

Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Art review: Dan Mills at Sherry Frumkin

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Why stop at 50? As Dan Mills points out in the mock manifesto accompanying his terrific show at [Sherry Frumkin](#), these United States of ours cohered over time — starting with 16 territories in the 18th century, adding 29 in the 19th, and five more in the 20th. “As we consider U.S. history,” he writes, “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.”

Should the government want to keep the pattern going, Mills has kindly — well, speciously really — done the groundwork. He has taken the invasion of Iraq and the assault on Afghanistan as models and made a case for assuming control over dozens of other nations and incorporating them into the United States. In a series of 35 collages, he combines maps, paint and handwritten text into tight little arguments for adding noncontiguous states to our growing family of dependents. These new U.S. Global (USG) states would accrue to our good old United States of America (USA) to form the U.S. Empire, aptly abbreviated as USE.

Iceland would be renamed “Thermia” and give us access to its ample thermal and hydro-energy stores, not to mention acres of available space for parking missiles and setting up military bases. Albania would be absorbed as “New Albany,” Venezuela as “New Venice” and Tunisia transformed subtly into “Tunisianana.”

Onto each sheet, Mills collages a map of the future state and compares it to an existing (“sibling”) state to indicate scale but also, in a pseudo-strategic act of persuasion, to normalize the new adoptee, to relate it to the known and accepted. He paints atop the maps, sometimes delineating travel routes and sometimes mimicking topographical patterns, covering the land in question with concentric bands of color or patches of flat, opaque hues.

Beneath a brief history of each country, Mills offers a motive/rationale for taking it over. “Why” largely transmutes into a matter of “why not,” as he lists natural resources to exploit, GDPs that promise to boost our own, populations to impose the glories of democracy upon and — the most pervasive of all — new areas to increase our military presence and, er, protection.

Wonderfully ludicrous in its entirety, the project is frightfully credible in its details. Mills exaggerates to the point of parody opportunistic foreign policy doctrines already in place — at least those that prevailed during the dark, greedy heart of the Bush-era PARTISAN POLITICS, the years Mills compiled this “Atlas of Global Imperialism.” The work reeks of truth and shimmers with humor.

In his page on the new state of “Formosa Taiwan,” Mills accedes that greater China is too big and powerful for takeover, but Taiwan can be our very own “little China.” It’s on record as wanting independence from China, he reasons, but there’s no proof it wanted independence from the USA. Why not?

“USArctica” would be a novelty — the “first democratic ocean,” a prospective new acquisition simply because it’s vulnerable. No one has grabbed it yet, and “preemptive protective doctrine” is the tautological rationale of choice: taking over a region to protect it from being taken over.

Mills’ subversive project comes across as a “Colbert Report” segment writ large — witty and wry and delivered with (mostly) deadpan earnestness. The new name of Somalia can’t be pronounced? No problem, we’ll call it Acronym. A national holiday celebrating the “liberation” of “Chosen Again” (formerly South Korea) is declared “Pendance Day,” since “Dependence Day” sounds a bit too honest and anyway, Mills quips, the ambiguity of the new term is perfectly suited for a state where English isn’t the primary language.

Mills lives in Pennsylvania, where he directs the Samek Art Gallery at Bucknell University. Long active as both a curator and artist, this is his first solo show in Los Angeles. His “Future States” project (recently published by Santa Monica’s Perceval Press) was born of anxiety. Mills channeled that into razor-sharp hilarity, and drew the thoroughly engaging series to a close (as Bush himself prepared to leave office) with what must have been exhilarating relief.

— Leah Ollman



Sherry Frumkin Gallery, 3026 Airport Ave. in Santa Monica. (310) 397-7493, through Nov. 7. Closed Sunday through Tuesday. www.frumkingallery.com

Photo: *New Venice*, 2003. Credit: Tom Van Eynde, courtesy Sherry Frumkin Gallery.