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Macdonald maps out imaginary countries

December 9, 2005

BY MARGARET HAWKINS Gallery Glance

Making maps, like making art, is a way to stake out one's place in the world, and both endeavors require the kind of creative optimism found in Shona Macdonald's maplike drawings now at the Chicago Cultural Center.

It is no accident that maps intrigue Macdonald, who came to Chicago from Scotland as a student 10 years ago and stayed. Like every emigre, hers is a story of travel and memory, and for an artist this reorientation of one's physical world is especially important to the visual imagination. Add to this mix the fact that Macdonald's first home was a place of islands, peninsulas and thousands of miles of coastline, and you begin to understand the work.

Macdonald diagrams imagined places that derive from but do not resemble the locales that inspired them.

She invents coastlines by tracing the real coastline of Scotland as well as borders of Midwestern locales and then "unfurling" or bending them to make up plausible aerial views of nonexistent islands. This highly process-oriented technique of borrowing from real topographical maps creates the illusion of time, travel and documentation as sometimes happens in old books where a made-up map introduces us to a place that only exists in the writer's imagination. In Macdonald's case, the invention is not literary but visual, though she sometimes incorporates surprisingly literal detail, such as tree branches, that bring us back down to earth.

Macdonald doesn't label these maps. They are maps of her mind's travels, which paradoxically, because they are not personalized, seem very real.

Shona MacDonald; Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington, (312) 744-6630. Through Jan. 15.