

BARBARA MENELEY

Cartographies for the Next 150

ART GALLERY OF REGINA



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to be exact

(a text in response to Barbara Meneley's exhibition, *Cartographies for the Next 150*)

One might ask—struck by the floor-to-ceiling masses of paper covering the walls—what kind of place is this? Hundreds of maps are assembled as a collage, so that one depicting Eyebrow, Saskatchewan butts up against others detailing sites in Québec, British Columbia or Nova Scotia. Produced between the 1930s and the 1980s, the maps reflect multiple generations of settlement in this place known by some—since 1867—as Canada. The maps were produced by the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC), founded in 1842 to establish a geological base through which to facilitate resource industries.¹ The GSC is currently part of the Earth Sciences Sector of Natural Resources Canada, a federal ministry whose maps continue to support nationalist impulses—but now through digital technologies.

These maps were not only used for resource extraction, but also for educational purposes. This collection of approximately 1000 maps was given to artist Barbara Meneley by colleagues from the Department of Geography at the University of Regina. Presumably outdated forms or excess data, the maps—some of which are yellowed with age and dog-eared—appear to have been well-used. Their representational scale (1:50,000), as well as the scale of their mass production indicate ambitious agendas. The hoisting of multiple static viewpoints of the ground upon the gallery walls is discombobulating. Horizons become vertical. Grounds slip away. There is a sense that something is being papered over. Something of imperial breadth.

The figures on the maps—denoting rivers, roads, towns, cities, rocky areas and marshy patches—seem to reduce life to a world of simple forms, outlines and icons: mostly black and white, but with washes of hushed, pastel tones. It is the kind of diminished, flattened surface that anthropologist Tim Ingold might qualify as “hard”—a vision of life as, “lived on or above the ground and not in it.”² The reductive imprints and smooth, white spaces of these maps indicate the spatial imaginary of a colonial conqueror who views a territory as *terra nullius*—a blank surface upon which history might be rewritten.³ These maps are powerful forms of representation—paper trails which reinforce oppressive spatial categories. They are part of a colonial system which has become so naturalized and impermeable that it demands, as theorist Lorenzo Veracini states, “[a] new language and imagination [...] we must become able to represent the decolonisation of settler colonial forms.”⁴

When first surveying *Cartographies for the Next 150*, patterns emerge: at “gallery height”, a row of maps juts forward from the wall. Arrays of small, angular cuts perforate these maps. They appear gridlike, yet organic, resembling at the same time computer punch cards and the work of moths. In places the cuts are so profuse and intricate the paper barely holds, buckling in on itself. Upon sustained looking, it appears what is being cut out are infrastructures, names and references. Indeed, Barbara has written, “the information removed varies from map to map, but includes radio towers, prisons, rifle ranges, historic sites, transformer stations, airports, refineries, malls, towns and cities, golf courses, sewage, trailer parks, gas plants, pipelines, gas & oil wells, non-Indigenous names, all map references (nts, lot numbers, highways, lat & long), map legends and orientation info.”⁵

If the density of the cuts demands extended reading, tracing the means by which they were made is a more immediate endeavour. Barbara has used an X-ACTO™—a ubiquitous form of utility or hobby knife with a blade set into a pen-like holder—allowing her to cut with editorial precision. Cutting is a method central to modern culture: from the cut-and-splice of film, the found-paper collages of visual art, the “cut-up” methods of literature, to the cut-and-paste techniques of analog graphic design.⁶ It is a fine line Barbara is cutting, both materially and conceptually. Her hand-cut process is labourintensive and exacting. Care is taken to remove settler inscriptions with as little disruption as possible to the paper—and by extension, to the land. Here, labour and imagination have the power to make things disappear, leaving cartographies that disorient settler colonial bearings and certainties.

Together, these innumerable cuts catalyse openings: the touch of their sharp edges exposes us to their critical agency. The excess of these cuts—paper fragments removed from the maps and held within glassine packets—rests on a light table, awaiting further consideration. These, as well as a video animating Barbara’s methods, underscore the processual condition of *Cartographies for the Next 150*. These unsettled cartographies engage an understanding of reconciliation, “not as a means to secure closure—thus fulfilling Canada’s national mythology of progress and inclusion—but rather as a place from which to begin the hard work of rethinking relationships and renegotiating responsibilities....”⁷

Joanne Bristol

1 According to their website, the GSC has, “played a leading role in exploring the nation.” Currently its, “world-class expertise focuses on the sustainable development of Canada’s mineral, energy and water resources; stewardship of Canada’s environment; management of natural geological and related hazards; and technology innovation.” Available online at <http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/earth-sciences/science/geology/gsc/17100>. (Accessed 14 May 2018)

2 Tim Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 45.

3 A Latin term meaning “nobody’s land”, the concept of *terra nullius* has been used to rationalize settler state occupation of Indigenous lands.

4 Lorenzo Veracini, “Introducing”, *Settler Colonial Studies* 1 (1) (2011): 5–6.

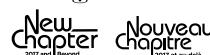
5 From an email exchange with the artist, 9 May 2018.

6 Of course, forms of paper cutting precede Western modernity: its origins date back to 4th century China, after the invention of paper.

7 This phrase, from scholars Allison Hargreaves and David Jefferess, articulates the necessity for settlers to continue to ask difficult questions about Canada’s colonial legacies and nationalist rhetorics. Allison Hargreaves and David Jefferess, “Always Beginning: Imagining Reconciliation Beyond Inclusion or Loss”, in *The Land We Are: Artists & Writers Unsettle the Politics of Reconciliation*, eds. Gabrielle L’Hirondelle Hill and Sophie McCall (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2015), p. 200.



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Catalogue Images:

1. *Cartographies for the Next 150* (installation detail),
2018, archival maps, paper
2. *Cartographies for the Next 150* work in progress
(studio shot), 2018
3. *Cartographies for the Next 150* (installation detail),
2018, archival maps, paper, glassine paper