

# Artists venture outside the box for fresh look at landscape

## GALLERIES

By Margaret Hawkins

**T**he physical body and the land around us seem to be the two constants in art that just won't go away, and who would want them to? Two new shows revisit these themes and manage to find fresh ways to look at these eternal preoccupations.

**Topography** is the more risk-taking of the two shows, combining works by five emerging artists who work in unconventional media to comment on landscape. Like tourists who venture off the beaten path for a more authentic travel experience, the best artists in this show seem to be looking beyond the obvious or the beautiful in landscape for the inspiration that we take from pure, untrammelled nature.

Among the most interesting works in the show are Amy Baur's minimalist photographs of barren landscapes hinged with equally minimal collages that match the contours she finds in the land. A slice of gray sky and bare rock is pieced together with scraps of sandpaper and waxed candy wrappers to form a continuous vista. They are two sides of the same view; the paper scraps that in another place might deface nature here become a mirror of it.

Baur sometimes makes photos by holding the camera away from her body and not looking through the viewfinder, seeking an accidental quality to avoid the visual cliché. She says of her work, "I am comfortable in the periphery and find these less direct, less stable views more genuine." Less direct but certainly purposeful, Baur's photographs make comparisons between found nature and found art. Beauty, she reminds us, is in the mind's eye of the beholder, and sometimes when we tire of pretty sunsets and tall mountains we find beauty in bleak views of scrub land and creased chocolate wrappers.

Baur's photo collages urge us to slow down, quiet down and see what is truly around us rather than look afar for the experience of the true or the sublime. Look closely, she seems to say.



Jan Estep's installation "Topo Antarctica" is part of the "Topography" exhibit at Northeastern Illinois University's Fine Arts Center Gallery.

the great 19th century Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton as saying, "Optimism is true moral courage."

Shona Macdonald's maps of make-believe places also call up romantic ideas of travel and faraway lands in the slightly ironic vernacular of 21st century art. Her smudgy maps are drawn in pencil and ink with bits of newspaper cutouts glued on. The maps identify weather systems, landmarks, roads and rivers, but alas, no known locale. They are loaded with information but without a key. Like Estep and Baur, Macdonald longs for the hidden, the obscure and the unknown, looking for an outpost of something that is fast disappearing from this earth.

**The Body Present** at the Museum of Contemporary Art revisits the human figure in art, using sculpture from the museum's permanent collection to explore the idea of the human body as effigy or decoy. Although it is already a small show, its impact could have been heightened by halving its contents, for it makes its point with a mere four or five singular works that don't need any further support.

### Topography

■ Through May 17  
■ Northeastern Illinois University, Fine Arts Center Gallery, 5500 N. St. Louis  
■ (773) 442-4944

### The Body Present

■ Through May 12  
■ Museum of Contemporary