

danmills

e-mail dispatch, july 22, 2002



Birthplace: Waterloo, NY

Chicago years: 1981–94

Currently resides: Lewisburg, PA

Artist's statement: Since the early '90s, I have been employing collage and collaging strategies in work of various media to investigate history, information, and culture. Much of the work combines old (and often dated) maps, charts, text, and other printed information onto objects or two-dimensional surfaces. I am attracted to this material aesthetically and as visual information, and am fascinated with how mapping and other visual language systems can present biased information but appear objective. In media including map painting/collages, monoprint/collages, installation or, more recently, audio/video, I strive to reveal, subvert, and sometimes play with the underlying meaning of this information through the creation of layered and visually thought-provoking work.

So how's the weather out there? Generally hot and hazy this time of year. The other day I actually spotted the parallel heat lines that are visible on TV weather maps—those orange-ish, squiggly pulsating ones. You had probably just seen them, since we often get “your” weather here a few days later.

What are you up to these days? Making and exhibiting my work, organizing exhibitions and developing a collection (I direct the Samek Art Gallery at Bucknell University), being part of a fam. Similar pursuits to my Chicago days.

When's the last time you were back in Chicago? Last week, to attend the opening of my Printworks show. I also came in for my opening at the NIU Gallery in April, and again for Art Chicago. I usually get back to the city about once a year, so it was a pleasure to return several times in a few months.

Name three things you miss most about the city. Besides being in “the Loop” daily, the neighborhoods, the museums:

A: The art collection I curated at the former First Chicago Bank (now Bank One), including work by Broodthaers, Conners, Denes, Fahlstrom, Jess, and a large group of working drawings of conceptual artists. Director John Neff more than doubled the collection Katharine Kuh began—over 500 works a year for seven years. It is a truly amazing collection, and very under-recognized, I think. The direct and daily contact I had with entire bodies of work by these and other artists, while in my 20s (well, at first, anyway), was significant to my development as an artist and curator. I'm bringing an exhibition from the collection here in September, *Oyvind Fahlstrom: The Complete Graphics and Multiples*.

II) Thai restaurants. Yeah, I know, you can get excellent Thai food many places now, but not so 20-plus years ago. And, as my fellow aficionado Tom Van Eynde sez, the best Thai to you is often the food you ate at the first place you had it. My first experience was in a place near Chicago and LaSalle. It's long-gone now, and I can't recall the name—but it was the beginning of a beautiful relationship. You can be sure to find me in a Thai restaurant whenever I come into town.

3. Many artist and director and curator friends, and fellow NIU Art Mafia members (insert secret handshake here). I probably wasn't supposed to say anything about that...do you know the number for the witness protection program?

Oh, and I guess I took some numbering liberties, there.

Name three things you miss least. While better than, say, 15–20 years ago, there still often seems to be a “round up the usual suspects” approach to selecting Chicago artists for major shows in some of the cultural institutions. This belies the depth and complexity of the Chicago art world. Don't miss that.

Packed summer El cars with no air conditioning, although my rides on recent visits suggest this is not so common these days.

The modest amount of art publications and critical press. Chicago has a significant art community comprising many remarkable artists, galleries, museums and collections—and has for some time. While some fine writers have written (and continue to write) about art in the city, there really hasn't been a consistent and sizable critical art press component to the Chicago art world, which is unfortunate, and detrimental on many levels. But wait! I hear there's a new

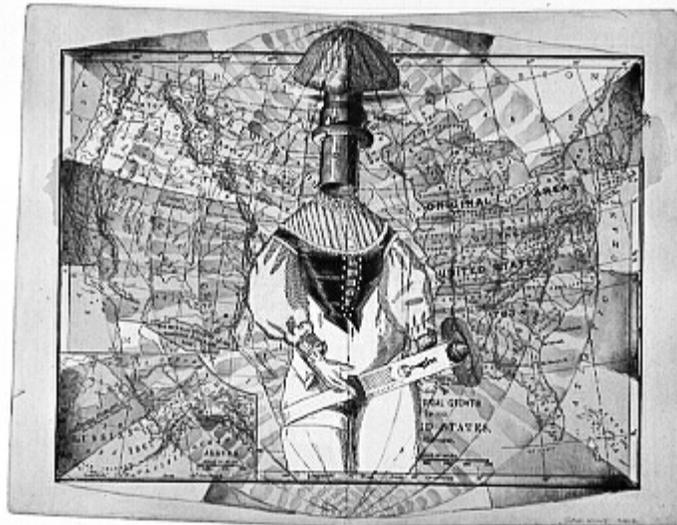
upstart art mag. I can't think of the name, but it has something to do with conjoined orifices. (I did a web search of "mouthtomouth" and ended up with a list loaded with sexual fetish pages—and also British Theatre. Hmm, more than a coincidence?) **[Eds. note: Dan was in no way prompted or compensated for this shameless plug. As for the link between polymorphous perversity and the thespian's art, well...it's just a theory.]**

Give us a memorable Chicago moment in your artistic career. In 1992–93—the time of the quincentennial of “the first encounter”—I started working with collage. The need to investigate and come to terms with the disparity between what I recall being taught about this historic event (and others, for that matter) drew me to materials related to the subject—and the use of collage. This was a significant shift from the found-object based urban building constructions I had focused on for ten years.

By 1994, I really hadn't shown much of the new work. Then Ken Saunders offered me a solo show at Deson-Saunders Gallery in June. At the same time, Greg Knight selected several works for the fine *Art on the Map* exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center (a precursor to Storr's *Mapping* show at MOMA). Having the opportunity to view the new work in this curatorial context—and with artists including John Cage, Nancy Chunn, Julia Fish, Guillermo Kuitca, and Claes Oldenburg—was beneficial to me. Combined with the solo show, it also provided an opportunity to introduce the new work.

So, why did you leave us? I had been curator for the bank for ten years, and was interested in trying directing, and doing so for an academic institution. There were no such positions of this type available in Chicago at the time. Our children (I'm married to artist Gail Skudera) were quite young then. When an opportunity arose for us to try life in a small university town, we decided to go for it.

Are you glad you moved? Yes, in many ways. In terms of art production, my work has no doubt developed differently by living in different places. While always trying to push the work further, I feel good about the direction it has taken. As for exhibitions, I continue to show in Chicago—probably less than if I still lived



Dan Mills, *Shekinah Vagina*, from the *Marginalia Series*, acrylic and collage on paper, 15x15 in., 2002. Courtesy Printworks Gallery, Chicago.

there. However, I also exhibit more nationally than I might have without moving (guess we'll never know). And as director, I have been able to curate, I think, some extraordinary exhibitions. Current projects include: *Lewis deSoto: Paranirvana (self-portrait)*, an installation of a 26-ft.-long, air-inflated reclining Buddha (with the artist's face) at last breath; and *Agnes Denes: Projects for Public Spaces*, a retrospective of her environmental projects and proposals. Both will travel nationally; Helaine Posner and Stephanie Hanor (a curator at the MCA, San Diego, the museum that recently acquired *Paranirvana*) are writing essays for the deSoto catalogue;

and former Chicagoan Eleanor Heartney is writing for the Denes catalogue. Exhibitions and curatorial projects bring me back to town with some frequency. If that weren't the case, this answer would be very different. I'd really miss Chicago.

What's the strangest thing about your new hometown? So far, it seems to be a fairly normal place—whatever that means. However, I think there is an additional food group here: the pretzel. At least it seems that way. I think there are two aisles of every pretzel-type imaginable in the supermarket. Must be the Pennsylvania Dutch influence. Also, I always find it interesting to peruse the phonebook in a new community, to see what particular names are prevalent among the local gene pools. In the Susquehanna Valley there are a fair amount of Germanic names (the P.D. again). And there seems to be more than our share of Boobs and Boops. I was recently told the story of someone named Boob who was so sick of name jokes and harassment that they decided to change their name—to Boop. Or could this be a “rural legend”?

Any advice for artists who are considering moving from Chicago? Not really. It's a great city. But if you have good reasons to move away, do so. Just don't be a stranger, so you stay connected with what drew you to the city in the first place.

What should we put in your care package? Thai food, preferably from Arun or Thai Pastry. That's it. Well, maybe some sausage from Ukrainian Village. Just that. But would you include the aroma of baking bread and fresh chocolate on the near Northwest side? That should do it. Except, would you add the series of Ivan Albright portraits at the Art Institute? I'm done. Wait; could you throw in some—

Who do you think we are—Artforum?

Dan Mills is represented in Chicago by Printworks Gallery. His work has appeared in group and solo exhibitions across the United States, as well as in Greece and The Netherlands. His most recent Chicago shows include two one-person exhibitions: Viewpoints: Monoprints and Collages at Printworks Gallery in July-August 2002, and Detector at the NIU Art Museum Gallery in spring 2002.