

Imagined Geographies

By Paul Goodwin

As a geographer, I've always believed wholeheartedly in David Harvey's self deprecating maxim that geography is too important to be left to geographers¹. Harvey's warning was not just a sudden bout of self flagellating humour designed to debunk the over inflated egos of geographers in their professional colonisation of all matters to do with space and place. He made it as a political intervention in the context of the debate about the role of geographical 'sciences' in describing and mapping the contours of an ever changing, global expansion of capitalism to all areas of life. Although he didn't state it, Harvey must have had artists somewhere in mind as his intervention hinted to the endless possibilities in the expansion of what he calls the 'geographical imagination'. In other words, artists can reach spaces of the geographical imagination that geographers can't reach.

This is exactly the thought I had in mind as I entered the 198 Gallery in the heart of urban London, to see Monica de Miranda's *NEW GEOGRAPHIES* exhibition. The first thing the visitor sees as one enters the gallery is a wall mounted light box, *London A-Z (2007)*, which on first glance is a standard map depicting London boroughs and main transport and road arteries. As you explore the map further, you see that the place names dotted around the map are actually places from around the globe arranged in accordance with the location of communities from these places in London. London becomes a world city, a city as a world. In Miranda's creative mapping of the city, Melbourne brushes against Tunis, while Mombassa lies just on top of Jerusalem. Ealing becomes resolutely Polish while Afghans are dotted around Southwark. Traditional cartographic precision and certainties are 'lost' as they are displaced and decentred. Racialised urban hierarchies are overthrown and re-imagined as a patchwork quilt of 'glocalised' cosmopolitanism.

As you move further into the exhibition, new geographies surround and envelop you on all sides. *Tuning (2007)* takes you on a panoramic video journey across London to a shifting car stereo soundtrack of music, talk shows and jingles of various multicultural hues and languages. *In The Back Of Our Hands (2006)* consists of seven light box mounted pictures of hands of various ethnicities and colours with composite maps projected on them, while *Where Are U From?* is a spectacular series of wall mounted hanging pictures of the artist and her friends with various maps transposed onto their bodies reflecting personal life journeys. In all these works, cartography is forced to confront real bodies: flesh and blood, an embodied sense of place as opposed to the disembodied geographies of traditional maps. Miranda is putting the body back into mapping, a return to the spirit of the medieval 'mappae mundi'². By integrating symbolic and corporal images and non-representational elements into maps, the artist is able to disrupt linear and one-dimensional cartographies of power and social control.

¹ Harvey, David "On the History and Present Condition of Geography" in *The Professional Geographer*, Vol. 36(1), 1984.

² 'Mappae mundi' is a general term used to describe Medieval European maps of the world. The term derives from the Medieval Latin words *mappa* (cloth or chart) and *mundi* (of the world).

The geographical imagination is expanded in other ways in this exhibition beyond the map. Dominant images of national identity and territorial integrity are challenged and exposed in works such as *Biting Nations* (2006) and *Flags*. *Biting Nations* is a video of national flags painted onto nails being bitten, chewed and spit out nervously by various performers. The sound track of the cracking and spitting out of the nails juxtaposed with the images of national flags being mutilated induces a subtle and uncanny sense of unease in the viewer. Are we troubled more by the sights and sounds of cherished national symbols being mangled before our very eyes? Or is it the bodily self-mutilation being displayed that we find so disturbing?

States is another piece that disrupts hegemonic images of nationalism. Eight multicoloured flags are arranged in a parade on the gallery wall reflecting the pomp and ceremony of national flags as markers of identity. Some of the flags are generic but others show the colours of national flags related to the artist and her partner. On all of them are images the artist and her partner dressed as clowns kissing, thus softening the hard surface of national and nationalistic flags with a ludic, playful and absurd dimension.

Indeed, images of clowns in love, wondering through various assemblages of real and virtual places, are also themes in *Wedding Series* (video) and *Wonders of the World* (4 mounted light box images). In the former, the artist and her partner are filmed getting married in a registry office in London dressed in full clown regalia, whilst in the latter the clowns are depicted all over the globe with iconic places and monuments (Eiffel Tower, Tower Bridge, Statue of Liberty etc) serving as a backdrop to their joyful and jocund imaginary 'honeymoon'. In these works some of the rough edges of multicultural urbanism are smoothed out by enticing the viewer into a virtual dreamscape of interracial relationships, love and play that appear to transcend the mundane and often aggressive realities of urban living in many of the world's great cities. The figure of the clown as urban flâneur, globe-trotting mongrel and purveyor par excellence of a 'spread love' philosophy, seems a fitting harbinger of the utopian promise of a new metropolitan cosmopolitanism already hinted at in the very streets surrounding the gallery.

As I leave the exhibition and head out into the Brixton night, Monica's world of cosmopolitan mongrelism doesn't seem very far away from the sights and sounds around me in the Brixton cityscape. Nail parlours jostle for space with exotic food and fashion stores. Brixtonites in all shapes, hues and accents rush past me at all angles. I look at my London A-Z and think about all the painstaking and meticulous attention to detail and exactitude displayed in its representation of Brixton: geographers and cartographers hard at work. Yet the *new geographies* I saw, heard and experienced in Monica's exhibition and that I encounter everyday in the bewildering streets of the great metropolis are completely absent from my map. Maybe Ordnance Survey need to start hiring artists like Monica de Miranda. Or even clowns?

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