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At Bates, museum director balances his work as curator and artist

Dan Mills gets up early to work in his studio and stays late after attending to museum duties.

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Dan Mills, director of the Bates College Museum of Art, also has an active career as a studio artist, and shows in galleries around the country. John Ewing/Staff Photographer

LEWISTON — Natural light beams into the second-floor artist studio on Park Street in downtown Lewiston. A half-dozen work stations fill the center of a spacious room framed by clean white walls where works in progress are tacked up. Workbooks of notes and sketches are neatly arranged on one table. Another is covered with a dozen or so maps of the world.

The artist keeps his brushes and paints over here, materials and over there. Finished paintings, wrapped for protection during transport, are stacked to the side. A small library in one corner supports shelves of books.

A popular adage suggests that a messy work space is a sign of progress that proves that premise wrong. "When I walk in that door, I have to say, "I can't afford to waste a lot of time."

Mills is director of the Bates College Museum of Art. He is also one of the busiest and most accomplished contemporary artists. In 2014, he had a dozen exhibitions from Maine to California, including at the largest U.S. gathering of the contemporary art community.

It's not unusual for a museum director or curator to also make a living as an artist, but it is unusual for a museum director who also has a thriving career as

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Mapo Tabulludo

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Outtake

He gets up early to go to the studio, stays late and works at the museum in between.

"It suits my practice, and it suits my life," Mills said. "I have to be pretty disciplined and manage my time to pursue my art practice on top of the museum piece."

Growing up in upstate New York, Mills' role models were his parents. Both were artists who also worked full time in arts and education. "It's what I have always done, since college. You learn to balance the two."

Mills has directed the Bates museum for five years, arriving in Maine in 2010 soon after his wife, Gail Skudera, completed an artist residency here. Skudera knew Maine as a little girl, and the residency made her think about the state as a place to base an art career.

"When she returned, she said, 'Let's move to Maine,' " Mills said. "A few years later, the position opened up at Bates. I turned to her and said, 'Were you serious?'"

Mills was familiar with Bates. A lifelong friend graduated from Bates in 1977, and Mills said the "institutional DNA appealed to me."

As museum director, he mounts exhibitions that bring a world of ideas to Lewiston. His shows often have an international appeal and support the college's academic programs. They're also just a little bit different from what audiences in Maine are accustomed to.

Last January, he and Bates associate professor Trian Nguyen collaborated with the Art, Design & Architecture Museum of the University of California, Santa Barbara for an exhibition of shaman art from Vietnam and South China. "How to Make the Universe Right" brought together an extensive collection of painted scrolls, masks and other objects used in shamanist ceremonies.

The current show at Bates, on view through March 21, features finished work passed back and forth between Dawn Clements and Marc Leuthold, artist friends who work in different media. Clements makes works on paper, and Leuthold is primarily a ceramicist. Each created work and delivered it to the other. Clements translated the sculptures she received from Leuthold into works on paper. Leuthold responded to Clements' drawings in clay.

Last summer, Mills organized an exhibition about jazz, using art from the David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, the American Jazz Museum and private collections to explore the interplay among jazz, art and film.

The common thread of those exhibitions is the totality of their scope and presentation, longtime friend and collaborator Sam Yates said.

"As a curator, Dan's research on the front end is so good, you can see it carry through to the exhibition itself," said Yates, who directs the Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture at the University of Tennessee. "You walk into the gallery, and you can sense right away that the show is put together so well."

Mills pays attention to details and takes pride in making sure the exhibitions he curates are hung well, lit properly and arranged in a manner that is both logical and welcoming to visitors, Yates said. Those same attributes show up in Mills' studio practice. Because he has been a curator most of his professional life, his art-making process is informed by the questions he asks when he is looking at another artist's work for display in the museum.

He thinks about how his work will look on the wall, how people might react to it, how it will be perceived. That is not to imply that other artists do not. But Mills, because of his training and experience, is able to address those questions from a different perspective.

"Artists I work with often tell me they appreciate my understanding of concerns and issues that are important to them," he said. "They see something in my approach as being influenced by an artist."

CREATIVE CARTOGRAPHY

Mills explores history, geopolitics and current events in his paintings, sculpture and collage.

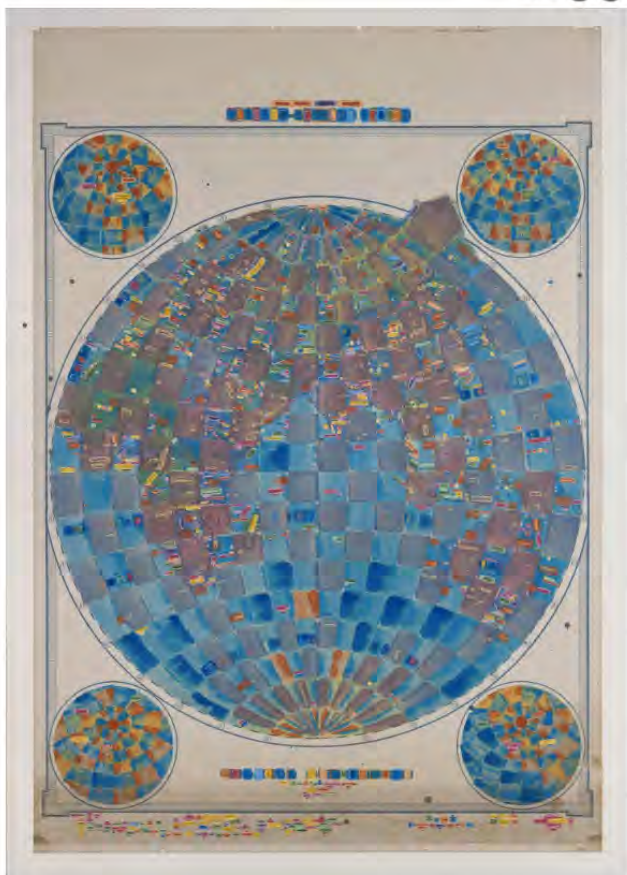
Since the 1992 quincentennial of Columbus' arrival in North America, Mills has made cartography a focus of his work. He's interested in maps and charts, the information they convey and the messages they send to their intended audiences.

In 2003, after the United States went to war in Afghanistan and before it invaded Iraq, his cartographic work took on a greater sense of urgency and focus. That effort culminated with the publication in 2009 of "U.S. Future States Atlas: An Atlas of Global Imperialism."

The book collected his work in response to those wars. It combined his critical observations of the country's "imperial ambitions" with the graphic appeal of maps. His art re-imagined the United States as a collection of new territories under the umbrella of United States Global, or USG.



Dan Mills' painting New York Portrait #2



Hemisphere

South Korea became Chosen Again, because of its strategic location. Afghanistan became Bushland. Iraq became USArabia.

The underlying idea was the notion that whatever the United States wants, the United States takes.

In his introduction to the book, Mills writes, “The atlas was started in response to the then U.S. leaders’ increasingly aggressive interactions with many countries – there were indication that the U.S. government would go to war, invade or threaten other nations for a variety of reasons, such as wanting their resources, not liking their leader, thinking they had weapons of mass destruction (note: the last one only applied if you were not an ally), and pretending to think they had WMDs. While creating the ‘U.S. Future States Atlas,’ I found that, by conceptually pushing this global stance a little bit further, it was possible to justify taking over almost any country.”

The work has been widely shown, including in Chicago in 2012.

Eleanor Heartney, an independent critic and contributor to the monthly magazine *Art in America*, called the “Atlas” project pivotal work for Mills. It synthesized his interest in history and maps with his political ideas. “Running as a thread through his work is an interest in beauty, both as a way of seducing the viewer into a consideration of the issues at hand, and as an end in itself,” she wrote in a catalog essay that accompanied a pair of 2012 shows in Chicago.

Mills bases his art on old maps, which he mostly finds online. He paints out the text and data in color patterns, effectively translating that information in artistic abstraction. Borders, labels, place names become bits and blocks of color. The resulting images look like maps we’re familiar with, layered with information and rich in detail.

Mills, 58, has worked in series throughout his artistic life. The maps have sustained his curiosity longer than anything else, perhaps because the level of information they impart is rich and deep. One related project that he’s developing involves translating data about states into visually appealing abstract images.

He’s experimenting, for example, with making maps that use empirical data about things like taxes and incarceration rates, and pairing them with studies about people’s happiness and sense of freedom. He’s interested in whether there’s a correlation between taxes and contentment, or peace of mind and prisons. He is not making conclusions as much as he is satisfying his innate curiosity.

INSPIRED BY MICROBREWERIES

In his research, Mills has found numbers that suggest Maine is home to more microbreweries and brew pubs per capita than most other states. A lover of fine beer, he’s thinking about how to work those numbers into a painting.

“I learn about the world we live in and make sense of it, in some ways,” Mills said.

Mills grew up in Schenectady, New York, and lived and worked in Chicago for more than a decade before moving back to the East Coast. Among other reasons, he enjoys living in Maine because of the state’s culture. People here value their culture and treat it as common heritage, he said.

He sees Lewiston as rich in diversity and as a city with opportunity. He would never be able to afford renting a studio like the one he has in Lewiston if he were in Portland, New York or Chicago – or just about any other city, he said.

He’s glad to be part of a city that, in many ways, is still becoming the city that future generations of cartographers and artists will record.

“There’s a lot more going on here than people know,” he said. “I love Portland. It’s a great city. But you can come to Lewiston and help shape it.”