

CORWIN LEVI



Dan Mills

Walking through one of Lewiston, ME'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 that number 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.)

This information inevitably makes it into Mills's art. In his *Current Wars and Conflicts* series, for example, he began by asking how much war and conflict is in the world, and then what that means. He tallied groups such as belligerents, supporters, asylum seekers ("A"), internally displaced ("I"), refugees

Dan Mills in his studio in Pepperell Mill, Lewiston, ME. The artist is viewing some roll-down school wall maps and other potential art material. Behind the artist hangs *Current Wars and 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". Photo: Henry Austin.

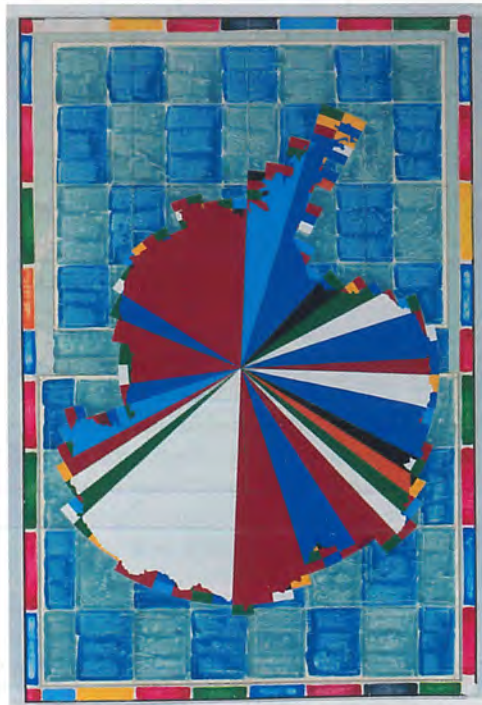
("R"), stateless ("S") and killed ("K"). Armed with this information, he uses maps as a base on which to collage and paint.

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 number 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 they accumulate in the water like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

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Mills's 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, dots and letters not only cover continents but burst out of their borders.

Mills's studio is chock-full of work and source material, despite a large number of pieces currently being exhibited in a solo show, *Human Topographies*, at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland. 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 notes 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 for so long, they find him as much as he finds them. Several years ago, for example, 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.

Everything in Mills's 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 they're even color coded so the viewer can match any given part of the art with what it represents.

Mills's 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 to our time. His work is full of information,

Above: Current Wars and 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 a letter for every 250k), 2017, ink on digitally reworked map, 95 x 148 1/2". Photo: Luc Demers.

Below: Magallanic (everyone wants a piece of it), 2018, acrylic on collaged maps laid down on board, 62 x 43". Photo: Luc Demers.

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.

Corwin Levi is a mixed-media, project-based artist based in Harrisville, NH. He draws inspiration from his travels across America, having lived in 18 cities across 12 states. He has a BA from Rice University, an MFA from the Tyler School of Art and a JD from the University of Virginia.

Human Topographies
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Dan Mills
abacus.bates.edu/~dmills/