

Artist Profile: Val Britton



Red Planet, 2014, ink tempera and collage on paper, 54 x 70"

Posted on 14 July 2014.

Val Britton, a 37-year-old San Francisco artist, constructs imaginary topographies with painted paper — razor-cut into delicate, multi-layered skeins that abstractly depict highways and air routes sprawling above and across prairies, deserts, riverbeds and mountain ranges. The effect is of movement and stillness, human time and geologic time, collapsed. In one particularly notable work, *Red Planet*, on view at Gallery Wendi Norris through August 2, the artist combines aerial and astral perspectives by painting circles of different diameters onto landmass-shaped forms containing puddles of crinkled paint that convincingly simulate the build up of stream-driven sediment – what geologists call alluvial fans. Equally exhilarating is *Reverberation #17*, a maze of interconnected (an extremely delicate) lattices glued to paper and overlaid with continent-shaped forms and small dots that, taken together, equate geography to neural pathways.



Reverberaton # 17, 2014, ink, collage and cut paper, 30 x 30"

“analogous to musical notation,” a comparison I resisted until I remembered some of the unconventional scores John Cage set before musicians.

A virtuoso of the Exacto knife, Britton discovered her facility for composing with cut paper while studying printmaking at the Rhode Island School of Design. (The school gave her a scholarship and awarded her a BFA in 1999.) “I started cutting up old prints as salvage and I found that I was fluid in manipulating things before gluing them down and settling on the compositions.” After graduating she moved to Brooklyn, and over the next four years, she worked as a freelance illustrator while taking encaustic painting classes. Both methods reinforced her penchant for building compositions “back-to-front in layers” with an aesthetic informed by her “low-fi training in design.”

Several years ago, Britton took the extraordinary step of moving the continent-shaped forms off their paper supports and into room-sized installations. The components, which sometimes fold over on themselves to resemble billowy clouds, hang from ceilings by string and fishing line. Facebook recently commissioned Britton to create one for its Menlo Park headquarters. And this fall, the San Francisco International Airport will install a large-scale laminated glass panel based on one of Britton’s 2-D designs. Neither work is open to the general public; however, *Deluge*, an installation similar to the one at Facebook, is on view for the duration of the Wendi Norris exhibition. Like its predecessors, it suggests unmoored landmasses anchored by loose tendrils of thread that, in this installation, come close to touching the floor. Britton sees it as



Deluge, 2014, hand and laser-cut vellum and paper, ink and thread. Installation at Gallery Wendi Norris

During graduate school at CCA, where she earned an MFA in 2006, Britton began fabricating her own shapes, the genesis of what we see today in her collages and installations. In this regard, Britton's work operates within the same sphere as several other well-known artists: LA-based Leslie Shows, whose art deals with environmental degradation; Julie Mehretu, a New Yorker (born in Ethiopia) whose works speak of interconnected communication systems; and the Brooklynite Danielle Teheder, a Constructivist-influenced multimedia artist whose 2-D works closely resemble the skeletal, cut-out forms seen in Britton's latest collages. They, and the rest of the works in *Passage*, reflect one of the most concentrated periods of activity of Britton's career, products of back-to-back residencies at Djerassi Resident Artists Program and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha.

My introduction to her came at a 2009 solo show at Johansson Projects in Oakland. The most memorable works were executed on large sheets of thick paper sliced to a point where they were structurally compromised, yet tough enough to be wall-hung and appended with all sorts of glued-down forms that, together, created the illusion that you were traversing vast distances. Curators typically categorize such practices as mapping, a designation that describes the look of Britton's work but not necessarily her motivations. Where most contemporary map artists redraw borders (racial, political, social or sexual) to express a particular worldview, Britton does so to plumb her past. She calls her work "emotional landscapes." They're maps, but "they're not maps of anything that exists outside of my imagination. They are a record of time spent "ordering and sifting" tragic events that befell her at an early age.



Reverberation # 21, 2014, ink, collage and cut paper, 30 x 30"

Her brother became a paraplegic following a motorcycle accident. Her father, a long-haul trucker and mechanic, died when Britton was a teenager. Her parents, who married as teenagers and had little formal education, struggled to support the family in Totowa, N.J., a small town outside Paterson. Much of the imagery contained in her earliest mature work came from road maps of routes her father travelled. Though her methods have evolved with compositions that have grown both simpler and more complex, the core of her art – byways running in all directions across variable terrain – remains intact. The artist says she creates this personal cartography to deal with "things I can't talk about."



The artist at Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, Omaha, Nebraska, March 2014. Photo: Colin Conces

To probe whether and to what degree she thinks her art resonates beyond herself, I read Britton a 1979 quote from Kim Levin in which the critic called mapping “an emblem of Postmodernism.” “Mapping,” Britton responded, “is deeply connected to the anxiety of the moment and artists are deeply connected to that,” adding that her art, which conveys both “fragility” and “tension” reflects those anxieties. “My work isn’t about the craft and the labor,” she stresses. “I want there to be a transformation.” Indeed, when you look at Britton’s work, the illusion of being drawn into wide-open spaces is so compelling that it is impossible not to be transfixed by her craft. That involvement transforms what we see and feel. With its roads to everywhere and nowhere, Britton asks us to confront, as *she* puts it, the question of whether “things are coming together or shattering apart.” The answer, of course, depends on where you stand.

Britton’s maps reflect a broad-based artistic response to the postmodern notion that a fault line undergirds every footstep. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari described the trend in a 1987 essay called *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: “The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant

modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation.” That, I think, describes Britton’s working method to a T.

–DAVID M. ROTH

Val Britton: “Passage” @ Gallery Wendi Norris through August 2, 2014.

<http://www.squarecylinder.com/2014/07/artist-profile-val-britton/>