its new state name and configuration (new regions are carved out and occasionally bits of adjoining states are added). Thus, for instance, South Korea becomes Chosen Again, whose taking can be justified by its strategic location, resources and dependance on the US military while Afghanistan becomes Beshkistan, for even more obvious reasons. The maps are covered with handdrawn notes that describe the resources and geographic situation that make this property attractive to the USSG and offer the historical and moral justifications for its annexation.

The atlas is a pivotal work for Mills — synthesizing elements of his earlier works in a way that anticipates his current work. Looking back at Mills’ career over the last twenty-five years, one detects an ongoing interest in the manipulation of history, the use of objects that convey multiple meanings, and of course, the power of the map as both an abstract symbol and a tool of conquest. Equally striking is Mills’ commitment to the aesthetic expression of complex social and political ideas. Running as a thread through his work is an interest in beauty, both as a way of reducing the viewer into a consideration of the issues at hand, and as an end in itself.

Tune for instance, the Building Process and Urban Building Process from 1993–97. These works, paintings constructed with materials scavenged from dismantled buildings, are commentaries on the process of urban renewal. Assembled with careful attention to composition, texture and color,
these works allowed Mills to investigate his interest in formal issues, while retaining reference to their social histories. They also allowed Mills to indulge his sense of irony, as he watched collectors who were often themselves participating in the gentrification process buy these previously worthless relics of the world they were displacing.

Eventually, Mills became frustrated with the limits of this kind of object making, and he began to seek ways to make the implicit political commentary in his work more explicit. The tool he found for this was collage. Mills was inspired in part by the use of collage by artists like Marcel Broodthaers, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Cy Twombly, Daniel Spoerri, and early Robert Rauschenberg, all of whose transformed and reconfigured found objects, images, and bits of language into assemblages of new layers of meaning in relationship to political, private or social resonances. During this period, Mills drew quite prominently from the world around him, adapting objects like used vinyl records, computer panels, floor grates, children’s books and window frames for his own purposes.

He also began to incorporate maps and map fragments, objects that allowed him to comment on the contradictions inherent in formulations of national identity and American history. One important work from this time, titled (Nameless American History Quilt) (1996), uses as its backdrop a roll-down map of North America of the sort formerly employed in classrooms. It is overlaid with stencil-painted quilt block designs that are printed onto a checkerboard of pages from a children’s book that illustrates serio-comic and wholly misleading tales of Native American life. This work, which looks ahead to the work in these current exhibitions, takes on the misrepresentation of the past and the suffering of the history of native conquest in the American Educational system.

From each work it was a short jump to the US Fireman States Atlas, which crystallized around Mills’s discomfort with America’s latest imperialistic adventure in Afghanistan and Iraq. Here maps take a central place as both aesthetic elements and political artifacts. Colorfully patterned maps of real and imaginary countries are fashioned out of fantasies of global control. In Mills’s hands they remind us of the arbitrary nature of national boundaries and their origins in acts of violence, greed and aggression.

The work in (Qu) which was completed in 2011-2012, takes this critique of geographic boundaries and nationalist ambitions a step further. These works are based on maps of the United States as well as other parts of the world that emerged from a history of colonization. Here, instead of altering the texts on these maps to reflect a fictitious ‘new world order’ as in the Atlas, Mills translates the existing text into the language of artistic abstraction. Border demarcations, labels, dates, natural and man-made landmarks and place names based on histories of conquest and...
Here, instead of altering the texts on these maps to reflect a fictitious ‘new world order’ as in the Atlas, Mills translates the existing texts into the language of artistic abstraction. Border demarcations, labels, dates, natural and man-made landmarks and place names based on histories of conquest and imperialism all disappear into variegated fields of painted color. These marks are deciphered only through codes which Mills declines to provide. In fact, he has even gone so far as to subject the artist statement that accompanies these works to the same process, so that the written explanation itself becomes an unreadable, though seductively beautiful, abstract composition (see inside back cover).

In certain ways, the abstract pattern overlaid on these maps hark back to a series of works Mills created in the 1990s in which land masses become checkered game boards, suggesting the way that the globe itself becomes a giant field of play for the super powers and their agents (once again, we might reference the game of Trivial Pursuit). In Quax, however, the geometric order of the checkerboard is submerged beneath amorphous shapes and layers of color that vibrate visually and speak as much about the history of art as they do about the history of the world. Thus Quax makes the point that, far from being objective records of physical places, maps are themselves constructed art forms. The geography they depict exists in human consciousness rather than within the landscape itself.

Mills’ interest in maps links him to a wide range of contemporary artists for whom their multiple associations have provided fertile ground for creative endeavors. For some, the interest in maps seems primarily visual. The colorful patterns and arbitrary flat shapes of maps have provided larger fields with abstract yet immediately recognizable icon that can be manipulated for formal effect. For other artists, the fascination derives from the psychological aspect of maps. Artists
Like Guattari, Autoflowering maps into dreamscapes that lead us into unknown and unknowable territories.

Yet other artists focus on conceptual and political issues, playing with the fact that maps translate complex three-dimensional places into flat two-dimensional diagrams. This maps provide abstract (and arbitrary) systems of order and classification that are larger than the world. This process is made visible in the embroidered maps of Italian artist Alighiero e Boetti. Produced between 1971 and 1990, each country in these maps of the world is designated by sections of its national flag. The series as a whole then becomes a record of the changing geopolitical borders during a volatile period that included the end of the Vietnam War, the demise of the Soviet Empire, the first Gulf War and various ongoing territorial disputes in the Middle East and South Asia. Adding to this sense of geopolitical unrest is the fact that the embroidery itself was done by Afghan women refugees who were exiled to Pakistan when the Soviets invaded their country.
Something similar goes on in Joyce Kilmer’s ironical named ‘The World’ poem. The idea of birth, growth, and fantasy that inspired the land grant behind the Roman expansion, the spread of the Holy Roman Empire and the colonial project of the ‘Age of Exploration’. Even more explicitly political is her monumental work, ‘The World’, a walk-in globe whose interior is covered with sections of contemporary geopolitical maps of the countries bordered by the United States between 1945 and 2000, the date of the world’s creation. One aspect of all these approaches in Mills’ map-based work. Also included in the Chicago Cultural Center exhibition is a copy of Mills’

The World (A Manifesto) (USE standing both for United States Empire and the world more ordinary colloquial meaning) This work is a deconstructivist vision of the cartography for the land grant that underlies the US federal state project. In many ways, its language, reasonable on the surface, but tied to a widely absurd conclusion, is reminiscent of the 19th century radical Jonathan Swift’s famous Essay, A Modest Proposal. Like Mills, Swift uses the apparent rational arguments to lead the reader toward a shockingly intimate social proposition. In Swift’s case this is a solution to the problem of Irish poverty that involves serving up the children of the poor as gourmet meals. In a similar way, the ‘USE Manifesto’ begins by noting that the US must stop feeding the food system to the rest of the world and start acting in a way that serves its own interests. From these it goes on to detail the benefits to the United States in letting such countries as Iceland, South Korea, Qatar and Iraq. As with A Modest Proposal, the tone is almost homely bureaucratic and the references USE the World (1998–2000), ink on paper, variable dimensions.
to similar acts in U.S. history make it seem quite logical. Like Smith, Mills is daring his audience to take the statements at face value, thus forcing them to own up to their own darker impulses.

Beginning in 2008, Mills began to create an Ambassadors project for the United States Embassy. He created a set of four Embassy portraits for each new U.S. state, and awarded them to people connected in some way with his projects. Each Embassy portrait was marked with a certificate denoting the work of an artist and a certificate of authenticity from the Department of State. The humility of the project, and the people he worked with, brought Mills to make this project.

The United States mission, the Open paintings and the Embassy project are all characterized by a keen sense of irony and a witty recreation of the desire that (art) colonizes and interfaces. But at the same time, Mills never neglects the visual aspects of his work. His projects straddle the worlds of politics and art, and the world of art, and the world of the world that partakes in the making of the world of art.

His works appeal to the mind and to the eye, making us smile in order to make us think.