

ARTS & LEISURE

Maps are the springboard for artist's imagination

By Paul Watson
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Dan Mills' cartographical universe is one fashioned from conflicting epochs. If time is a human construct, always fleeting in our minds, then Mills would remain steady, one period superimposed over another. His map-collage work is the equivalent of looking at a picture while one's retina keeps another flashbulb image burning over it. As a result, maps become commentaries, artworks and philosophical inquisitions as opposed to geographical learning tools. It is his uncanny knowledge of history as a subjective response to the sociopolitical whims of the times that endows his work with rare insight. It may be true that those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it, but what if that history has already been compromised?

The cozy East gallery seems paradoxical to the universal template Mills draws upon, and yet is entirely appropriate. Maps are, in essence, the macroscopic world reduced to microscopic scale, so that we, the audience, can grasp the enormity of the world. As always, humans desire to control the vast unknowable universe. Thus, the small-gallery enclave is an ironic statement on the nature of maps.

"The language of maps is such an abstraction. Mapmaking takes things that are too large for the eye to see and presents them in a very abstract language which we know pretty well how to interpret...and we accept what they say," explained Mills. "Maps, and similarly, history, can be manipulated, so we are accepting something which isn't really objective at all."

Mills' exhibit, entitled *Embellishments and Subversions*, is an inquisition into the nature of national identity. Topographical collage works blanket the walls, colonization superimposed over native tribal scenes. The subtle demarcation line between history as polemic, and history as art, is deftly straddled.

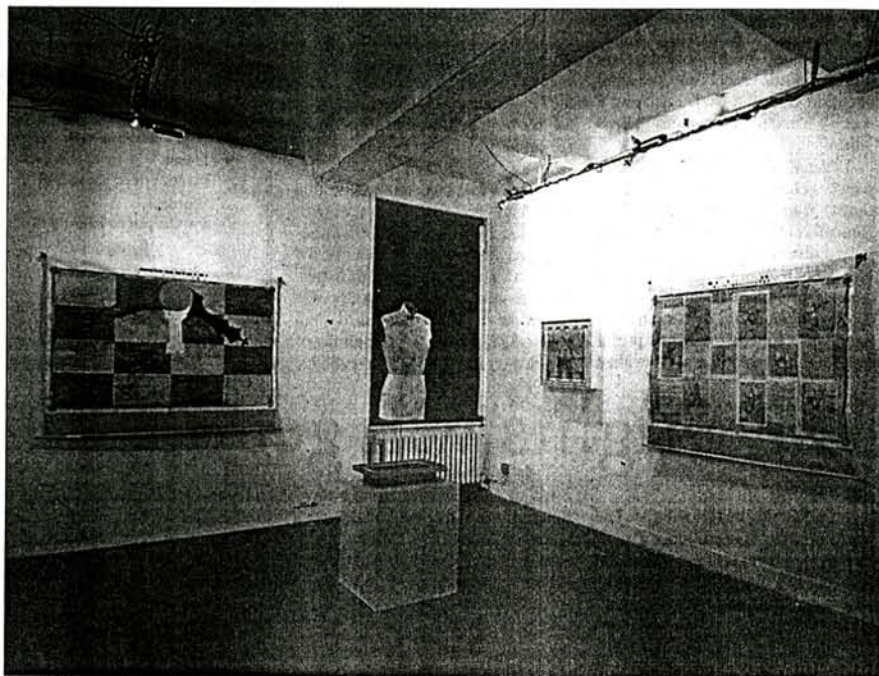
Political or social art as an unwritten rule can be overly pedan-

tic, the soapbox preacher's iron fist replacing the finesse of the diplomat's tongue. Not so in Mills' outstanding series of works; his intrinsic knowledge of geography is tempered by a visual acuity and graphic panache, ideally suited to the work at hand.

For example, in *Continent*, a fashion bust is dressed by a map of Africa. The work harks back to Man Ray or Marcel Duchamp's playful incorporation of the found object as art. Instead of merely rendering a useful object useless, however, Mills drolly comments on how we fashion history to fit our own subjective preconceptions about the world, a dangerous frame of reference which was a mitigating circumstance in colonial Europe's vicious colonization of alleged "primitive cultures." A litany of opinions can be broached by *Continent*. The subjugation of the female form by patriarchal power structures? The evil of haute couture? Part of the fun of this exhibit is the different interpretations it brings to the table. And yet one can still see the physical beauty of the man, its graphic allure, and in this sense Mills takes away the educational usefulness of the object so as to return to the topographical craftsman, his rightful inheritance as artistic creator.

"The concept of the map has always been that of an authority figure," explained Nancy Einreinhofer. "It's funny how people say they remember how bad they were at geography when they see this installation; the teacher pulling the map down, how they got stomach aches when it was unfurled."

No need to fear that dizzying sense of nausea returning at this exhibit. Familiarity is thrown out the window, especially in a work like *Marginalia*, where chimeralike anatomical drawings are placed in chess-board-type fashion over a map of the world from 1763 to 1848. One such illustration is of a medical torso which has, in place of intestines, a man's upside-down head. The base of the neck sprouts a volcano, while the pelvis, in a bawdy double entendre, sports a water faucet.



Dan Mills' art will be on display through March 2.

These strange enigmatic creatures owe much of their heritage to the surrealist parlor game entitled "Exquisite Corpse." This improvised stream-of-consciousness exercise, which boasted such noted practitioners, as Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, and Magritte, commenced when a piece of paper was folded over in four sections. One artist would draw the bottom of the illustration, then fold it over, keeping it a mystery to the following contributor. The next person would add onto what the previous artist drew, and so on and so on until the net result, a strange amalgam of surrealist images, would grace the paper. What secrets could these strange Frankenstein hybrids hold in their sphinxlike gaze? Could it be a strange pun on how different we are from one another, or how alike we are in these differences?

Mills' latest foray into topographical aesthetics is bound to the infinitesimal world of the human genome, a place ripe for colonization and manipulation. In composition, an eclectic group of people from separate time periods are placed over a man, while a motley-colored DNA strand stands in conjunction with the artist's very own overwhelming fingerprint.

The concept of race and identity is confronted on a multicolored grid

of ravishing beauty.

Simply by plastering Native American children's books onto another European map, he attacks the ignorant assumption that these indigenous people had no right to the land they were born on. The innocent juxtaposition between the domesticated Native Americans, with the dominating presence of European colonization, is telling, as is the title at the top of the piece. Made to look as if he has changed the meaning of a previous text, Mills subtracts letters from the mapmaker's name, "Denoya Gesproit," to read *Deny Prior Histories*. The work, entitled *Native American Story Quilt - A Patchwork Comforter*, is a confrontational piece. What right do we have to sleep under our down blankets, when our hearth and home were built over the misfortunes of others?

"Atlas Grated," the most complex piece in the exhibit, looks like a hollowed-out reliquary with the circumference of a wall clock. Within its grated prison floats the fetal head of a child. Like an immaculate conception, it silently levitates in the womb of the ocean, being strategically centered over a map of water. The image of Atlas has been rendered almost indecipherable by its incorporation into the barlike grates. Perhaps this floating child will be born

into the world as a celestial redeemer lessening the burden of his patriarchal precursor, freeing society from the ignorance which for so long has pitted brother against brother. It is not by chance that Mills put an excerpt about the tribes of Canaan behind the child's countenance.

"I am intrigued with materials that are essentially used for utilitarian purposes and have lived out their use. I'm rescuing them from the waste stream," explained Mills. "Atlas Grated was one of my most challenging cut-jobs. I cut it to fit the narrow curvilinear form of the grate."

Whereas Robert Rauschenberg uses popular culture as commentary in his collage work, Mills uses world history to no-less effect. His stunningly complex, multilayered artworks grace William Paterson University through March 2. Take an hour out of your busy schedule and rush over to the Ben Shahn Galleries immediately.

Rarely does an exhibition of such whimsical imagination materialize in the Garden State.

The William Paterson University Ben Shahn Gallery hours are from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

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