

Dan Mills and His *US Future States Atlas*

*It's no longer ruled. It's owned.**

—Arundhati Roy

DAN MILLS has been invested in the idiom of collage ever since his maturity as an artist began in the mid-1980s and his chosen medium has given him the freedom to accumulate visual data from the external world. The gradual development of Mills's artistic vision has always been closely related to his interest in specific global political subjects – he is able to internalize these subjects and infuse them with his keen insight to create a highly personal sequence of constructed imagery executed in a form that shifts back and forth between representation and abstraction, and there is a direct, detectable continuity that allows for a pictorial interplay between the two tendencies. In *(I Get Mine, See?) I Get Yours*, (1997-98), a complex system of superimposed images yields to a greater control of graphic signs and notations. The painterly impulse is executed site-specifically in *Superimposition/Culture Property* (2007), which demonstrates the collision of color modulation within the decipherable shape of a map; the work also includes a color chart hovering over the black- and- white gradation of other mapping and illegible texts.

If one were to consider Mills's work in the context of recent art history, he belongs in the rare company of no more than four or five contemporary artists who have been galvanized by similar political themes – notably, Öyvind Fahlström and Mark Lombardi.

Fahlström, with his highly personalized construction of both topical and historical materials, never intended to make his images legible to the viewer, nor did he wish for his works to adhere to the logic of popular trends. Given the artist's fondness for happenings and opera—two art forms whose spatial and temporal aspects are conducive to his notions of art's amorality—it stands to reason that he understood that the “amoral” aspect of art is not a necessary means to a political end. In addition, Fahlström's grouping of printed images derived from mass media and popular culture—particularly images in the conventional language of

(Native) American Story Quilt
A Patchwork Comforter, 1996-97
acrylic and collage on map
67" x 47" x 3"
(170 x 119.5 x 7.5 cm)



cartoons—endows his composition with busyness and instability. Through his unusual appetite for information overload Fahlström ultimately was able to pose his own questions about reality— these questions, in turn, became his political acts. For example, *World Map*, (1972), an epic work presenting a topography of current historical “facts” separated from each other by borders, is unquestionably driven by pictorial necessity: the image is shaped by the contained data from each region rather than by its physical geography. The result, a synthesis of formal complexity, is a visionary union of comic-book images and political cartography.

Unlike the open excess and resistance seen in Fahlström's work, Mark Lombardi's exquisite drawings embody a kind of pared down construction that could be perceived as the most likely data exposed by his investigations of financial capital. The work reveals itself through an almost algebraic constellation of circulated and interlocking patterns. In Fahlström's art, one immediately recognizes a performative underpinning that is dictated by a maximalist sensibility— everything is accounted for in his vision of utopia, whereas Lombardi's narrative structure is an exhaustively detailed representation, comparable to the ways in which corporate vocabularies are manifested through idiosyncratic charts and diagrams. Using inverted signs and symbols, Lombardi demonstrates how money is routed through a maze of secret arrangements, such as the George Bush – Palmer National Bank nexus, the Savings and Loan Scandal of the eighties and nineties, the arming of Iraq, Oliver North's funding of the Contras, and law firms and coded off-shore bank accounts. While the lists and connections continue ad infinitum until they are no longer decipherable, the hierarchical relationships are drawn on the white background. Every statement of fact and every connection is culled by the artist directly from the public record.

Similarly, looking at Dan Mills's *US Future States Atlas Project* (2003-

2009), comprised of thirty-five works on paper, variously measured in nearly uniform formats (from 11" x 15 1/8" to 16 7/8" x 22 1/8"), one notices how the artist has taken full liberty to recompose the content, which is transposed with selected texts. Mills then superimposes and reconfigures selected states and countries into a quasi-humorous, politically motivated equivalent of what he insists is a Jeffersonian vision.

In *Future State No. 1: New Albany* (2003), a map of the U.S. appears at top left, above a close-up of "New Albany" (the country of Albania superimposed to scale over the state of Virginia on a drawing of the Eastern U.S.). On the right Mills's has painted repeating patches of green, dark green, pink, and some red areas closing in on what is left of central Albania. Text surrounds this image, covering topics such as Albania's forty-four years under communism, the motive/rationale for U.S. attempts to dominate along with Albania's natural resources and economy, all of which is in contrast with what actually benefits the U.S. In *Future State No. 23: New Cuba* (2003) the artist depicts the legitimate map of Cuba, slightly off axis of the picture. This map is overlapped by its larger version, a honeycomb grid painted in blue (the actual island is colored by a strange acid green, its darker tone accented with horizontal strokes). These horizontal strokes repeat in what appears to be a map of the state of Oregon located on the upper right—it is embedded in modulated variations of white and pink horizontal strokes. As in *Future State No. 1 New Albany*, the surrounding texts play an equal role in the picture as a whole.

These works reveal Mills's improvisational impulse, which corresponds with his critical observation of U.S. imperial ambitions. Again, we're reminded that the text in his work provides the viewer with the whole chain of actions, corresponding to the concept of the memory image associated with its intended meanings

US Future States Atlas was conceived in 1992 during the quincentennial

of the so-called first encounter (Christopher Columbus landing in the "New World"). After completing his first handful of "Future States" works, Mills felt that, as he puts it, "the only way for visual clarity to co-exist with narrative is to conceive of the whole process with consistent strategies." After perusing the staggering array of information available in the "C.I.A World Fact Book," Mills began to think of himself as a global imperialist who is able not only to utilize the text, but also to colonize the shape of each selected state or country accordingly. The artist then re-contextualizes these geographies using various strategies: physically dislocating them as in the case of *UScandinavia*, (2005) and *USAntarctica* (2004); forecasting them in hypnotic color charts, as in *USG Hawaii* (2003); or reducing them to pattern, as in *Formasa Taiwan* (2005).

Mills considers imperialism to be a mediating form that exists between fact and fiction. In this moral maelstrom, one thing one is certain: his object of desire inevitably will become our object of desire. Like Fahlström and Lombardi, whose works resist any kind of easy reading of the artist's political vision of the world, Mills has found his refuge in conceptual density and minimal lightness. Ultimately, what holds our interest in Mills's work is the tension between what is read and what is seen. It's no longer imagined. It's made.

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*Arundhati Roy, from "The U.S. Invasion of Iraq Was Perhaps the Most Cowardly War Ever Fought in History." Transcript of talk given at United for Peace and Justice teach-in, Washington, D.C., May 31, 2003.

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