## DAN MILLS | The Will to Power

Eleanor Heartney

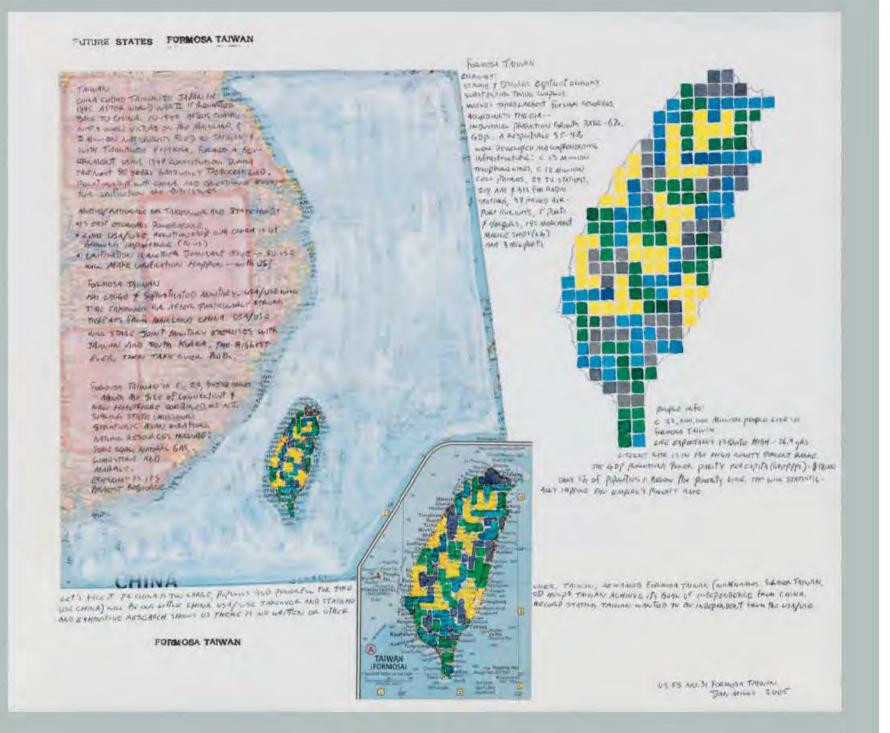
When I was in college — a million years ago — the time wasting activity of choice was the game of Risk. Our dormitory lounge was filled almost twenty-four hours a day with students avoiding school work in the pursuit of world domination. The players of this board game are each equipped with a set of 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 Fature 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 14½ x 16 ¾ inches



While the maps in the Atlas are heavily annotated, Quest 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.

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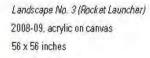
Both series are the outgrowths of previous series of work. These include the Morphs (2005) which provide a step by step set of alterations of the map of the United States into objects such as military helicopters or assault weapons. In another precursor, the American Icon series (2005-07), the images 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.



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

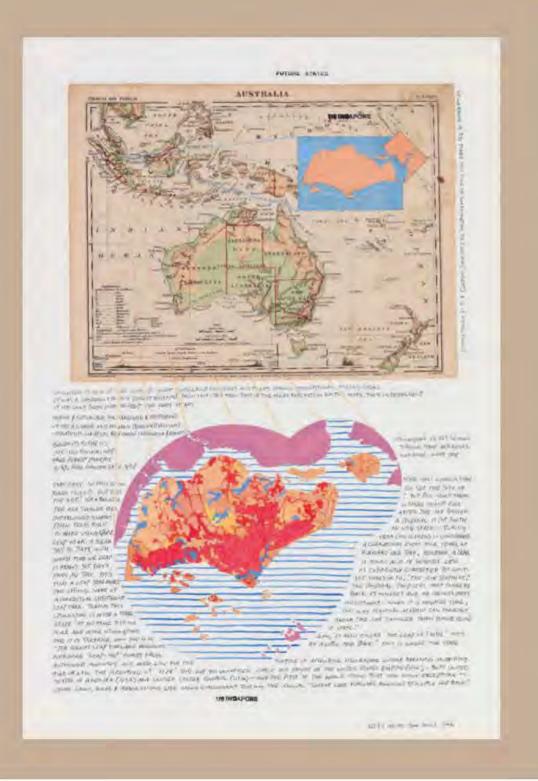
USA to Attack Helicopter 2005, acrylic and graphite on paper 18 1/2 x 91 1/2 inches





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 Fature 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 periodbetween 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

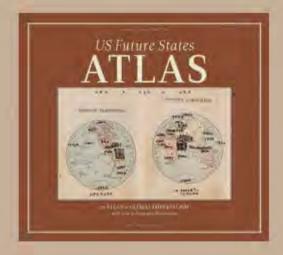


language, it would be possible to justify just about any imperialist intervention into the affairs of sovereign countries.

The US Fature 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 ½ 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 include 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 American history. One important work into assemblages with new layers of meaning rife with from this time, titled (Native) Ameripolitical, private or social resonances. During this can Story Quilt—A Patchwork Comforter 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.

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



(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

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

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



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



Border disappear into



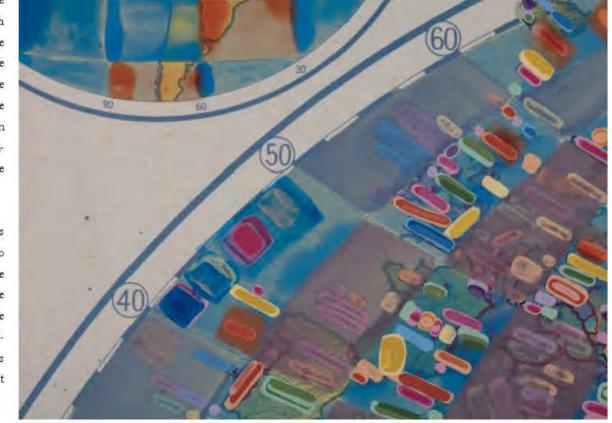
above: Beacon, 1998, acrylic and collage on map, 51 1/2 x 65 x 2 inches
left: Hemisphere, 2012, acrylic on map on board, 68 x 48½ inches (detail below right)

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 lands cape 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 twodimensional 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.

> Erasura (Warm), 2012, acrylic on printed map on paper, 22 ½ x 30 inches





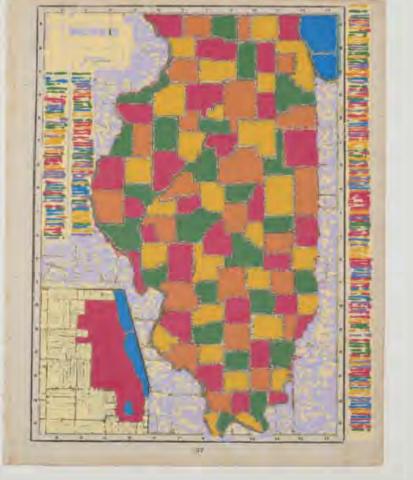
City State 3. 2011, acrylic on map on paper, 22½ x 30 inches

Something similar goes on in Joyce Kozloff's ironically named Knowledge series. These are recreations of historical maps and globes which reveal mixtures of fact, fallacy and fantasy that inspired the land grabs behind the Roman expansion, the spread of the

Holy Roman Empire and the colonial United States between 1945 and 2000, project of the "age of exploration". the date of the work's creation. One Even more explicitly political is her sees aspects of all these approaches in monumental work, Targets, a walk-in Mills' map based work. globe whose interior is covered with sections of contemporary aeronautical

Also included in the Chicago Cultural maps of the countries bombed by the Center exhibition is a copy of Mills'





USE the World (A Manifesto) (USE standing both for United States Empire and the words more ordinary colloquial meaning). This work is a deadpan discussion of the justifications for the land grabs that underlie the US Future States project. In many ways, its language, reasonable on the surface, but tied to a wildly absurd condusion, is reminiscent of the 18th century satirist Jonathan Swift's famous essay, A Modest Proposal. Like Mills, Swift uses the apparently rational arguments to lead the reader toward a shockingly inhumane 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 feigning benevolence toward the rest of the world and start acting in a way that serves its own interests. From there it goes on to detail the benefits to the United States in taking over such countries as Iceland, South Korea, Qatar and Iraq. As with A Modest Proposal, the tone is almost boringly bureaucratic and the references

USE the World (a manifesto), 2003, ink on paper, variable dimensions

## USE the World (a manifesto)



The USA is the world's lone superpower. We are the imperialists of the 21st century. Let us stop pretending. Rather than feign that our actions are benevolent, let us function openly as global imperialists whose actions are clearly defined by direct benefit to the US, and not clouded by the often half-hearted multiple missions that give US actions an ambiguity of purpose and erode international credibility.

Let us move forward with the obvious next steps in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Why not do what we did with Texas, Alaska and Hawaii? Texas became our 28th state in 1845 after many US citizens immigrated to this part of Mexico, who voted to become an independent republic, and won a war with Mexico (then as victors, bought the southwestern US and California from the loser for only \$15 million). Alaska became our 49th state in 1959, and established the precedent of expansion into non-contiguous lands; and Hawaii (50th, 1959) was the first state in another part of the world. Remember, the USA was comprised of only 16 states in the 18th century. Nineteenth century expansion added 29 states. In the 20th century we added five more, As we consider US history, a pattern of expanding by at least five states every fifty years exists, with the exception of the last fifty or so. We clearly have some catching up to do.

Why not take over a nation for its location, as we did with Hawaii. for natural resources as we did with Alaska, and to gain a location for placenow on, if we provide a country with military protection, it'sours Additionally, ment of military and missile bases as we did with Quam. And from takeover of developing countries will mean US businesses can move offshore, reduce overhead, and exploit natural and human resources — while remaining within the US. Takeover of countries with higher CDPs than the US will elevate our lackluster CDP (if we add enough of them). New states with large military bases will be added next to our adversaries, enabling US to dominate both (and allies are much easier to take over, as they assume our military will protect them).

Let us consider a few possible future states.

Iraq. We have already invested a lot there, it provides a beachhead in the Middle East, and possesses considerable oil reserves. And did you know that this piece of real estate has a rich history of naming and renaming? In fact, "Iraq" may very well be the name used for the shortest duration in its history \* Theretore, renaming it USArabia will continue this long tradition. This rame allows for cultural identification while making clear what country it is a part of. And it is a fine state size — about twice the size of Idaho.

Iceland has no military. Protection is provided by the Icelandic Defence League, Do you know who staffs the IDL? We do! If we protect you you are ours. With an abundance of hydro and thermal power, significant tracts of empty land we could use for military and missile bases along with membership to the Buropean Union, US benefits are easy to identify. We will name it the less off-putting "Thermia." It is anice state size, similar to Maryland.

ChosenAgain (former South Korea) (we already have 37,000 troops there). an Indiana-size state so near China and Japan? will be much easier to take over than North Korea. After all they are already dependent on us militarily The infrastructure is well developed, and the strong GDP will benefit the US. And won't it be great to have



Outer is already accustomed to monarchic rule, and according to "CIA The World Factbook" (https://www.cia.cow/cia/publications/factbook), it controls the world's 3rd largest oil and gas reserves. However, this modest land juts into the Persian Gulf and is vulnerable from hostilities. With a new Preemptive Protection Doctrine (a natural policy developed after Preemptive War for Peace Doctrine), we take it over so we can protect it from, well, takeover. And the new state. Gutter is larger than Connecticut.

New non-contiguous states will be known as the United States Global (USG). Together with contiguous USA states, they will be known as the United States Empire (USE), Eventually, each USA state will have a sibling state. A mission similar to the extremely useful Manifest Destiny of the 19th century will be enacted, but this time, "extending the boundaries of freedom" would be global.

"USE The World" should help you grosp the benefits (well for us, anyway) of a world dominated by the United State Empire. As recently as the late 1990s, the ideological position represented in this manifesto would have seemed almost inconceivable. Not anymore, Now is the time to act Lexit it great for US that things have changed so much and in such a short period of time?

@Dan Mills, 2003



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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 insoudance 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 Hog-

arth. 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

