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Maps for Navigating to a New Perspective

By SYLVIANE GOLD DEC. 3, 2010

What are maps for? Of course, you think you know, and so did I — until I found my way to “Mapping: Memory and Motion in Contemporary Art,” at the Katonah Museum of Art. The works in this terrific exhibition offer so many takes on the subject that you feel your personal definition of cartography exploding as you walk — with no map to guide you — through the galleries.

For some of the show’s 38 artists, existing maps serve as raw material to be turned into sculptures, collages and such. For others, a map is the end result, created from experience or imagination to fix a place, a time or an idea. But all these objects, gathered by the guest curator, Sarah Tanguy, force you to reckon with maps as aids to meditation, objects of pleasure, blueprints for war, records of subjugation. And oh, yes, I almost forgot: as tools for getting from here to there and back again.

Locating “here” can become tricky, however. You’ll get lost if you try to follow Karey Ellen Kessler’s fascinating maplike drawings — they’ll pilot you no farther than her psyche. Kysa Johnson tracks the travel paths of subatomic particles in swirling colored lines — there’s no Lonely Planet accompanying her map, either. At first glance, Lordy Rodriguez’s delineations of the North and South Poles seem nearer our traditional notions of what a map should be. But closer examination reveals that these two ink drawings literally upend our sense of the globe, reordering our perspective and providing a biting commentary on it as well.

Several of the maps on view document not just what is, or what might be, but what is no longer. In her “Voyages” series, Joyce Kozloff reproduces antique maps of faraway islands on Venetian carnival masks. The titles — “Pola,” “Nova Guinea,” “Pulo Penang” — and the colorful painted backgrounds evoke the varied cultures that once thrived on those islands; the sameness of the masks and their empty eyeholes suggest the way the Western gaze reduced such places to spoils of empire.

In “Okesa,” which means “halfway there” in Osage, Norman Akers overlays a schematic depiction of the tribe’s reservation with a realistic painting of a panicked elk. Oversize acorns imply that perhaps regeneration is possible; but this is a map of destruction.

The artists who manipulate existing maps often create dense visual puns. In “Highland Dress,” Susan Stockwell turns Victorian-era government maps of Scotland into a 19th-century gown, repurposing their long blue lochs into ribbonlike accents for the bell-shaped skirt and their bright-red contour lines into embroidery for the bust and shoulders. The sculpture, elegant and eerie, reminds us that one diminutive woman once ruled an empire on which the sun never set.

Books of maps rather than individual ones are the medium for Doug Beube. In “Crater,” he carves out hollows of various depths, rendering a large atlas useless but creating a powerful topography of his own. The atlas in “Invisible Cities” is equally unreadable, its pages folded and sewn into a pleated cylinder capped at both ends with a decorative metal finial. Ms. Tanguy compares it to a reliquary; I see a miniature Torah. In either case, the map has been transformed into an object of reverence.

Matthew Cusick uses maps not for sculpture but for painting. Created from inlaid bits of 1960s and ’70s road maps, his 2004 “Transamerican” depicts a Pontiac Firebird, flaming eagle hood decal and all. Made prior to the bailout of General Motors but after the demise of the storied muscle car, the work reads almost like prophecy these days. From a distance, the car has a ghostly presence; as you get closer, it disappears into the map fragments, like a mirage.

There are similar phantasms in Lincoln Schatz’s shimmering video, which shows a man using a compass and other navigational tools to chart a journey. The point of view shifts constantly, and overlapping sequences fade in and out like dreams.

There's something utterly compelling about the contrast between the precision of the task and the hazy, computer-generated flow of images. And the man turns out to be J. Craig Venter, who found a way to map the mapmakers when he plotted the human genome.

"Mapping: Memory and Motion in Contemporary Art," at the Katonah Museum of Art, 134 Jay Street (Route 22), Katonah, through Jan. 9; katonahmuseum.org or (914) 232-9555, extension 0.

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