Mapping the Infinite Possible

To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.
— Robert Louis Stevenson

Some years ago an obscure psychological study came out that claimed to prove that travelers with a map, any map, even the wrong one, felt less lost and had more success reaching their destination than travelers with no map at all.

Seemingly strange at first, on second thought this phenomenon makes a deep kind of sense. Perseverance requires hope, and chaos makes hope impossible. We all need order in life if only to rebel against it.

Map making is an effort to find order in the world, to place oneself in a context, and the pursuit of this order requires a kind of creative optimism not so remote from the making of art. Shona Macdonald combines these two impulses to make maps, and landscapes, that are frankly fictional.

It is no accident that maps fascinate and preoccupy Macdonald, who came to the United States from Aberdeen, Scotland, as a student in 1994 and has since made Chicago her home. Every émigré has a story of her own but in one sense Macdonald's is like all of them, a story of assimilation and loss, discovery, displacement, cultural duality and memory of a place left behind. This rupture and reorganization of the facts of one's physical world are the conditions of Macdonald's visual imagination. Add to this mix the fact that her first home was a watery place of islands, peninsulas and thousands of miles of coastline, and you end up with the essence of this painter's aesthetic.

The work is all geography and landscape based, albeit imaginatively so. Her paintings look like maps of some island nation before aerial views and measuring devices put landforms and bodies of water in geographic perspective. There are other kinds of perspective, though. She's influenced by Japanese isometric perspective and often uses a shifting point of view, painting the perception of place and space, not the objective fact of it. Her images are, in part, about the act of finding one's place in the world and marking out territory for the purpose of saying here I am, here is where I am going, here is where I have been.

Often she invents coastlines and archipelagos by tracing the real coastline of Scotland and then "unfurling" it down on the canvas in lengths, bending it to make up plausible but non-existent islands. This highly process-oriented technique of borrowing from real maps aids the illusion of travel, as happens in old books where a made-up map warps a known coastline and thus introduces us to a place in the writer's imagination. In Macdonald's case, the invention is not literary or narrative but visual and spatial. It happens in how she warps and reinvents physical space; flattening it out and popping it back up into Renaissance perspective. In a single painting we see both the craggy profile

of an island and also how it must look from above. This presentation of a composite image rather than the perceived image is a technique used by primitives and children but also in highly sophisticated and spiritual cultures, ancient Egypt for instance, when the idea of a thing is more important that its mere physical appearance.

Macdonald cites diverse influences that include Emmet Gowin's aerial photography, Julie Mehretu's paintings, Bruce Conner's drawings and fellow-immigrant Vija Celmins' vast painted spaces, which Macdonald describes as "screens for reflection and memory."

All of these artists grapple with representing or deconstructing space and so it is in Macdonald's work. Both visually and logically she leads us in and out of real space the way a deeply-felt dream remembered in the midst of a busy day leads us in and out of reality, making us question which part of our experience is more real, the inner truth or the outer. This trickery, which zooms us in and out as well as up and down – some of the imaginary aerial views contain big blue amoeba-like shapes suggestive of the depth measurements in topographic ocean maps – forces us to reconsider our notion of objective reality. And that's quite the point. Even the paint itself shifts back and forth between illusion and materiality and just as we begin to believe in a landscape a broad stroke of pure paint jolts us back to the surface.

Macdonald employs her tracing and unfurling device in her drawings too, and it is particularly notable in one where she obsessively draws and redraws her driving route to and from her teaching job in Bloomington, Illinois. Studded with little pine tree road sign symbols that signify campgrounds, the drawing becomes a journal of travel, a map of time as well as space.

This borrowing is a powerful device that is beautiful in its own right for anyone who loves maps but which works as a metaphor, too. For what is a map but proof that we have a place in the world, that our place is connected to the rest of the world and that we can find our way out and back home again. It is also a metaphor for possibility, the repetitious drawing of a route or a border, a road or a river represents a conjuring of or longing for possible travel.

Macdonald doesn't label anything on these maps, she offers no key and doesn't name her bays and isthmuses with fanciful monikers. These are maps of the mind, which paradoxically, because they are not personalized, seem very real. She makes us believe they are simply places we've not yet discovered, and they begin to work for us the way that false map in the psychologist's study worked for the lost hikers. Each of us makes these his or her own private maps in which we see our travels and our travails and perhaps our future transcribed in all their complexity and potential.

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