

# Dan Mills

Human Topographies



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University of  
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## Haunted Data

*"The principle of true art is not to portray, but to evoke."*  
—Jerzy Kozinski

Artistic topics in this age of (dis)information, are as numerous as keywords; practices delve deeply into realms of often obscure(d) knowledge, repressed histories, and details that reveal things excluded in totalizing taxonomies and master narratives. Artists utilize data visualization, a graphic design strategy, to represent this material. Dan Mills has been at the front of this trend his entire career. His topics include politics, power, identity, and how these things have troubled the planet. His strategies often begin with the co-optation of highly abstracted representations: 50,000-ft. portraits of Earth, such as maps, then accumulating references to others; abstracted portraits of group identities, such as flags and insignia. Mills revels in the beauty, clarity, and utility of these inventions—maps as world knowledge, flags as celebrations of pride of identity—even as he wants us to be critically aware of the problems posed by cartography's transcendent views, and vexillography's assertions of dangerous, patriarchal tribalisms.

Data visualization is the practice of communicating facts and statistics represented by data, themselves highly abstracted by the very methods that produce them, by means of a visual object. It utilizes human visual cognition, such as the ability to compare sizes, colors, and quantities, infer relationships and processes, and comprehend complex information quickly and efficiently through visual means. There is an aesthetic component—successful data visualization, like all good design, compels engagement by formal means—composition, color, shape, and line.

Mills offers a meta-commentary on strategies of representation: His data visualizations present highly abstracted (notional, ideational) information, yet the most urgent aspect of his aesthetic strategy is the physical and material: Instead of the flat, formal, hyper-abstract grammar common to design aesthetics, Mills provides painterly (handmade, drawn, stenciled, collaged) marks. The effect is to render the very habits of political representation—data, statistics, maps, flags—fraught with a phenomenological, bodily element. In one of the monumental works from his series *Current Wars and Conflicts*, painted letters on



Image Left (detail):

*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

Image right:

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

maps represent warring factions and victims of violence in constant and perpetual conflicts that plague our species and planet. Painted stencils mark “B” for belligerents and “S” for supporter groups; “A”, “I”, “R”, “S”, “K” for asylum seekers, internally displaced, refugees, stateless, and killed. Each letter stands for a million human lives, but the psychological effect of this abstraction/reduction is halted, and then reversed, by the body in the work--the materiality of the mark, the expression of the gesture, and the phenomenon and metaphor of the paint—it is real, palpable, present in our world, and it flows and stains like blood, or tears. Painting's unique (and evidently sustainable) potential is to convey the presence of an embodied, human subject (perhaps “mirror neurons” are involved) even as it generates language. The presence of this body evokes the viewer's body, as the bodies of others become imagined as well.

**Laurie Hogin**

*Chair of Painting and Sculpture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*





# Went Looking for Answers

In 2015, Dan Mills went looking for answers. "There is a lot of suffering due to conflicts in our world, but *how much* due to current wars and conflicts?" The answers he found fluctuate and expand constantly. In the resulting series, he attempts to make sense of issues and data that are not always easy to grasp. The visual systems he creates help bring perspective to information that may be easily read, but not necessarily quickly absorbed. The work urges you to slow down and consider what he is questioning and seeking to understand.

Mills' extraordinary manipulation of collage can be seen in all his work, however it is particularly fundamental in the *Current Wars and Conflicts* series. The Cubists Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso were the first to use collage as social commentary and a means to move away from and question traditional modes of representation. Shortly after, the Dadaists used it to comment on the political climate surrounding World War I, forming a method of piecing images, information, and fragments together to create a whole, often analyzing war and emphasizing its absurdities. Mills adds to this rich history of collage as social and political commentary. Using maps as a framework to physically associate information on world conflicts, he enables the viewer to fully realize the scope of the issues presented. The often unusually long titles serve as legends for deciphering the information, containing the key to analyzing the visual system.

In one of the most recent works in the series, *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, Mills presents a vibrantly colored, large-scale world map. The array and multitude of letters provide instant impact and recognition of the true scope of belligerents and supporter groups in the world, so much so that the letters extend past the landforms, cascading to the outer regions of the map. This, in turn, forces the letters representing Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced, Refugees, Stateless, and Killed, out into the oceans, connected by thin lines to the respective continent. At first glance, the amount of letters seems manageable to comprehend, then one realizes each letter represents a million people, requiring a recalculation and closer look. The smaller works in the series, created on pages from discarded atlases, also benefit from close looking. For example, *Current Wars and Conflicts by Continent, Belligerents and Supporters III*, 2015, in which the cascading, colorful dots, signifying amounts, create a flurry of movement that is in line with the volume of events they represent.

Dan Mills' collage/paintings create access points to understanding the magnitude of current wars and conflicts. However, it is imperative to express that the works also function by having a striking visual presence. By utilizing multiple mediums, including collage and painting, the works perform both as a method of social communication and as works of art, effectively assisting in the viewer's acknowledgement of the information presented.

**Bethany Engstrom**

*Associate Curator, CMCA*

Image:

*Current Wars and Conflicts by Continent, Belligerents and Supporters III*, 2015, ink on printed map on paper, 15 x 22 ½ inches, Collection of Jeffery and Hillary Becton







Image:  
 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



Image:  
*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



# Liberty and Justice for All?

In the large painting *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, (+ *Incarceration and Murder*) *State Ranking*, Mills attempts to find a correlation or causation by examining data around freedom, environmental and gun regulations, quality of life, healthcare, incarceration, and violence. Stenciled numbers spill across state lines, vying for space and attention. As viewers dig into the data, questions about each state tumble out, much like the numbers and text that skew across the irregular geographical lines: What does this mean for residents in states with the lowest ranking? How does this affect communities, people's well-being, state and local budgets—what actions, if any, are being taken to improve the numbers? Mills doesn't present answers as much as prompts to explore complex social and political issues.

*Human Topographies* presents a narrow slice of Dan Mills' wide-ranging and decades-long interest in using history, exploration and games and wordplay to investigate networks—networks of power, trade, and migration that underpin societies, nationally and globally. It was a number, five-hundred specifically, that fueled his intellectual and artistic curiosity and which has informed his practice for nearly thirty years: 1992 marked the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas, precipitating centuries of jockeying for transatlantic and global domination. Since then, Mills has made paintings and collages about our shared human history, utilizing maps and data to expose the legacies of imperialism: war, colonialism, and emigration.

In the *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness...* series, Mills' perspective shifts from an outward global view to a focused introspection of American life. Found maps of the United States, enlivened by energetic dots and dashes (one might think Morse Code given Mills' facility with language and puzzles) in a dizzying color palette, form the underlying structure to Mills' paintings. His deft hand is evident in the nuanced layering and seductive washes that pool and dry across the surface. His use of brilliant primary and secondary colors—red, blue, yellow, green, orange, and purple—in checkerboard patterns and stenciled letters and numbers intentionally suggest board games with their simple, yet bold graphics and prescribed rules. But these are not simple paintings. These are elaborate, luminous, dense paintings laden with demographic information conveyed through text, sophisticated color-coded systems, and more subtly through allusion, sly references, and suggestions to familiar cultural touchstones. By using the map as a constant, Mills poses questions about life in the U.S. and plugs-in variable sets of data responses to visually represent a country and society in flux. He is not interested in a straight-forward reading or

creating a didactic info-graphic of his findings, often even painting out the key to force viewers to undertake their own process of inquiry. His intention, he states, is personal: "What do I have to say about this map, this country, and at this time?"

The overcrowded states, jam-packed with numbers tell the tumultuous story of a country where state differences are vividly pronounced and where the quality of life differs dramatically. Mills makes clear in this powerful series that not all U.S. citizens are treated equally—his dynamic paintings convey the contradictions, inequalities, and conflicted history of the United States.

**Kristina Durocher**

*Director Museum of Art, University of New Hampshire*

Image:  
*Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness and the World,*  
*Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,*  
series 2016-17, ink, and graphite on atlas, 19 3/4 x 13 5/8 inches





# Everyone Wants a Piece of It

The history of Antarctica is inextricably linked to histories of human power and desire. First claimed by Spain in the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), pieces of this fifth-largest continent were subsequently claimed by seven countries, in a process that reflected how international law is embedded in histories of colonialism and the drive for resources. Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, France, and Norway all established claims, while Chile and Argentina cited *uti possidetis iuris*, or their right to inherit lands "belonging" to their former Spanish colonizers. When Spain made their initial Columbian claim, however, there was no sense of just what was down there—hence the name *Magallanica*, Magellan's land, a terra incognita that over the centuries has drawn whalers and explorers, along with more recent tourists and scientists, who use complex technologies to understand the dynamics of climate change. Maps of Antarctica must now be redrawn yearly, in a recalibration that has nothing to do with sovereign borders and everything to do with melting ice.

The Treaty of Antarctica was signed in 1959, at the end of the First International Geophysical Year, a project that encouraged scientific cooperation even within the context of the Cold War. The Treaty sets the continent aside for scientific research and explicitly bans either militarization or mining; an environmental protocol signed in 1990 sets terms for environmental protection and assessment of all activities in the region. Resources have attracted the rest of the world to this uninhabited continent from the beginning, including whales, fur seals, and even fresh water by drought-stressed states. Mining is currently banned, but that will come up for review in 2048. And new issues continue to emerge, from harvesting krill in protected fishing grounds to taking biological samples. And all the while, scientists make maps and measure glacial melt and draw cores from the interior. Countries build infrastructure and establish their presence. Tourists flock south to view sublime perspectives and walls of ice as they slip and crash into the Southern Ocean.

Dan Mills' maps of Antarctica do not give us sublime perspectives. Instead, they make visible the claims crowding the continent, rendered in the bold primary colors of national flags. They present us with a kind of constructivist *estrangement*: contemporary images of ice and calving glaciers have become familiar and problematically apolitical. *Magallanica* as pie chart represents the countries who claim standing of some sort in Antarctica, whether as initial or subsequent signatories to the Treaty, "parties with consulting status," or UN observers. Pretty much everyone, it turns out.

Maps of Antarctica are disorienting in part because we can't find "west." Mills' projections of Antarctica aim to unsettle: the only thing to grasp hold of is the long peninsula, which shoots upward – like nothing so much as a kind of wheel of fortune, waiting to be spun.

But in this case fortune isn't only about resources to be found *there*, but the fortune (or fate) that awaits us all, when the glaciers and ice of the bottom of the world will have melted to water and risen on the coasts we call home...

**Jane Costlow**

*Clark A. Griffith Professor of Environmental Studies,  
Bates College*









Image:  
*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



# Mapping Conversations

When I look at this painted map of place names, I wonder if we are being asked to consider the silence of so many sounds. This nation is filled with Indigenous place names. I almost wonder if they hum like so many busy bees around the states too small to fit them. They punctuate our lives. From my home in Androscoggin County, Maine, you can hear the roar of the Androscoggin River when it is full of the spring melt. I attended schools in Massachusetts and later in Wisconsin, eventually doing research in Oklahoma.

Dan Mills has counted these and hundreds—thousands—more Indigenous words on a map of the United States that was first made in 1890. That was the year that the federal government declared the frontier to be “closed.” There was no longer an imaginary line separating American Indians who did not deserve to live in this country from the “civilized” white Americans who did. The frontier had vanished presumably because the Indians had, too. Guns assisted in this work of erasure. 1890 was also the year that the United States Army massacred more than 200 Lakota men, women, and children at Wounded Knee. On Mills’ reconfiguration of this map, the nation’s Indigenous names now lie buried under red, white, and blue. The nation looks a little like a fragmented stars and stripes.

But in the late 1600s, when Miamis told French explorers of the river they called Miskousing, which means “river that flows through a red place,” they taught the French how to navigate this waterway. At about the same time Wabanakis told English colonists about Amoscoggin, “the place of many fish.” In this word they explained a little of how to live from and live with the river. These place names were not just dots for Mills to paint many centuries later. They began conversations about Indigenous knowledge of and respect for these places. In offering their guidance to colonial peoples, Indigenous people suggested how both groups might relate to these places and to each other.

Those relationships became far more violent than Miamis, Wabanakis, or any other Indigenous group could have imagined, but the conversations did not end in 1890. Or ever. Wabanaki friends tell me not only what Androscoggin means but also how it remains part of a world where they still live and work. They tell me how it remains part of a world they still fight to shape and inhabit.

So perhaps in all of his dots, Mills is not hiding the words but suggesting to us how many there are to listen for. And in listening for those words, perhaps residents of the United States might hear more easily the conversations that define this nation. Perhaps we might see the conversations that color and complicate these stars and stripes.

**Joseph Hall**

*Associate Professor and Chair of History at Bates College*

Image:  
*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 ½ x 10 ¾ inches







## Biography

Dan Mills is an artist and museum director based in Maine. He has had solo exhibitions at The Chicago Cultural Center, Sherry Frumkin Gallery in Los Angeles, Tianjin Academy of Fine Art Museum in China, and Zolla/Lieberman Gallery in Chicago, as well as featured in solo and group exhibitions throughout the US and internationally. His *US Future States Atlas* was published as a book by Perceval Press, Santa Monica, in 2009. He directs the Bates College Museum of Art in Lewiston, Maine. [www.dan-mills.net](http://www.dan-mills.net)

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—Dan Mills



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Image: *Contest - The Americas (with nationalist colors and including the colonial era)*, 2018-19, acrylic, watercolor, and ink on map laid down on paper, 6 x 8 5/8 inches