

_SIMMER DIM

_SHONA MACDONALD

**_CURATED BY
MARTIN PATRICK**

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**_CURATED BY
SHONA MACDONALD**

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MARTIN PATRICK

"The middle term that links earth to map, and world to earth, is landscape. This is what all four items possess in common. It is their shared integument, their double-sided flesh. Like flesh, landscape is the living and lived surface of a body—the earth's body. It is how earth appears to the gaze and the touch, how it surfaces to view and grasp. It is also what is projected, complexly, into the two-dimensionality of maps and taken up, multiply, in the n-dimensional worlds of works of art. The relief that is represented in maps belongs ultimately to the fleshlike surface of landscape, just as the darkest recesses of earth that are brought forward in painting belong to the depths of the same surface. If maps for the most part represent overt landforms in detail and in all possible verisimilitude, paintings represent the land's surface in its implicit and concealed character. Both accomplish a truth that is based not on isomorphism but on bringing the reclusiveness of earth into the openness and light of world."

—Edward S. Casey, *Representing Place: Landscape Painting & Maps*, 2002.

Shona Macdonald's paintings and drawings offer an evocative reading of landscape, riddled with manifold implications. Very often her works present imagery characterized by both its precisely rendered detail and confounding spatial ambiguity. Macdonald's imaginative topographies incorporate an intriguing array of pictorial tactics, as she zeroes in on her surroundings, observing and reworking them deftly. Drawing upon the history of the abstracted landscape, a complex range of sources become refined into renderings that lay claim to a highly layered and nuanced, sometimes haunting graphic language.

Much of Macdonald's imagery has developed out of her lived environment, most recently in the northeastern United States, but previously in the midwest region, where the artist resided after relocating from her native Scotland, to begin her postgraduate studies in Chicago. Macdonald has spent much time over the years moving from place to place, whether in longish commutes, her travels back to Europe, or during the conducting of many visiting artist stints. In this process, Macdonald has taken notice of interstices, distances, downtime, and has thereby made imagery stemming from such observations entirely central to her work.

The expansive American interior is often reduced in cosmopolitan shorthand to the "flyover states." Nonetheless, in works including *Simmer Dim Flyover*, Macdonald upsets this stereotype by honing in on the subtler aspects of such geographic locales, capturing the uncertainty presented by flying over a landscape shifting from darkened plains to illuminated towns, airstrips, and highways. Furthermore to flyover is to miss, omit, neglect to pay attention whereas Macdonald has heightened her awareness of such (non-)sites. And Macdonald's continual cognizance of her own displaced and dispersed identity has increasingly played a role in energizing her work, but it also leaves the artist inhabiting an ever-precarious status, somewhere between cultural settings, traditions, territories.

Earlier on, Macdonald had used such materials as vintage aerial sketches of the Scottish coast, and her own trajectory to and from work on an monotonous stretch of interstate highway as diverse research material for new drawings, paintings, mappings. Macdonald began a generative process of conflating memories and experiences with cartographic documents into her own hybridized imagery. Moreover, she was influenced by much theoretical writing on the significance of landscape, such as the more embodied, phenomenological conception as proposed in the writings of philosopher Edward S. Casey (see the epigraph above). Macdonald titled one series of work *Topamnesia*, referencing Casey's notion that "remembrance of place, especially that informs a painter's rendition of a place or region she has once experienced in first person; in such memory, the place or topos constitutes the major theme or primary concern."

The timing of Macdonald's maturation as an artist coincided in particular with a strong resurgence of contemporary drawing, as evidenced in a variety of prominent museum exhibitions and surveys, as well as a great number of artists investigating fantastical takes on the landscape, knowingly mixing aspects of both abstraction and representation, in the wake of postmodern appropriation, irony, and pastiche. But while many such artists thrive on the use of postmodernist strategies of appropriation, irony, and pastiche, Macdonald's work evinces a more somber, quiet feel, despite its very sophisticated use of palimpsest-like assemblage and layering. And unlike Julie Mehretu, a painter with whom she has been compared and has intriguing affinities, Macdonald keeps her work allied much more closely with both the handmade and the intimate in scale. In her more recent images the everyday and prosaic from piles of snow to stacks of laundry become imbued with an unlikely resonance, simultaneously mysterious, humorous, and warm, despite their dramatically stark qualities.

Macdonald often treats the earth as some massive, unwieldy, collaged entity, composed of shadowy scraps, glimpsed only partially. Yet the rough edges of this landscape are deserving of careful scrutiny, as they are apt to deliver much more than one initially bargained for. Perhaps these are the craggy shores of a coastline, or simply the effect of a partially glimpsed memory trace, summoned through a line, a stroke, an actual tracing via the hand of the artist. As critic John Brunetti perceptively noted: "Appearing to expand and contract, Macdonald's network of meandering estuaries, attenuated peninsulas and orphaned islands express the internal effects of an individual's external experiences." Notably Macdonald, while often clearly referencing the external world in her practice, creates new creative mappings which cannot actually direct one anywhere specifically in real space, but instead are likely to move the sympathetic viewer toward various engaging states of contemplation, reverie, and wonderment.