

The Future of the Past

In Form Ation: Constructions and Collages by Dan Mills

by Heather Joyner

"Scavenging the Dumpsters" was an art school course I'll never forget—one that involved tooling around town in a dilapidated van to search out junk. For more than a few parents, it was a questionable use of class time (if not tuition), whereas most of us students felt it opened our eyes to a new world of things from which art could be made. On site, someone would yell, "You've gotta come see this!" and we'd scramble over to inspect a discarded oven coil or weathered piece of wood, inspired by the possibilities.

In the spirit of Marcel Duchamp, the work of Dan Mills reminds us that objects can be more than the impetus for art—they can become art itself. Duchamp's "ready-mades" of the 1910s turned the art world (and items as mundane as snow shovels and urinals) upside-down. Mills' use of RPM records, computer panels, floor grates, etc., is yet another Duchampian challenge for the viewer, and presumably for the artist himself. Mills chooses materials "...with an eye for that which [has] the evidence of human use and alteration," linking past and present. And he's really cooking when he manages to simultaneously question the future.

A striking assemblage called "Space Trains," part of Mills' computer panel series, succeeds where its companion pieces sometimes don't. Various components—the outdated computer board itself, small square buttons with images of trains and planets, larger train cut-outs traversing the composition, and an industrial-strength glass box atop the panel (containing an open book with locomotives hurtling into the heavens)—com-

bine to form an arresting whole. Rather than appearing thrown-together or tacked-on, disparate elements seem synergistic. Sealed like a museum relic, the book has an especially outmoded and absurd quality above circuitry labeled "chilled water expansion tank," "pressure," and "winter circ." Most interesting is what the

work conveys: an almost subliminal sense that technological innovations have little by little become littler.

Modern technology used to belch steam and smoke and be BIG. Now it's small, if not invisible. The O. Winston Link-meets-Captain Kirk quirkiness of "Space Trains"

laughs in the face of a humorless machine aesthetic. "Armchair Traveler"

is witty as well, with porthole glass over a conventional window frame. Actual chair arms mimic a ship's prow and maps become the view beyond.

When Mills is not amusing us with visual and verbal puns, he's stunning us with razor-sharp irony. "[Native] American Story Quilt—A Patchwork Comforter" is made from a beat-up roll-down map of North America and speaks of grade school days when children were taught bald-faced lies about their country's history. The map's title has deleted letters and letters masking original words, implying that the lies continue. Furthering misrepresentation is an overlaid grid of text pages stamped with "Indian motifs" and showing romantically-condescending scenes of native life with headings such as

"Silver Moon, the Little Pawnee," "Lorenzo, the Little Pueblo," and "Grey Eagle, the Little Sioux."

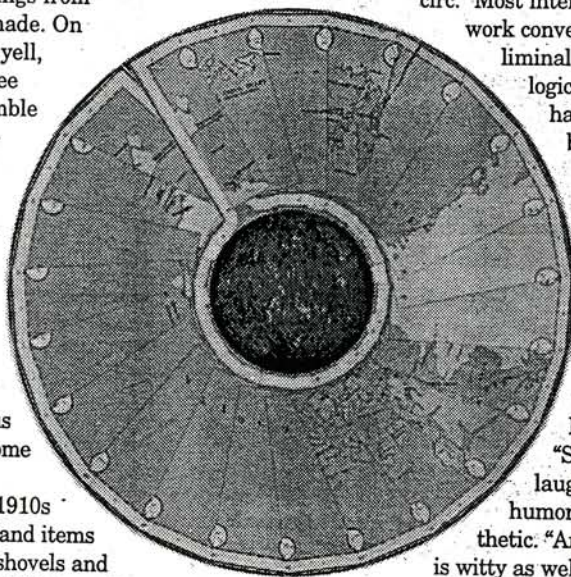
More traditional are collages like "Earlier American Travelers" and "Recent Explorations," built upon doctored reproductions of Illman Brothers engravings (*Les Modes Parisiennes* from 1862). Here images of slavery are contrasted with European fashions. "Recent Explorations" alters a pair of costumed figures, lending one a crown for its lion's head, and the other (an ape), a porkpie hat. Panels removed from dresses reveal miniature people and rugged landscapes. Both subject and execution are reminiscent of photomontages by Hannah Höch, the early 20th-century Expressionist associated with Berlin's Der Sturm Gallery, although Mills could stand to incorporate a touch of Höch's subtlety. On the other hand, the works are refreshingly direct.

As for Mills' use of architectural grates, it is most effective when their latticework augments or challenges collages they accompany. At times the grid format seems too much of a frame, despite an impeccably crafted and applied overlay or skin tying it to the image beneath. "Atlas Grated" is a fine exception, with the style of its iron pattern evoking the era of the Mediterranean map and cherubic wooden face it partially conceals. An intriguing aspect of the face is the illusion that it's sinking slowly into azure

waters. Some of the collage work glued to the grates' louvers is barely visible, perhaps complicating the reading of such pieces as

"[Grate Pun] to" and "A [Grate Pun]." Brighter lighting would also allow more shadow play.

Poet Ezra Pound referred to "the inevitable rightness of line," recognizing content and form as inseparable. Much as lines structure poetry, found objects provide the scaffolding that support and enliven Mills' ideas. When those objects and ideas come together, we're presented with something sublime. ☺



"Map Record", by Dan Mills, collage on record album *Dark Side of the Moon*

WHAT: An exhibit of mixed-media art by Dan Mills

WHERE: UT's Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture

WHEN: October 23—November 19, with an Artist's Slide Lecture in the Art/Architecture Building, Room 113, on October 30 at 7:30 p.m. (followed by a reception)

