CityBeat

Cover Story: Atlas Sung

CAC's Uncoordinated and American Idyll dissect globalization and popular culture in new ways

LAURA JAMES — JUN 18, 2008 2 PM

In Greek mythology, the titan Atlas held the universe on his shoulders. He was being punished. Middle-20th-century thinkers liked to claim that they — the thinkers, the artists, the writers, the scientists — were culture's answer to Atlas. Without them, society would slack and fall. Now in our post-postmodernist world, we have thinkers in the form of young contemporary art curators like Maiza Hixson and Clare Norwood who manage to dissect both popular culture and popular thought with two smart exhibitions at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC).

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Sean Hughes

World Party

New perspectives

Let's start with the titan's namesake, which takes a disjointed form in Norwood's exhibition *Uncoordinated: Mapping Cartography in Contemporary Art*. Atlases and maps are ostensibly neutral things.

They tell you how to get from here to there; they show you where water meets land. But there's more to a map than directions — the colors, lines and shapes denote politics, war, weather and even economics.

Norwood takes up this idea in the first paragraph of the exhibition's brochure: "Though we equate maps with truth, one must be conscious of the omissions and limitations inherent in the mapmaking process."

The mapmaking process is like composing a system of symbols, a visual language. The writer and the reader share a common understanding with which to read the map — the same basic system that tells us what to wear, what groceries to buy and what story is newsworthy.

Indeed, the work Norwood chose for *Uncoordinated* pushes open the idea that maps aren't organic but rather *created* things. The artists included here all have a certain point of view, just like the makers of your handy city map — it's just that the artists aren't trying to hide their subjectivity.

Perhaps the first "map" you'll encounter as you walk into the gallery space is Torben Giehler's large painting, "The Question of Time." The angular shards of color translate into a Cubist sense of time and space. The map is fractured. Space is four-dimensional now, as time has been thrust into it.

Giehler plays with the idea of a painting as a "window." He has shattered that window's glass; looking through it now wreaks mental chaos, rather than a sense of understanding. You find yourself asking, "Where am I supposed to look?" Human perspective is shattered, revealing its bias.

Erin O'Hara Slavick's mixed-media drawings take up another gallery wall. From a distance the pictures seem like magnified cells showing some virus up close. As the mapping systems come more clearly into view, however, you begin to understand that the pictures are a kind of reconnaissance mission: images of lush green lands ravaged by war, bomb sites dotted in watercolor drops that look like blood.

Slavick's small drawings are beautiful to behold, which makes the reality of what they say even uglier. The key to the map is missing. The symbol is there, the meaning is there, but the common understanding is not.

At least two artists in *Uncoordinated* take the idea of authorship and subjectivity to a different level by joining actual text with cartography. Jonathan Callan uses books as his medium, warping them into strange sculptural masses. In "America in Ireland Is Invertebrate," he takes a small, neat hardback book and transforms it into something messy and beautiful.

First, note that the book is entitled "An Atlas of Invertebrate Structures." (The book's spine is entirely intact.) The cover has been eroded. At first the disintegration looks like mold, something natural, but in fact it's been forced by the artist's hand.

Look even more closely and you'll begin to see the "mold" for what it is — the shape of the United States peeling away from the ocean. There lies the message of the work, if not the book: Globalization has made its way to Ireland, eroding all that's in its way.

In "Being Unfair," Callan again uses books as his media. This time, he has morphed a stack of books into a standing sculpture. From the sides it looks like a 3-D map. From above, though, the viewer can clearly see titles like "A Christmas Story" and plenty of science books.

"Being Unfair" draws a parallel between learning tools and imaginary tales, gluing them together into one loopy looking, unstable mass. What's written, Callan is saying, is *not* what's true.

Another artist, Stephana McClure, plays with text as media. Her three works are each masses of shredded paper refigured into neat, illegible balls. Two of them are colorful — flat maps torn into unreadable piles of paper and restructured into a globe.

According to Norwood's text, "Maps of various locations in the world become spherical representations of those locations, giving the viewer a new perspective on place and time. McClure's sculptures, smaller than standard classroom globes, question how much information is possible to communicate with cartographic tools that we assume are used to tell the truth."

The artist has made of mess of the organized school system geography lesson. More than that, however, she pulls a famous novel — Melville's *Moby Dick* — into the world of maps, thus equating fantasy with so-called fact and dissecting them in the same way.

Uncoordinated is a global exhibition. So far, we've encountered artists from Asia, the United States, the United Kingdom and other places in Europe. It's fitting that Norwood would include some Cincinnati-based artists as well.

Tim McMichael, who has an exhibition right now at Clay Street Press in Over-the-Rhine, also has three works in the CAC show. "Currents" is a floor piece with black resin splashed into what looks like an oil spill. The viewer looks down on the work as if flying over some Exxon disaster.

More than that, though, the splashes also transform into island-like structures — accidental landmasses. "Currents" belies the apparently stable foundations upon which we stand.

McMichael's other two works are more legible maps — clearly delineated as the United States but tinted and shellacked into something not so obvious. One of the works has a map hanging sideways. Both have slats and lines running through the atlas like the rings in a tree stump.

According to Norwood, "McMichael debates identity, time and oblivion in his contemplation of our impermanence, and his works function as artifacts and evidence of moments fossilized and moments yet to come."

Another local, Jimmy Baker, has transformed his Google Map fascination into two photographic shots, "The Ends of the World South" and "The Ends of the World North." Though not the most visually enchanting images in the show, Baker has made a point: Google maps are perhaps the epitome of our globalized, digital culture.

As Norwood states, his photographs "describe a variety of global concerns that accumulate into a grim dystopian future. His maps/replicas contemplate the structure and navigation of information and how we perceive events in the hopes that we will be able to step outside of our moment in history."

Sing, sing!

One floor above *Uncoordinated* is Curator Maiza Hixson's *American Idyll: Contemporary Art and Karaoke*, and it seems one floor changes everything. Far from the muted, intellectual issues downstairs, *American Idyll* pops with color and fun and, of course, some curious insight about the connections between art, globalization and karaoke.

If you're lucky, you'll hear it before you see it — that's if someone has wandered into Christian Jankowski's "The Day We Met," an interactive, lounge-like karaoke bar.

Yet Jankowski isn't just about making museum-goers sing; for "The Day We Met," he commissioned the largest karaoke company in Korea, Tanjin Media, to create new backdrops for a karaoke machine using the artist as the central figure, which illuminates an odd sense of tourism.

According to Hixson, "karaoke videos typically serve as generic backdrops to illustrate karaoke song lyrics, (but) Jankowski uses them as a subversive means to engage ideas of tourism and globalization, as well as individual and group identity."

Phil Collins, a Scottish artist, mixes karaoke and TV in a similar way that Hixson has done with her entire exhibition — pairing the idea of an immensely popular television show (*American Idol*) with an immensely popular pastime (karaoke). Both seem innocuous, but right beneath the surface lays the foundation of globalization and personal and cultural identity.

Collins created his work, "He Who Laughs Last Laughs Longest," to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the television. The video installation documents a laughing competition in Scotland: everyone fake-laughing until they can't stand it any longer.

Watching it happen is eerie. It calls to mind the pseudo-pleasure of reality TV contestants, as well as the hyper-reality of a sitcom laugh track, both of which have become so ordinary in today's pop culture that we almost don't see or hear it anymore. Collins uses his installation to unmask the

speciousness of our globalized, televised culture.

A favorite work in *American Idyll* is Candice Breitz's "Karaoke," which like many of the installations has its own small gallery. It needs it: The work comprises 10 television monitors, each displaying a close-up of a different person (none of them native English speakers) singing the same song: Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly."

There is nothing soft about the work, though. The TV monitors are arranged in a circle, forcing the viewer/listener into the center. Each voice is different, each louder than the next, each seemingly trying to drown out the other.

What Breitz ends up with is a shouting match in song — a cacophony of voices, a mélange of faces, races and sexes. Again the seemingly innocuous song lyrics turn into something at once uniting and competitive.

It's simultaneously beautiful and horrible. It's a metaphor for both personal and cultural identity fighting for the chance to be heard though the anonymous sound of globalization.

Cincinnati-based artist Jose Versosa called upon Dana Ward, a local poet, to re-verse a letter Versosa found on the Internet, written by an anonymous 16-year-old boy. Versosa then had musician Bob Kellison set the poem to a musical score and placed that score with a microphone and a keyboard together to create his piece, "The Ballad of Toma."

Visitors who know nothing about the songwriter, the teenager or the poem are put in the position of becoming the vocal counterpart to it.

Versosa's work deals with the creative process but also with anonymity and that part of the creative class who goes unheralded. Songwriters and playwrights aren't the name-brand performers. It begs the question: How do we delineate an author?

Hixson refreshes this idea in a recent e-mail: "As I began to do more reading about karaoke I learned all sorts of interesting things. Such as that the inventor of karaoke, Daisuke Inoue, never patented the machine in Japan in the '70s, thereby missing out on millions of dollars; that he was recently awarded the Ignobel Peace Prize at Harvard by actual Nobel laureates for creating a machine that allowed people to tolerate each other more; and that he now makes a living making pesticides that keep roaches out of karaoke machines. ... In a way, Daisuke is a symbol of the anti-star, the un-American Idol."

Hixson leads me to another great artist in the exhibition, Marisa Olson. "The One That Got Away" documents Olson's attempt at pseudo-stardom in trying out for *American Idol*. The video is a ridiculous parody of the contestants and the show, revealing the weirdness and the painful

competition that it is. In 2004, Olson documented her attempts before the judges on a blog, asking her readers to choose an outfit for her audition and a song.

"I wanted to contrast reality shows like *American Idol* with karaoke in order to parody and question the premise of the reality show, that anyone could be the next American Idol," Hixson says. "Obviously, not everyone can be a star — it's like a talent Olympics or the lottery or the American Dream that suggests everyone can attain great wealth if they work hard enough. But these are all social constructions that conceal the reality of exclusion."

'Sense of relaxation and community'

Hixson and Norwood worked together in 2006 to curate *Experimental Personalities: Kate Gilmore and Angie Reed* at the CAC. But this is the first time each curator has had the opportunity to create an exhibition for the center on her own.

Both shows are bold, ambitious and fresh. They deal with recurrent issues in contemporary art — globalization and popular culture — but they use new substance to unveil the speciousness of our ordinary day.

Norwood, who has since moved to North Carolina to pursue opportunities there, writes in her curatorial statement, "All the artists in *Uncoordinated* bring to light new ways of thinking about mapping tools, mapping aesthetics and the subjective nature of maps and the potential to use historical cartographic methods to communicate ideas pertinent to today. Encouraging visitors to consider maps as both commentaries and philosophical inquiries, *Uncoordinated* provides the opportunity for all of use to rethink what maps mean and their potential to communicate ideas that otherwise might not cross our minds."

Hixson wanted to make the experience of going to a museum a little messier.

"While watching people perform karaoke, I found it extremely interesting to see how idiosyncratic each person's song choices and performance styles were and to witness an act that was simultaneously individual and collective, both a local and global cultural phenomenon," she says. "When I was given the opportunity to curate an exhibition at the CAC, I wanted to capture a ... sense of relaxation and community I felt through karaoke and to bring it into the art gallery. I also thought that since so many exhibitions deal with observation rather than experience, I thought it would be great way to give people an alternative to the typical engagement of seeing art hang on a wall."

The Contemporary Arts Center hosts UNCOORDINATED through Aug. 17 and AMERICAN IDYLL through Aug. 31.

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