

**Val Britton @ SJICA**

By David M. Roth

April 30, 2013



*The Continental Interior*, 2013, mixed media installation of hand cut paper, ink, tempera, thread. Photograph by David Pace.

Imagine unmooring the globe's landmasses and suspending them in midair from strings like a cosmic puppeteer. That, essentially, is what Val Britton does in *The Continental Interior*, a room-sized installation in which the collagist pushes her estimable 2-D visions of terrestrial reality into three-dimensional space. For Britton, whose largest collages run to 10 feet square and can sometimes strain the bounds of what can be displayed on a

wall, this seems like both a breakout move and a logical extension of what she's been doing since the start of her career. For a prime example, check out SJICA at [artMRKT](#), May 16-19, at Fort Mason Center – Festival Pavilion. There, you'll find *[Beginning Anywhere](#)*, one of Britton's iconic large-scale works from 2008.

Her hybrid 2-D constructions meld the specificity of road maps and jet routes, the swirling contours of topographical maps and the allusiveness of abstract painting –geometric and biomorphic. The results are expansive, intricate, reinterpretations of man-made and natural forms depicted from an aerial perspective.

Britton now occupies the upper tier of collage. She arrived there by carving out a niche in the fast-evolving subcategory of mapping, wherein artists take maps, the very symbol of authority, and use them to challenge boundaries of all types: racial, political, geographic, sexual and so forth. For an excellent survey of the field, consult Katharine Harmon's *[The Map as Art: Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography](#)* In it, you'll find Britton's work alongside that of a great many well-known artists (Mark Bradford, Vic Muniz, William Kentridge and others) who take great liberties with materials.

The last installation of Britton's I saw was in 2010, in a group show organized by Intersection for the Arts called *[Here be Dragons: Mapping Information and Imagination and Open Process Events](#)*. Her piece encircled a spiral staircase. This installation is much more expansive. It occupies SJICA's Focus Gallery, bisecting the room diagonally, from the rafters almost to the floor. The piece engages you at eye-level and pulls your gaze up upward to the strings that suspend it from the ceiling. From those strands hang painted shards of paper that Britton has sliced into silhouettes of varying opacity. Held mostly taut, they range in size from specs no bigger than a fingernail to jagged masses of up to a yard in length. Some bend or fold over on themselves to suggest erosion or wind. Overall, their shapes bring to mind floating river islands, continents, icebergs, mountains, cumulous clouds and riverbeds.



*Sister Ship*, 2013, ink, watercolor, collage, and hand cut paper, 72" x 60"

The strings play an especially important role. They suggest how the whole construction might be manipulated like a giant marionette; and though that potential isn't realized, the feeling that the piece could suddenly spring to life persists even though the suspended forms remain static, disrupted only by faint air currents.

What propelled Britton into this realm was the sudden death of her father, a long-haul trucker. He died when she was a teenager, and since earning her MFA from California College of the Arts in 2006, she's created, dissected and reassembled maps of her own making an effort to follow his "tracks".





*Sister Ship* (detail)

Her “navigational” tools are scissors, X-Acto knives, brushes, glue, ink and watercolors, the latter of which she uses to create stains suggestive of mineral deposits, fire and other natural processes.

Five large-scale collages accompany the installation. Each is stunning, but none more so than *Sister Ship*. I hesitate to call it immersive because that descriptor is so overused. But here it applies because of the way Britton turns two-dimensional space into a landscape into which you easily project yourself. She builds up the composition in visible layers; slices out swaths of negative space that read as waterways (or jet routes); and soaks paper in pigment so that it wafts and warps – like the rise and fall of actual topography. The effect is of soaring above a floodplain and, at the same time, feeling of texture of the substances that comprise it. Thus, *Intimate Immensity*, the title of this show, makes perfect sense.

Britton may not crisscross the country the way her father did, but her art covers a lot of ground. In so doing it creates the palpable sense that you are too – just by looking.

Source:

<http://www.squarecylinder.com/2013/04/val-britton-san-jose-institute-of-contemporary-art/>