

Eleanor Heartney

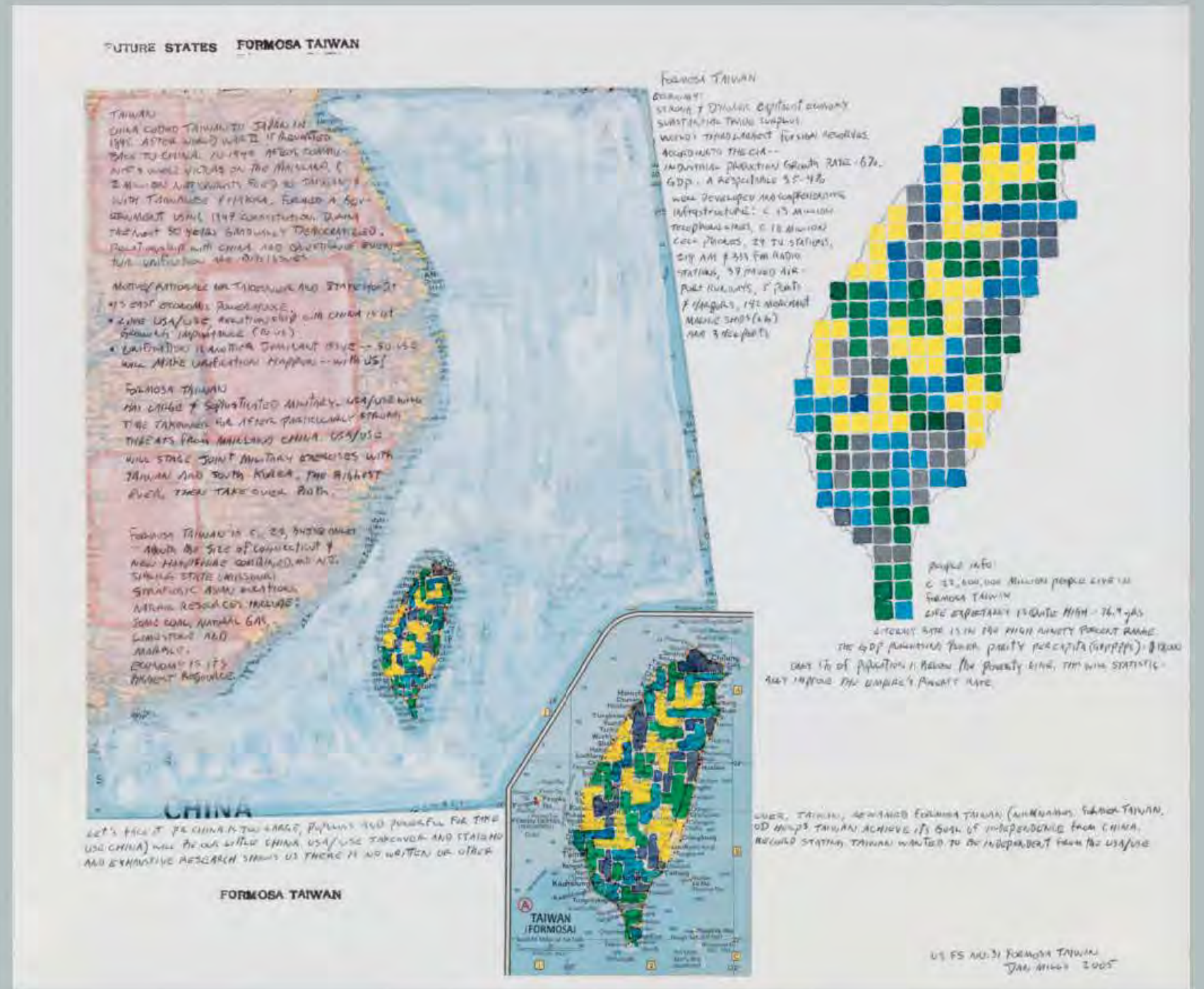
When I was in college – a million years ago – the time wasting activity of choice was the game of Risk. Our dormitory lounge was filled almost twenty-four hours a day with students avoiding school work in the pursuit of world domination. The players of this board game are each equipped with a set of armies that they may deploy across a map of the world with the objective of knocking off the armies of other players and gaining strongholds 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's nation states by any means possible. Diplomacy is a potential tool, as two or more players may join forces to wipe out a third, but such alliances are flimsy and easily repudiated 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 caricatured in Risk, also underlies Dan Mills' exhibitions *Quest at Zolla/Lieberman Gallery* and *US Future States Atlas* and related materials at the Chicago Cultural Center, two exhibitions of Dan Mills' work dealing very differently with the seductions of Imperialism.

For the *US Future States Atlas*, 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 levity allowing Mills to draw out their consequences to absurd, but logical extremes.

Formosa Taiwan
2005, acrylic, collage
graphite and ink on paper
14 1/4 x 16 3/4 inches



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Both series are the outgrowths of previous series of work. These include the *Morphs* (2005) which provide a step by step set of alterations of the map of the United States into objects such as military helicopters or assault weapons. In another precursor, the *American Icon* series (2005-07), the images of recent American political leaders associated with the reinvigoration of the imperialist program meld with unflattering popular comic book characters - thus for instance Condoleezza Rice merges with the wicked but sexy Natasha Fatale, George Bush is provided several alter egos including the corporate cheerleader Ronald McDonald and the clueless Alfred E. Newman and of course Dick Cheney fuses with Darth Vader, reportedly a nickname he actually assumes around friends and family. [Both series were exhibited at Zolla/Lieberman Gallery in 2007.]

In the *Landscapes of War* series (2004-) battle scenes and military weapons are transformed into decorative near-abstractions, a comment on the aestheticization of our more destructive impulses.



Imperialism lies at the heart of the American experience - it permeates our history, encompassing the initial usurpation of native lands, President James Monroe's 1823 Monroe Doctrine, which declared the Americas off limits to 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. Underlying all these measures was the embrace 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 "civilizing" projects.



Landscape No. 3 (Rocket Launcher)
2008-09, acrylic on canvas
56 x 56 inches

Dick Burns
2005, watercolor on paper
14 x 11 inches

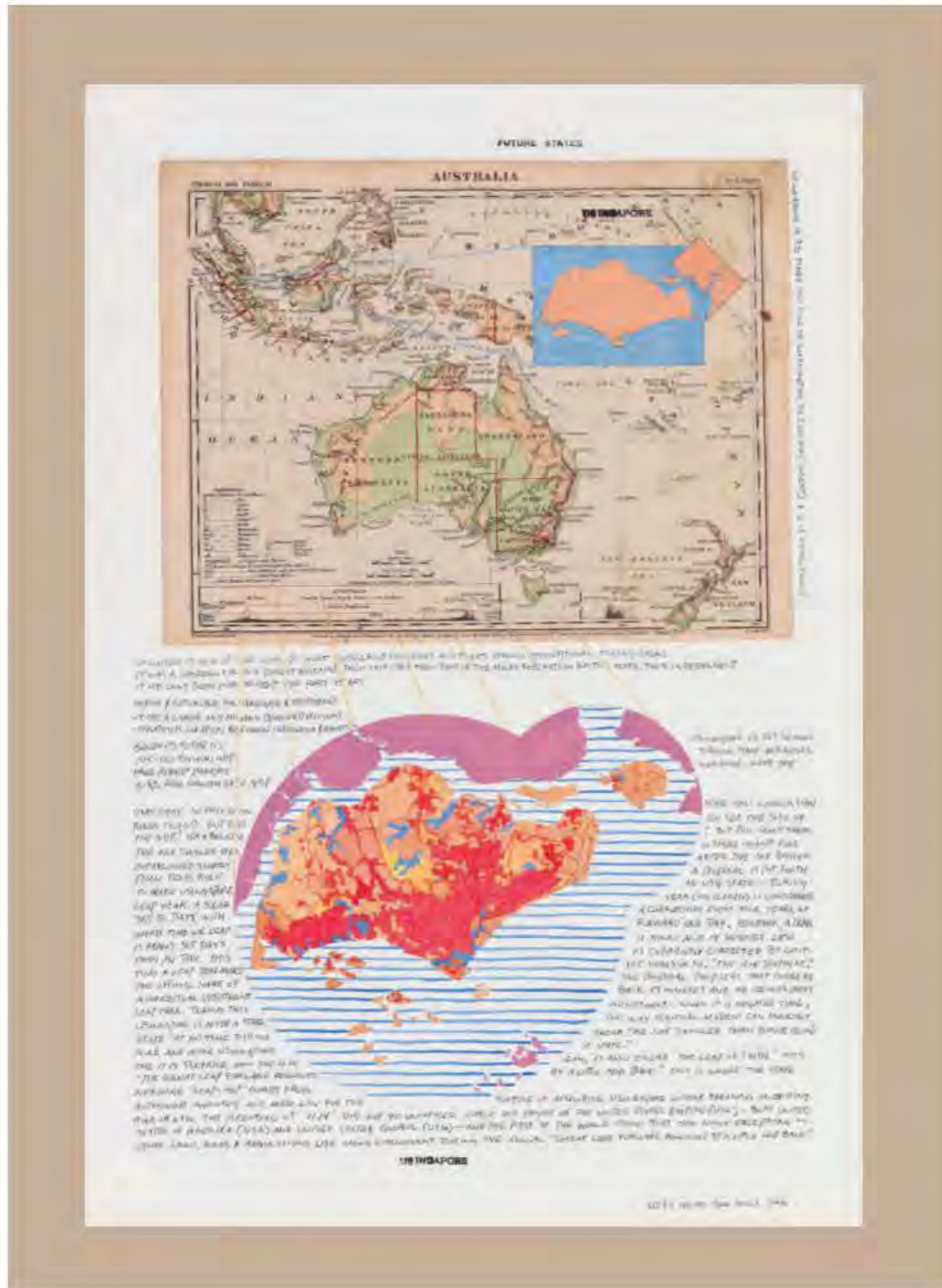
Alfred E. Bush
2005, watercolor on paper
14 x 11 inches
Private collection, New York

USA to Attack Helicopter
2005, acrylic and graphite on paper
18 1/2 x 91 1/2 inches



After the failed adventure in Vietnam, imperialist ambitions went underground, though American interventions in the 1980s and 90s in places like Panama, Somalia, Grenada, and Iraq reveal that the impulse was anything but subdued. 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 hubristic to influential 'neo-cons' 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 States Atlas*, a project that underlies much of the work here. Ultimately published in book form by Percival 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 States Atlas* provides annotated maps of each of the new territories to be subsumed under that umbrella organization Mills has dubbed United States Global or USG which, along with the USA states becomes the United States Empire, or USE. The maps set the current contours of the about 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 dependence on the U.S military while Afghanistan becomes Bushland, for even more obvious reasons. The maps are covered with handwritten notes that describe the resources and geographic situation that make this property attractive to the USG 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 seducing the viewer into a consideration of the issues at hand, and as an end in itself.

Take for instance, the *Building Markers* and *Urban Building Facades* from 1983-91. These works, painted constructions created with materials salvaged from dilapidated buildings, are commentaries on the process of urban renewal. Assembled with careful attention to composition, texture and color,



Urban Building Facade No. 2, 1986-87, acrylic on found polychromed wood, 37 x 64 x 4 inches. Private Collection, Chicago.
 Left: *USingapore*, 2006, watercolor, collage, graphite and ink on paper, 21 5/8 x 14 3/4 inches



Armchair Traveller, 1992-93, collage on wood, chair arms, windows, 20 1/2 x 63 x 8 inches [included in *Art on the Map*, Chicago Cultural Center, 1994]

these works allowed Mills to investigate his interest in formal issues, while retaining reference to their sad 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, Öyvind Fahlström, Daniel Spoerri, and early Robert Rauschenburg, all of whom transformed and reconfigured found objects, images and bits of language into assemblages with new layers of meaning rife with political, private or social resonances. During this period, Mills drew quite promiscuously 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.



Record of History?, 1993, collage on record, 12 inches in diameter

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



(Native) American Story Quilt—A Patchwork Comforter, 1996-97, acrylic and collage on map, 67 x 47 x 3 inches

American history. One important work from this time, titled *(Native) American Story Quilt—A Patchwork Comforter* (1996-97) 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 saccharine 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 softening of the history of native conquest in the American Educational system.

From such work it was a short jump to the *US Future States Atlas*, which crystallized around Mills' 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' hands they remind us of the arbitrary nature of national boundaries and their origins in acts of violence, greed and aggression.

The work in *Quest*, 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 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



Human/Nature, 1971, 1998-2002, acrylic on mixed media construction, 154 x 92 x 5 inches



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above: *Beacon*, 1998, acrylic and collage on map, 51 1/2 x 65 x 2 inches

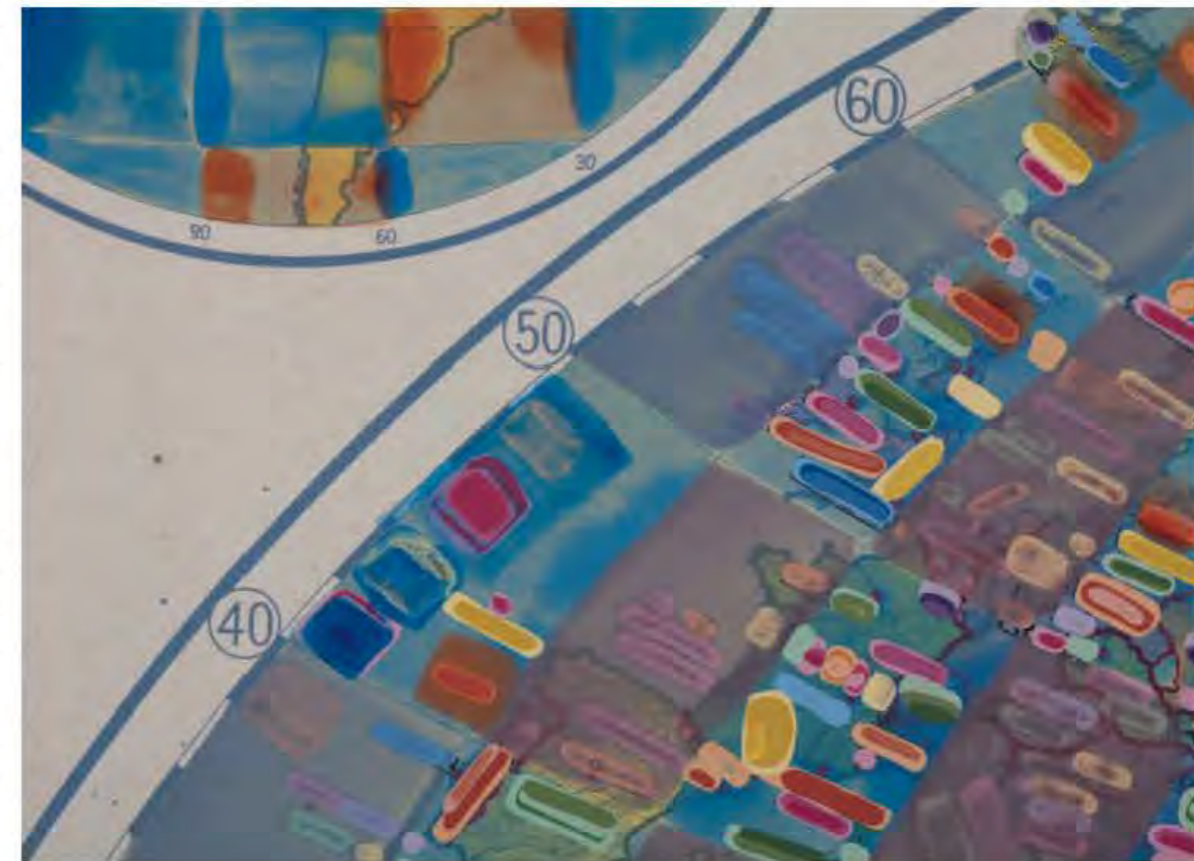
left: *Hemisphere*, 2012, acrylic on map on board, 68 x 48 1/2 inches (detail below right)

imperialism all disappear into variegated fields of painted color. These can be 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 patterns 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 Risk). In *Quest*, however, the geometric order of the checkerboard is subsumed beneath luminous 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 *Quest* makes the point that, far from being objective records of physical places, maps are themselves consciously constructed art forms. The geography they depict exists in human consciousness rather than within the landscape itself.

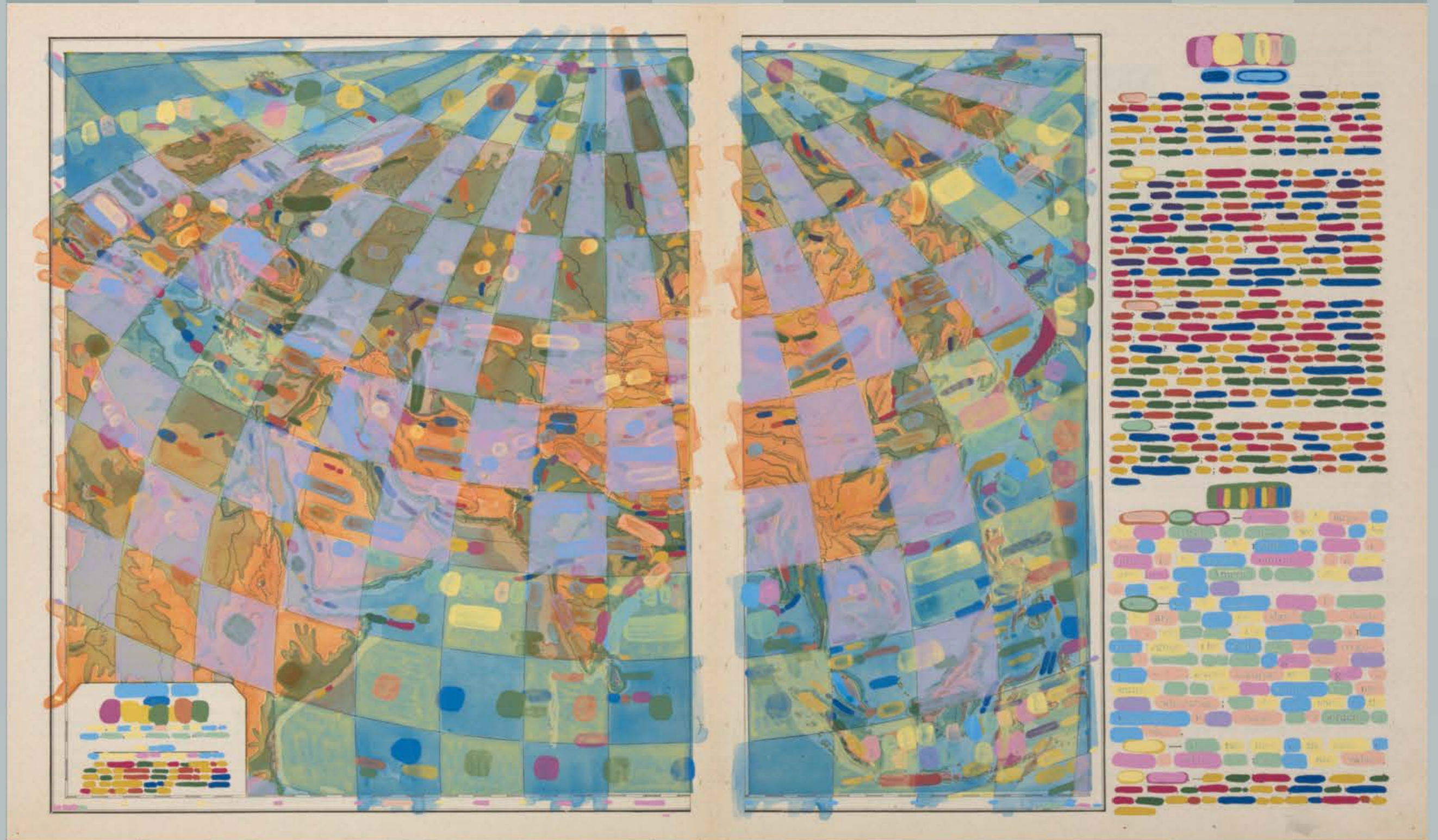
Mills' interest in maps links him to a wide array of contemporary artists for whom their multiple associations have provided fertile ground for creative endeavors. For some, the interest in maps seems primarily visual. The colorful patterns and arbitrary flat shapes of maps have provided Jasper Johns with an abstract yet immediately recognizable icon that can be manipulated for formal effect. For others artists, the fascination derives from the psychological aspect of maps. Artists



like Guillermo Kuitca turns 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. Thus maps provide abstract (and arbitrary) systems of order and classification that create our sense of the world. This process is made visible in the embroidered maps of Italian artist Alighiero e Boetti. Produced between 1971 and 1992, each country in these maps of the world is designated by sections of its national flag. The series as a whole thus 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.

Erasure (Warm), 2012, acrylic on printed map
on paper, 22 1/2 x 30 inches



to similar acts in U.S. history make it seem quite logical. Like Swift, 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 Ambassadorial apparatus for the United States Empire. He created a set of four Embassy positions for each new USE state, and awarded them to people connected in some way with his projects. Each Embassy appointee was mailed a certificate deploying official language culled from a variety of sources, ranging from documents created by the American Confederacy to diplomas in the Martial Arts. In keeping with the spirit of the whole enterprise, these awards are rife with nepotism and favoritism and positions are, of course, also for sale (see below image).

The *US Future States Atlas*, the *Quest* paintings and the Embassy project are all characterized by a keen sense of irony and a witty insouciance toward the desires that fuel colonialism and imperialism. But at the same time, Mills never neglects the visual aspects of his work. His projects straddle the worlds of politics and art, and in the end occupy a region that partakes as much of Matisse as of 18th century political satirists like James Gillray and William Hogarth. His works appeal to the mind and to the eye, making us smile in order to make us think.

Parts of this essay are adapted from Heartney's earlier essay "Dan Mills—Delusions of Grandeur," which was included in the catalogue *Dan Mills: Meditations on Empire* (Tianjin, China: Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts Museum, 2009), pp. 5-14, in conjunction with an exhibition there December 15, 2009 – January 14, 2010, which traveled to the Mandeville Gallery, Union College July 15 – September 26, 2010.



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1462-1914 & 1914-1939, 2012, acrylic on printed map on board, 40 x 49 inches