

Northern California

'Topographies' at the Walter and McBean Galleries, SFAI

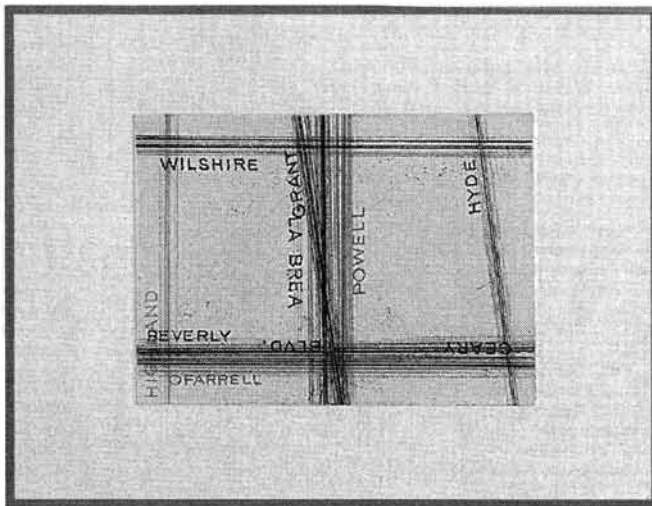
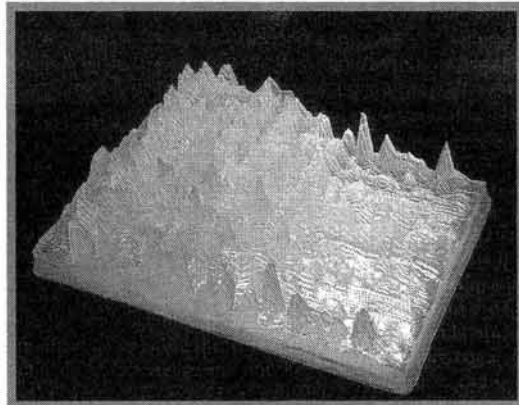
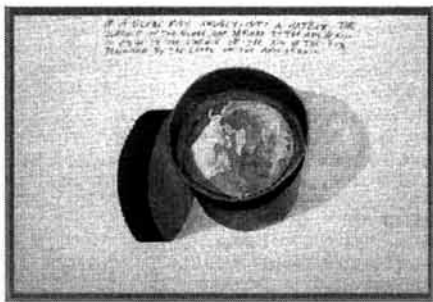
Our age of Patriot Act surveillance—the new panopticism—has led to the disciplining of space itself, by military and governmental practices as much as ideological and political tactics that have begun to redefine our relation to landscapes and mapping. Border zones, coastlines, entry points and other forms of territorial boundaries now become pressure-points for marking self and other, homeland and alien, good and evil, such that the logics of a so-called “war on terror” become inscribed into the landscape itself. At the same time, the collective paranoia of the mediascapes and threat-level discourses seeps into our everyday lives, resulting in a state of anxiety that seems to pervade the very environments we might otherwise wish to feel safe in.

These broader social contexts for the San Francisco Art Institute's exhibition *Topographies*, curated by Karen Moss, helped frame interesting questions regarding the artists' desire to map the conditions of our lives without falling into the same logics of those systems that aim to construct, constrict and constrain our movements and potentials within such landscapes. Several of the artists in the show used imaginative and conceptual approaches to take cartographic practices well beyond the Cartesian grid of the map and into social and spatial landscapes that open up new horizons for the understanding of our locations in and over the world.

The situationists' notions of psychogeography became starting points for several artists, as a way to rethink our own private negotiations of public space, in ways that don't normally reveal themselves in normative mappings. Lordy Rodriguez's multimedia *3 Roads to San Francisco* turned what

appeared to be drives from Los Angeles into sculpted cross-sections of an almost unrecognizable California coastline. Charles La Belle mapped his Hollywood neighborhood in terms of abandoned couches, using sidewalk refuse as a way to chart class segregation in Los Angeles. The San Francisco Bureau of Urban Secrets provided several interactive projects in which viewers could help “survey” an experiential understanding of the Bay Area, in terms of thought-provoking new categories.

Adam Ross and Tam Van Tran both used painting as a means of mapping, inventing new territories of color and shape. Sabina Ott's wild digital prints, *What's Here is Everywhere* (paint-



Clockwise from top: Bull.Miletic, *You Are Here*, 2001, two-channel video installation; David Hinman, *Sound Topography of Glass Shattering*, 2001, glass; Ed Ruscha, *Wilshire*, 2001, from the *Los Francisco San Angeles* series, color soft ground etching, 8-1/4" x 9-1/2"; Charbel Ackermann, *The New Geometry*, 2003, ink and pencil on paper, at the Walter and McBean Galleries, San Francisco Art Institute.

ings 1-8), morphed into three-dimensional topographical reliefs in the wood, Plexiglas and foam models of the prints constructed in collaboration with Eric h. Paulson and W. Megan Werner/dZp Models. Ingrid Calame's inventive, enamel-on-aluminum paintings added a conceptual twist to compositional mapping. She traces various stains found in urban streets and sidewalks and then collages them in her work, forging a series of bright abstractions that also function



as documentary maps.

Other artists explored the linguistic as means for new taxonomies and constructions of spatial relations. Simon Evans's exquisitely detailed maps used collage and text to chart out vast urban street maps that seemed to involve psychological states and political conflicts as much as actual real estate. Charbel Ackermann's hilarious *The New Geometry* explored “20 Axioms” in ink and pencil, charting various projections of the now-infamous “axis of evil” onto maps, demonstrating such geopolitical maxims as “if a globe fits snugly into a hatbox, the surface of the globe cap

defined by the axis of evil is equal to the surface of the rim of the box delimited by the level of the axis of evil.” Jessica Bronson's unsettling *perpetual perceptual* used bright, thin, light-emitting diodes that shot out random bursts of color against the walls. Only after a while did one notice that the burst of light were not only matched to the various threat levels of homeland security discourse, but also formed words such as “attack,” “report,” “severe” and other words from

our new, post-9/11 dictionary of terror-language. A different approach to the connections between language and paranoia was provided by Alex Slade's *The Conversation*, which included an elaborate sculptural map of several recorded dialogues in space, along with photographs of the café in which the various speakers were spied upon. This conceptually intricate homage to the Francis Ford Coppola film of the same name played on the tendency of paranoid logics to get so entangled in the details as to create new jungles of strange constructions and meanings.

Historical works by Ed Ruscha, Allan Kaprow and John Baldessari helped provide regional background for some of the curatorial concerns,

while video works by Bull.Miletic and Susan Silton, and conceptual sculptures by Shirley Tse and David Hinman brought additional media into the conversation. On the whole, *Topographies* was a challenging, critical and timely success.

—David Buuck

Topographies closed in May at the Walter and McBean Galleries, San Francisco Art Institute. Other artists in the exhibition included Young Kim, Rigo 23, John Roloff and Anna Von Mertens.

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