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22
Wednesday
AUG 2012

Interview with Dan Mills: Part 1

POSTED BY VIEWSONARTBLOG IN ARTIST INTERVIEW

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I met Dan Mills early in my undergraduate college career when he was the Director/Curator of the Gibson Gallery at State University of New York, College at Potsdam. Dan has been creating art for over two decades, making multi-media works that comment on current and past political and social events. Recently, I caught up with Dan at the cusp of concurrent exhibition openings at the Chicago Cultural Center and the Zolla/Liberman Gallery Chicago. In part 1 of the interview, we discuss his earlier works.

-Christina Ely

Christina: Dan, you have been creating art for twenty-five years. Talk a little about the progression of your work over time, and about the basis for your ideas.

Dan: When I moved into Chicago in the early 1980s, I was essentially creating three-dimensional paintings. I had attended graduate school at the School of Art at Northern Illinois University, and feel fortunate to have been there at a really good moment, one filled with significant experimentation, many smart and creative peers, and when many of the faculty were very active as artists, exhibiting and engaged with the Chicago art scene.

Anyway, the work I began making was painted found object constructions, and I gathered the materials from buildings that were being gutted or demolished in both distressed and gentrifying neighborhoods. Initially, the work focused on forms derived from rural vernacular architecture. I was an art mover at the time and was driving throughout the Midwest and becoming attuned to its distinct structures and landscape and palette, which were quite different to someone who grew up in the Northeast.

After investigating and developing a process for this visual and material/construction vocabulary, I turned my interests to the source of the materials—urban buildings. My interest turned more and more to thinking about the anonymous history that had taken place in the modest buildings that were the source of my materials. These were quite successful, I think, were exhibited extensively, and collected in Chicago.

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— Urban Building Facade No. 2, 1986-87, acrylic on found polychromed wood, 37" x 64" x 4"

One of the culminating works was *Homage to Mopetown*, a construction made from materials gathered from the last remaining house in a south side neighborhood that had been zoned out of existence, with blocks being replaced by large municipal projects such as highways, rail lines. The brick side of the house had fallen, exposing the apartments inside. The wood and bricks were gathered from the building. By this point, I was no longer painting glazes onto the constructions, a process I had used to formally unify the constructions.



— Homage To Mopetown, 1990, Found (polychromed) wood, brick, hardware, 49 1/2 x 52 x 11"

So my interests had evolved, to thinking much more about ideas including gentrification, displacement, and the lives lived in the building sites that were supplying me with raw materials, than the earlier more formal and architectonic interests.

Around the time of the Quincentennial of...insert euphemism here...The First Encounter, The Discovery of the New World, Columbus's Discovery of America, I began incorporating collage into my work, and quickly found that this process of adding a new and potentially more specific vocabulary of found material into my work worked well with my interests. So at a time when I was thinking a great deal about the meaning of this anniversary, and so much of the discussion around it—which often omitted history in favor of political positions. I began to read a lot about this, and began to make work that was my way of investigating these ideas.



— (Re) View (1492), 1992-93, collage on wood, 20 1/2 x 52 x 2 1/4"

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From that point on, the work became my way of making sense of the world around me, historic and current, and became my way to comment on this, critically and sometimes with humor. One particularly successful series is the *Map Paintings*, which think about imperialism and colonialism, and are paint and collage on roll-down schoolhouse maps. Many works since this time employ, are made on or with maps.



Christina: Your work is largely based on political events nationally and internationally. Explain how events of the time resulted in your series *Morphs* (2005) and *American Icons* (2005-2007).

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

Dan: This is true. Beginning in the early 2000s, much work from this time was responding to our government's global and military actions and its ways of negotiating with other countries in the world. The *American Icons* is a series of watercolors that visually combine political figures and their (unflattering) cartoon or comic alter egos. I spent considerable time thinking about what fictional character best embodies some of the characteristics of the political figure. I think of them as archetypal images; art/political cartoon-images that will represent the era for years to come.



— Yosemite Rumsfeld, 2006, watercolor on paper, 14" x 11"

The *Morphs* are 8' long paintings that transform a map/symbol of the US into various other symbol forms that seemed appropriate to the time: an assault rifle, attack helicopter, and eagle. The eagle is not one of the more stylized and benign eagle symbols commonly used now, but looked back to the early 19th century when we depicted the raptor more naturalistically, as a muscular bird with more aggressive talons and beak.



— Dick Burns, 2005, watercolor on paper, 14" x 11"

These and other works of this time continue my approach—making sense of the world around me through my work—but with a specificity not seen previously. Working this way risks having one's art not stand the test of time, I suppose, but if it's strong work, my thinking is that it does, and as time passes, it also represents a way of thinking at that time that, too, becomes historic.

In part 2 of the interview we will discuss Dan's recent works and exhibitions at the Chicago Cultural Center and Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, Chicago.

All photographs are Courtesy of the Artist.

See Dan's work on exhibition or visit the following websites:

[Dan Mills: Quest, Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, Chicago, through 8.25.](#)

[Dan Mills: US Future States Atlas and related material, the Chicago Cultural Center, through 9.23.](#)

Upcoming:

September-October

Not the Usual Politics, Rose Contemporary, Portland, ME (group show)

View more of Dan Mills' work on his [website](#).

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Interview with Dan Mills: Part 2

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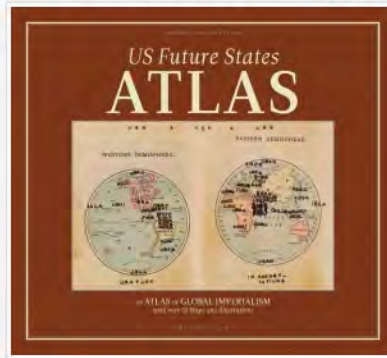
To read part 1 of the interview with Dan Mills, visit [here](#).

Tags

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 Dan Mills,
 Zolla/Liberman Gallery
 Chicago

Christina: In 2009, your series of thirty-five maps titled *US Future States Atlas* was published by Perceval Press. Discuss the political, social and cultural events that led to the creation of this pivotal work.

Dan: Yes. It was such a great experience working with Perceval Press. Perceval is actor Viggo Mortensen's press, which he started a decade ago. His brother, Walter Mortensen, and designer Michelle Perez do fabulous work. Viggo responded favorably to the project, so we created an artist's book that is large format, hardcover with a faux leather embossed cover, and a fine essay by Phong Bui



(Brooklyn Rail known for being very involved with the small number of books published each year. I recall receiving emails from him from Spain, where it was being printed, with updates about some final details right before printing—he was there to do the press check! With Viggo and the press's fine work and extraordinary attention to detail, the book turned out wonderfully. There are still some available at www.percevalpress.com

The work itself: The *US Future States Atlas* was started after we went to war with Afghanistan and before Iraq. From the initial global response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and how our leaders turned what was initially a supportive "we are in this together" outpouring from most of the global community to more of an "if you're not with us you're against us" approach to diplomacy, and to determining military actions based not on facts but rather on deciding actions and then searching—or fabricating—for corroborating information to support these decisions, etc...this poorly conceived approach, where this would lead us in war and diplomacy...these were the catalysts to this work.

LA Times critic Leah Ollman summarized the work well in conjunction with an exhibition at Sherry Frumkin Gallery, *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.'"

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Ollman continues, “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.”



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Christina: Your work for the concurrent exhibitions *Quest* at Zolla/Lieberman Gallery and *US Future States Atlas & Related Material* at the Chicago Cultural Center continued to evolve based on the *US Future States Atlas*. How did the ideas and artwork progress and develop in the last year or two leading up to these seminal exhibitions?



— Hemisphere, 2012, acrylic on printed map on board, 68" x 48 ½"

Dan: For *Quest*, I worked on a number of small and mid-sized works on paper, and five larger works. After moving to Maine in fall 2010, I spent a year painting on small maps, approaching this using different media—watercolor, acrylic, ink—and different conceptual and visual strategies. I also revisited making work on/with schoolhouse maps, this time laying them down on gessoed board.



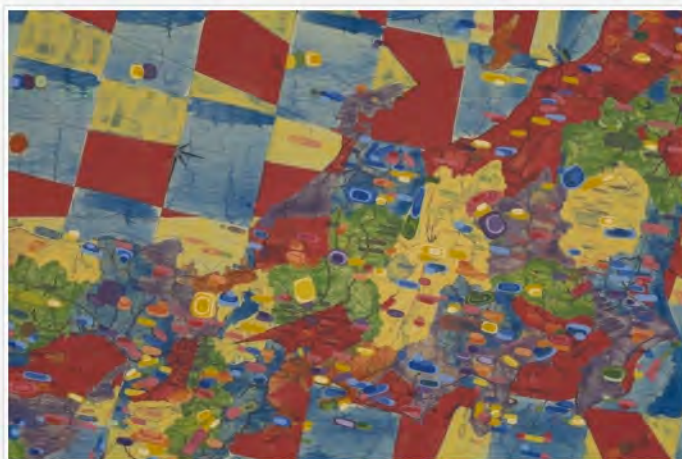
— Erasure (Cool), 2012, acrylic on printed map on paper, 22 ½" x 30"

In fall 2011, I began the work that is in the exhibition, and painted out words that identify political and other characteristics; the addition of paint as a form of erasure. In the catalogue that supports both exhibitions, Eleanor Heartney

writes a substantial and informative essay. About this work, she states, "While the maps in *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. The eye-catching results are reminders of the artifice of all mapping systems."



— Road Map, 2012, acrylic on printed map on board, 37 1/2" x 47 1/2"



— detail, Road Map, 2012, acrylic on printed map on board, 37 1/2" x 47 1/2"

When the Chicago Cultural Center offered me an exhibition, the exhibition that developed, *US Future States Atlas & Related Material*, provided me an opportunity to show the "Atlas" in Chicago, a place important to me and where my formative years as an artist and curator were spent (1981-94). Adding the related material was my way to also include supplemental materials to the Atlas, namely a number of United States Empire (USE) Ambassador Documents.



Christina: In the Chicago Culture Center exhibition is a copy of your *USE the World: a manifesto*. Tell me a little about the thoughts leading to this manifesto.

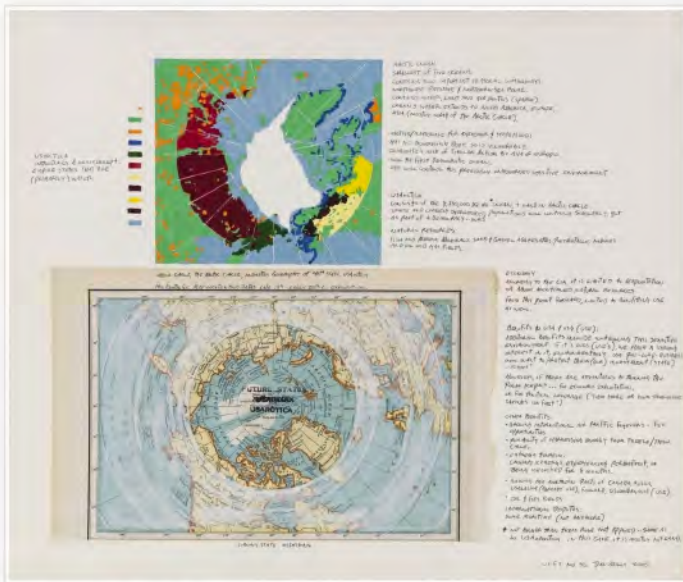
Dan: Written in 2003, this satire of the time, in deadpan language, lays out why we just aren't doing enough to grow and expand the country. Heartney draws parallels to 18th century satirist Jonathan Swift's essay *A Modest Proposal*—I like that! Anyway, she states, "Like Mills, Swift uses the apparently 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 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."



— USE the World (a manifesto), 2003, ink on paper, 42" x 30"

Christina: One stark contrast between the two exhibitions is that approximately 10,000 words are embedded in the art at the Chicago Cultural Center, but ZERO words are in the work at Zolla/Lieberman Gallery. Why did you decide to include a volume of written word in one show, and an absence or silence of written word in the other?

Dan: This was exciting and fascinating to do simultaneously. Much of the CCC show focuses on the Atlas, which in its entirety is comprised of 35 works on paper that on average have 200-300 word text hand written in them. Each work has some facts about the new "acquisition"; motives and rationale for takeover and statehood, and usually some darkly humorous aspect of this takeover, and part of the grand narrative that exists throughout the Atlas. Additionally, the Manifesto, 74 Ambassador Documents, and related correspondence are in the show. While not necessary for someone to read it in its entirety, the act of selectively doing so makes the viewer have a good sense of the rest (although I love knowing the occasional viewer actually does read everything).

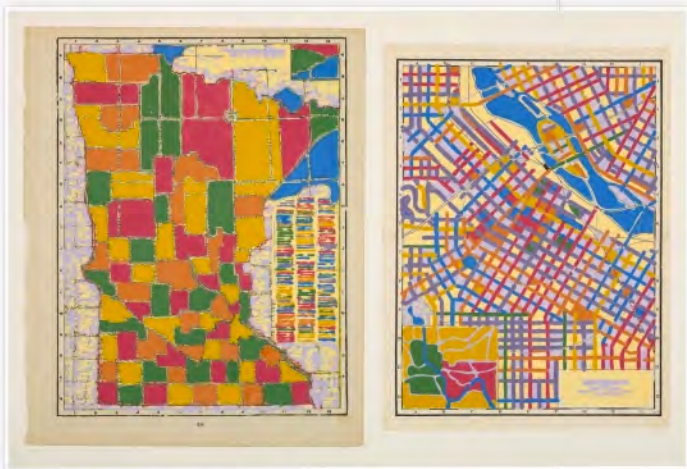


— USArctica, 2005, watercolor, collage, graphite and ink on paper, 14 1/8" x 17 7/8"

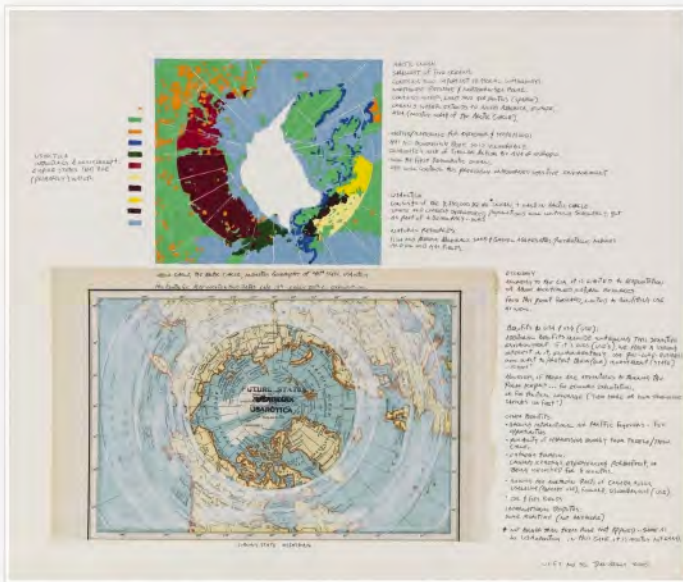


— Artist Statement (English), 2012, acrylic and ink on paper, 30 x 22 1/2 inches

Meantime, *Quest* is employing a strategy of removing text and its meaning. After all, historically, colonialism and imperialism have been as much about erasing history as writing new history, no? So I developed various strategies to do this: certain colors marks, frequencies, were chosen by the letters beneath them. No longer readable, what existed beneath significantly determined the outcome of what is seen. This is even true with the Artist Statement. After writing it, I transferred it onto the 22 1/2 x 30 inch Arches watercolor paper and painted the words out applying the same strategies used in the other works. But I left the punctuation.



— City State 4, 2011, acrylic on printed map on paper, 22 1/2" x 30"

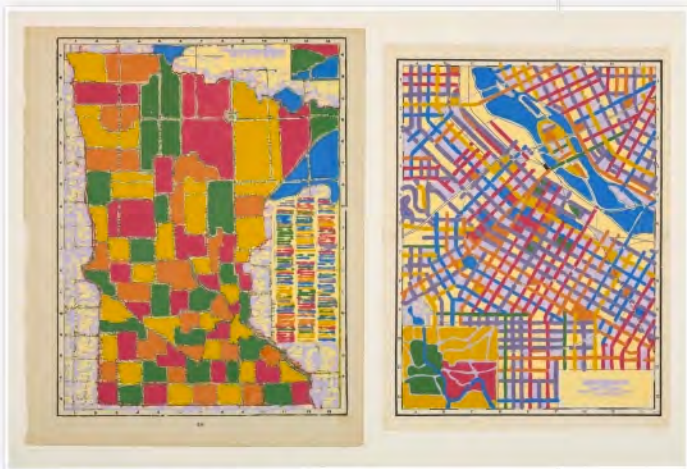


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