

"Please Cross Out the Correct Response"

CLIO: LORDS WHAT IS HISTORY? NOT MUCH: YESTERDAY'S BLANK PAGE HAPHAZARDLY COLORED IN. PUTTING THE FINISHING TOUCH ON MAN'S LONG FAILURE, MY CRAYONS OF CREDULITY & DOUBT CROSS OUT, CROSS OUT THE PAINFUL TRUTH.

So Clio, the muse of history, summarizes her role in James Merrill's long poem *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Yet what resonates most strongly in these lines are the frustrations of childhood, when we struggled to master the tools of expression, yearning for the control that would permit us to expertly stay within the lines. Every artist engages with a similar struggle with history, with the precedents of style and technique and ideology that make up the evolving language of art. Style might be thought of as how much any individual manages to color in, or cross out, art history.

The recent body of work by Dan Mills, in which the artist has used maps and charts evocative of the schoolroom as the foundation for his own artistic messages, seems particularly engaged with this balancing act with history. Mills also evokes the secret childhood urge to put one's own images on the classroom wall, to add graffiti to the maps and charts, to cease to take the passive role in education. But unlike Clio, his crayons never quite manage to completely cross out the painful truths of the originals.

A desire to re-work the past, and to give new context to the discarded, has been a long-standing strategy for Dan Mills. In the 1980s, he constructed pieces out of discarded building materials, particularly old wall lathing. From these were fashioned new works, more 3-D than the average painting, which resembled buildings, and meant to be hung on the wall. Ironically, people living in newly gentrified homes were purchasing works to hang *on* their walls that were possibly made of the lathe boards that had been *in* their walls. By the 1990s, however, Mills had turned almost completely to collage, sensing that his own connections to art history lay in the works of artists who mix and overlay existing images.

Mills has long shown a sly gift for puns, double entendres, and other verbal games, and his work of the last six years is riddled with such word games. Much of this stems from language already present in the charts and maps he uses. "European Commerce" says the chart, and Mills has altered the title at top to read "I Get Mine, See?" but titles the work *I Get Yours*, which is, of course, the point in imperialism. If the viewer looks closely at the dress-patterns that have been added, additional words enter the fray: "yoke," "collar," "belt," "cuff," suddenly cease to be the parts of a shirt, and become a strategy for world domination and political aggression.

If charts and maps are all about ways of visualizing things too big to see, Mills has also been drawn in recent work to various ways of visualizing the very small. *and ME@, from the MYdna Collection@*, is an installation using old mannequins, wearing shirts patterned with DNA. At a time when advertising wants us to believe that the most ubiquitous items are the most personal, clothing painted with the owner's DNA patterns is probably something we'll soon be seeing at Lord & Taylor.

The worlds of history and politics and the personal realms of childhood meet in the installation *Myopia/Crib* and the video/sound work derived from it, *Past Imperfect (a compilation collected from American history books and children's readers from 1845 - 1956)*. Arguably the funniest and edgiest of Mills's recent work, these are pieces that articulate blame and implicate people, as Adrian Piper once said of her own work. A large white mannequin of a baby (a Freudian baby, all consuming need without discretion) is at the center of a playroom of stereotypes, while children's blocks spell out the lessons being learned: MY, TAKE, USER.

For all its wit and humor, these genuinely naughty works evoke the darker side of culture, when unquestioned assumptions of racial or economic superiority are evoked under the cover of objective education. But no map is truly objective: each is merely a projection, one person's attempt to visualize the unseeable, one child's attempt to draw in the lines that will govern a life. Luckily, Dan Mills still has his crayons.

Jeff Abell
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