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Art review: Mapping data makes for informative art at CMCA

'Human Topographies' is the result of the research and creativity of Dan Mills.

BY DANIEL KANY

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Dan Mills' "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. Photos by Luc Demers

How many countries have a claim on some aspect of Antarctica? Or, better maybe, how many don't? How many American states have towns and features with Native American names? Where are the people of the world who are being displaced by current wars and conflicts?

ART REVIEW

WHAT: "Dan Mills: Human Topographies"

WHERE: Center for Maine Contemporary Art, 21 Winter St., Rockland

WHEN: Through Oct. 13

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday

COST: \$8, \$6 for seniors and students, free for ages 17 and under

INFO: www.cmcanow.org, 701-5005

To the first question, the answer is simple: There are just two nations (you'll have to go to find out which) without a legal claim on some aspect of Antarctica. But most of the questions that Dan Mills has researched and visualized in his exhibition "Human Topographies," on view at the Center for the Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland, are much harder to grasp.

Mills, a Lewiston artist who is also director of the Bates College Museum of Art, takes maps, asks questions, does research and then begins the art of making quantitative data reveal the qualitative as he lays it out visually. Mills' style takes on elements of redaction, interruption, marginalia, collage, sociology and much more. It's part Duchamp, part Darwin and part Warhol. It's insightful, and Mills' questions are deftly designed to chip away at our assumptions. But while it is undeniably subversive, Mills' project could not be more humanistic or compassionate.

Mills' work "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)" is a roughly 8-by-12-foot, self-described "digitally reworked map" the artist completed in 2017.

Needless to say, it's not a standard map. It's covered with black and red circles that are sparse enough in places like Canada and Australia, but are a thick cloud over Africa, Europe and the Middle East, pouring out like blood from an open wound. Mills' title lays out his project with clarity: It is the literal key to the map.

Mills' interventions relate to our now-common culture of graphically presented comparative data – bar graphs, pie charts, scatterplots, etc. (Why use numbers when we can see it in pictures, right?) But he presents his insights with painterly logic, and this serves as a great reminder that what we typically see as "objective" data is inevitably colored by the visual and persuasive concerns of its authors. Mills will, for example, switch his hat from a cartographer's perspective to that of a vexographer (a fancy term for flag specialist): It's a logical move to use the dominant color of a nation's flag to represent it on a map even though that means many abutting nations will not be coloristically distinguishable. In doing so, Mills reminds us of the systems of color on maps. Choropleth maps are maps in which color is used to distinguish qualities – like red and blue for partisan voting in the U.S. Then colors can be lightened or darkened, or made purplish to show the degree of voting distinctions.

Mills' (brilliant) title is practically enough to explain the work. Rows of "K"s and overflowing dots reveal its humanistic sense.

"Human Topographies" occupies the elegant center gallery in the CMCA that Director Suzette McAvoy has made look gorgeous from the new facility's first installation of small Alex Katz paintings to the exquisite photography of Jocelyn Lee. And, once again, CMCA uses this space brilliantly. The installation's visual context of Mills' work plays up the strong role of its painterly presence. Whereas his works' painterly interventions had previously upheld humanistic qualities, in this setting we can't help but see that Mills – despite his deeply nerdy research and data-based content – is a painter of visual purport and impact. Many of the maps he uses are, by design, very old. Mills' ability to interact visually with these dated objects on his contemporary terms is one of the keys to his success.

"What's in a Name? (state names + the number of major geographic features named after indigenous people & words marked with red)" that Mills finished in 2018 is an acrylic-painted and collaged 65-by-83-inch map that was printed in 1890 – that critical year when the official colonization of Native American lands seemed to be complete. In the work, Mills redacts the name of the state (or territory) with daubs of paint and puts a mark in each state for every official element therein (municipalities, etc.) that has an indigenous name. To most of us now, Oklahoma's many name dots are a mystery, since between 1890 and when it achieved statehood in 1907, the unorganized "Indian Territory" became incorporated as part of the "Oklahoma Territory." The date of the map, in other words, sets the stage for Mills' illustrated story. How to do this? Mills had to go through every state's municipalities and features and do the count himself. From there, the questions cascade: How many states have native names? More than half. Which has the most? Wisconsin, with about 380. Maine has about half that number.



Dan Mills' "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.

Among the dark data, Mills plants his wit, often as redactions. Removing most of the map key's actual words (in standard redaction style, like what the Trump Administration did to the Mueller Report), the key now reads: "Map of the United States and Territories,... and... Lands, showing the extent of Indian... n...a...m...e...s... and... w...o...r...d...s... Chief Draughting Division. 1890 – 1918." Mills, of course, had to put in the last date by hand.

Mills takes on questions such as India's role on both sides of the colonist coin and the relation between the colonization of African countries and their extractable resources – all painted in national flag colors.

In short, Mills dredges up maps and data that spill light onto our current – and ostensibly informed – understanding of ongoing conflicts around the world, including many bubbling under our feet right here at home. Mills' wit fits the model of, say, Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert: It's timely, relevant, funny and it helps us connect well-informed historical understandings to often outrageous events.

"Human Topographies" is a complete show: It's interesting, educational, entertaining and important.

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Dan Mills' "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.

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