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Mapping Minutiae: Art in the Age of Foursquare and Genome Projects

by Benjamin Sutton



In a culture that tends increasingly toward obsessive-compulsive behavior, massive, meticulous and map-like art offers a particularly apt kind of satisfaction. As opposed to the clean sparseness of minimalist conceptual art, or the opposite trend towards messy maximalism, carefully organized levels of infinitesimal detail seem an appropriate aesthetic for the age of genome maps, nanotechnology, locative social media and digital world-building programs like Second Life and Minecraft. Three artists having solo shows in Williamsburg create spectacularly precise and idiosyncratic landscapes for us to explore.

In the main gallery and back room at Pierogi, respective exhibitions by Brooklyn-based artists Daniel Zeller and Ati Maier (both through November 14) feature confounding topographies that shift scales and tend towards abstraction. Maier's work remains partly rooted in figuration, as in the large-scale piece that gives her exhibition its title, "Giant Dipper" (2010), where thick, swooping lines of ink and airbrushed paints in bold tones convey the mountain-like forms of a rollercoaster track. More intriguing pieces like "Savvy" (2010) seem at once celestial and cellular, with bright swirling forms and smooth flows evoking orbits and microorganisms. Elsewhere she embeds narratives —some quite kitschy, involving UFOs, for instance —into the Fauvist-hued compositions, fixing the meaning of works that want so badly to keep moving along their many lines of flight.

Appropriately enough for drawings that resemble microscopic cells, Daniel Zeller's truly obsessive ink and acrylic abstractions in the adjacent space continue to evolve. In addition to works with two or three colors filling the narrow spaces between sharp concentric lines to evoke topographical maps and bacterial colonies, the exhibition *Incomplete Analysis* includes two large-scale and three smaller black and white works that further confound distinctions between micro- and macro-scales. In "Binary Plot" (2010, detail at top), a vast cinematic composition of black pen-marks, a series of white lines crisscrosses a dark crevice-like formation, suggesting an alien highway seen via satellite or stitches holding a wound shut. The smaller monochrome pieces, meanwhile, resemble an impenetrable hieroglyphic notation. Zeller's maps remain fascinating in their illegibility.

Patricia Smith at Front Room Gallery

Patricia Smith's psychic cartography at Front Room is more easily read, but similarly enigmatic. The seven new ink and watercolor works on paper and one wall-sized acrylic on neoprene piece that make up *My Territory Is the One You Stole from Me* (through November 14) seem, from a distance, to describe tropical archipelagos glimpsed from above. Coves, atolls and barrier reefs bare the names of mental states and emotions rather than geological features. In "Mapped Location of Pronounced Situational Destiny" (2010), for instance, a closed-off lake is labeled "Forgotten," while a treacherous coastline to the north reads "Cataclysmic Chance Events." The psycho-spatial self-portraits' whimsical strips of land formed in red, white and sepia tones suggest ancient explorations, but contemporary terminology has seeped into the landscape; one particularly narrow strait is dubbed "Unfriend."

Like Zeller's confounding topographies, Smith's mind maps underline how we make sense of our accelerated and dematerialized interactions in elaborate, self-reflexive spatial terms. Maps grow more important as our trajectories become increasingly unclear. These cartographic artists try to find a way, and their complex directions are perversely fulfilling to follow —even when they lead nowhere.