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DAN MILLS: WHAT'S IN A NAME? (THE SECRET LIVES OF MAPS)



Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness (+ Incarceration and Murder) State Ranking, 2017, acrylic and graphite on collage laid down on board, 78 x 141 inches

Walking through one of Lewiston, Maine's old mill buildings on the outskirts of downtown, you pass an art therapy classroom, a furniture refurbisher, and a sound engineer. The dominating feature of the building, though, is the L-shaped art studio of Dan Mills.

Mills, who prefers the "L" because it gives him additional wall space to work, is a researcher, historian, and cartographer, a data visualizer and an artist, and the director of the Bates College Museum of Art. Mills has an uncanny ability to collect and transform data into affecting artwork. He is a curious artist who is unsure what he will learn as he makes his art, where sometimes the learning is from the process and other times from the end result.

Mills, who can't remember whether he was asleep in history class or whether the classes just omitted much of history, is a wealth of piercing information: 31 states are named after indigenous words, one in

113 people worldwide are displaced from their homes, one in five Syrians are refugees, Maine is the state with the smallest number of incarcerated people per capita in America yet is only the median for this statistic among countries worldwide, and New Hampshire is considered the “most free” state. (Mills notes that different sources give different statistics, but that he eventually just has to go with a figure as best he can ascertain.)



What's in a Name? (state names + the number of major geographic features named after indigenous people & words marked with red) 2018, acrylic on collaged map laid down on board, 65 x 83 inches. Courtesy of Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston.



What's in a Name? Maine (with the number of major geographic features named after indigenous people & words marked with red), 2018, acrylic and ink on printed map laid down on paper, 15 1/2 x 10 3/4 inches, Private collection, Massachusetts.

This information inevitably makes it into Mills' art. In his Current Wars and Conflicts series, for example, Mills began by asking how much war and conflict is in the world, and then what does that mean? He tallied groups such as belligerents, supporters, asylum seekers (“A”), internally displaced (“I”), refugees (“R”), stateless (“S”), and killed (“K”). Armed with this information, he uses maps as a base on which to collage and paint.

He often redacts the text in these maps, like colonialism and imperialism redact history, before he adds his own content. In this series, black and red dots, standing in for the numbers of belligerents and supporter groups, spill out of continents into the oceans and collect in piles at the edges of the map. “A”s, “I”s, “R”s and “S”s cannot all fit on the land, so accumulate in the water like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.



Current Wars & Conflicts... (with, by continent, Belligerent and Supporter groups marked with letters, and Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced, Refugees, Stateless, and Killed marked with a letter for every million) , 2019, acrylic on paper laid down on board, 92 x 144 inches



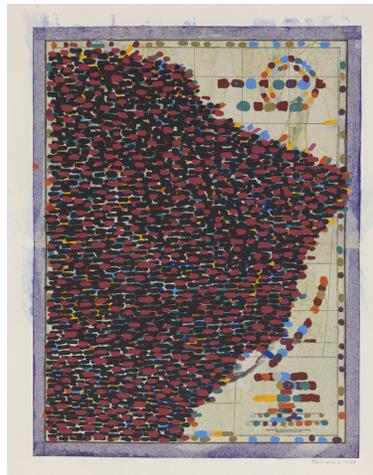
Current Wars & Conflicts... (with, by continent, belligerent and supporter groups marked with black and red circles respectively, and Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced, Refugees, and Stateless marked with a letter for every million, and killed marked with letters for every 250k), 2017, ink on digitally reworked map, 95 x 148 7/8 inches

But Mills' work is not didactic: though he may specialize in data visualization, he is not a data visualization specialist. The work effectively conveys information with an emotional heft that a more technically accurate rendition would not provide—here, with dots and letters covering not only continents, but bursting out of their borders.

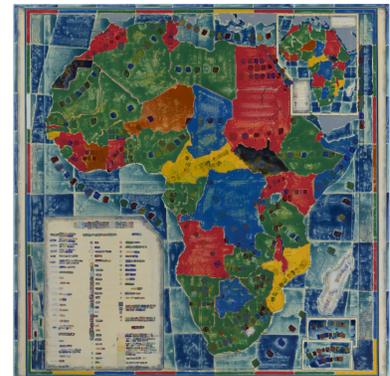
Mills' studio is chock full of work and source material, despite pieces constantly traveling for shows such as *Mappings* at Howard Yezerski Gallery in Boston (2021) and *Human Topographies* at the Herron School of Art + Design in Indianapolis (2020) the Museum of Art, University of New Hampshire (2020), and the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (2019).



Poland, its shifting borders, and all its legendary, semi-legendary, and historic rulers 6th century - 1795 (when it disappeared from the map for 123 years), 2020, acrylic and ink on paper laid down on board, 67 x 71 ¾ inches



Amazon Region II (with the estimated number of indigenous nations and tribes at European contact marked with black and the remaining nations and tribes marked with red), 2018, acrylic, watercolor,



Contest—Africa (with nationalist colors, and colonial documents identifying extractable resources), 2019, acrylic on collage laid down on board, 58 x 58 inches

gouache, and ink on map laid
down on paper, 14 1/4 x 11 inches

Because he builds his pieces on top of maps, his space is filled with topographies and atlases of all sizes. And because his work is built up through data, there are sketchbooks strewn about that are not only brimming with colors and ideas (and even marks from brushes being cleaned), but tallies of statistics and information. He explains that he needs to write the data down for it to sink in and to understand it.

Mills creates art through an investigation of history, culture, and cartography. And because he has been working with maps so long, they find him as much as he finds them. For example, several years ago he received a set of Antarctica maps as a gift, which he turned into a series where he paints over the continent with the primary color of each nation's flag that has laid a claim to the land. Each swatch of paint is tied to how much of the continent a country claims—and every country but two has claimed some amount of land there.



Magallanica Melting, 2019, acrylic on collage laid down on paper, 30 x 22 1/2 inches



Magallanica (everyone wants a piece of it), 2018, acrylic on collaged maps laid down on board, 62 x 43 inches

Everything in Mills' artwork feels purposeful and considered. Countries are colored according to whatever color is dominant in their flag, and if the flag has three equal colors, Mills uses the top color. The color scheme of some American maps is derived from Jasper Johns's famous 1961 painting, *Maps*. And his titles are often, in explanation, a paragraph long—sometimes even being color coded so the viewer can match any given part of the art with what it represents.

Mills' work has a surprising freshness and dynamism for the amount of data it holds. He says it took him three years to figure out how to translate the energy and spontaneity from his sketchbooks into larger, finished artworks. In mastering that transformation Mills has achieved an art form that is perfectly suited for our time. His work is full of information, yet it is not meaningless information. And the information is meaningful, but it is not merely meaningful. Mills has taken particulars about our species—his work is infused with humanism—and translated them into a visual metaphor for our lives. It makes us not only aware of our circumstances, but gives us the opportunity to feel it—which, some would argue, is exactly what great art should do.

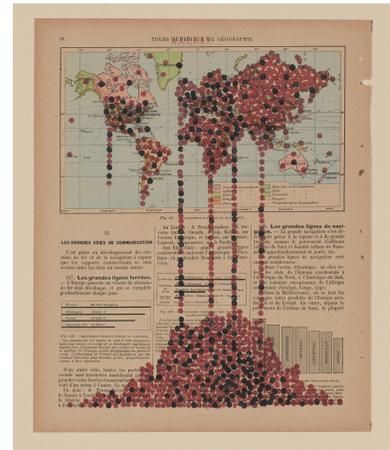
This article was originally published in the fall of 2019, and appears here with light edits and revised images. All photos are courtesy of Dan Mills unless otherwise noted.



What's in a Name? Eastern States (with the number of major geographic features named after indigenous people & words marked with colors), 2018, acrylic and ink on map laid down on paper, i.s. 10 1/2 x 8 inches. Collection of the Museum of Art, University of New Hampshire.



A.I.R.S. by Continent (Asylum Seekers, IDP, Refugees, Stateless) Book 09, 2017, ink, watercolor, gouache on atlas, 8 x 11 x 1 3/4 inches



Piling Up (Current Wars and Conflicts, Belligerents and Supporters by Continent), 2016, ink on book page on paper, 15 x 11 3/4 inches

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: CORWIN LEVI

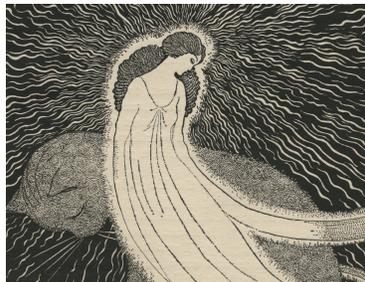
Corwin is a visual artist working in design, illustration, bookmaking, curating, and writing. As an artist, he has attended over twenty artist residencies. He has also have lived in eighteen cities across twelve states. Along with Michelle Aldredge, he co-created Mirror Mirrored: An Artists' Edition of 25 Grimms' Tales. He is currently remixing vintage game boards and making a book from illustrations of *Alice in Wonderland*.

By Corwin Levi | 06.05.21 | Art, Creative Spaces, Interviews, Process, Spaces | 0 Comments

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