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Nowhereland

More Explorations of Terra Incognita at Area 405

By Blake de Pastino

Places that never were seem livelier than actual spots on a map--at least in *Flat Earth*, the new show at Area 405 and only the latest in a curiously long spell of local art shows that have fretted over the idea of where we are. One exhibit after another in the past year has tried to position itself around this notion of place--the recent lodestone readings of Gallery Four's *Axiom*, the shows *Charmopolis* and *Habitats and Dwelling: Memory and Material*, both at Maryland Art Place--and running beneath each of them has been a heady sense of disorientation, of artists working either to find their bearings or to make sure that they never get found, but in either case roaming free, reeling out there in the great wide open. In *Flat Earth*, two of the three artists on display seem more interested in keeping their feet on the ground, but the show's most tough and reckless pleasures turn out to be found, literally, in the clouds.

Photographer Julia Pearson does not quite set a tone with her dozen untitled pigment prints that hover in 405's cavernous entry space. They're big, crisp visions of bitterly lonely scenes, all found in and around the burned-out Clipper Mill site, that brick husk of an industrial building on the Jones Falls filled with the skeletons of rusted trusses and other architectural memories. In one sunlit frame, the remains of a spiral staircase helixes its way into the empty air above it. In another, taken from overhead, rust-dappled cast-iron columns stand in rows, the ceiling they once supported having long since vanished. In a third, thumbnail nuggets of rubble lay scattered over layers of masonry, remainders of the decay brought about by fire and the elements. They're clear-eyed and expert pictures, but still difficult to fix: plaintive but not sentimental, vague but not mysterious. We look at them and feel--whether we're meant to or not--lost.

Washington, D.C.'s Jonathan Bucci puts a slightly finer point on things with his installations of latex and silicone that sit in heaps on the gallery floor. Through a process of tinting, molding, and layering rubberized material, Bucci sets out to distill landscapes into their irreducible essences of color and form. Like candy-colored topographic maps, they ooze out into shapes made recognizable only by their titles: In "Narragansett Bay," lumps of speckled brown sit ringed by streams of pure white and marbled blues, mimicking an aerial view of the Rhode Island bay in winter, the waterways choked with ice. In "Mount Rainier," an unassuming plateau of gray-white plastic spills down from all sides, striated all around in thin lines of blue and green, as if marking out frost lines or thresholds of altitude. And aficionados of environmental art may recognize the scene Bucci apes in "Biscayne Bay," a floor-bound archipelago of seven puffy green islands placed on a sea of blue, each encircled in bright pink; it's a commemoration--if you want to call it that--of the German artist Christo's early-'80s "Surrounded Islands" project, in which he and his wife swaddled islands off the Miami coast in miles of fuchsia-colored cloth. Whether parody or homage, there does seem to be a little Christo in these man-made bastardizations of the natural world. On Bucci's turf, the synthetic does battle with the organic, and arrogance takes root where once the land seemed humbling.

But visual puns prove no match for lengthy meditations, and this is where the digital art of Brandon Morse sweeps the field. On three large screens in 405's darkest corners, projections of shadowy gray clouds gather, rumble, and disperse over fabricated skies, and their combined effect is distressingly hypnotic. In "cumulus_1," gray-white puffs slowly accrete in a corner of a black field, in time collecting into the giant, rumbling nimbus of the title, and in just as many minutes it slowly dissipates, breaking into fragments that float off the screen. In

"the situation on the ground," a color scene projected onto the floor from above, a patchwork of Technicolor greens--lime, hunter, lima--gradually becomes obscured by colonies of clouds, swarming through our airborne view of the land below like rolling hordes of locusts. And in "cumulus_2," we stand before one of the most sinister images that vapor can make: A billow of smoky dust stirs up from the bottom of the screen, as if earthbound, rising like a fist into the blackness above. It's not a mushroom cloud but something more wicked, like a nuclear plume combined with a tornado. As minutes pass, it splits into two, each pillar of smoke burgeoning up and out, growing new billows like buboes looking to be lanced. In time, as in all the other pieces, these clouds pass, but you know what's left after they're gone is far worse off than when they started.

These are not blue-sky clouds, because Morse's is a world where weather never exists. The shapes he makes are richly textured and deeply shaded, but moreover, they're hyperactively unreal. As they advance in pixilated jitters across the screen, they seem almost menacingly unnatural, which perhaps is why it seems so unsettling when you realize you've been staring at them for five minutes at a stretch, with an expression on your face that's comparable to bliss. More than Pearson's photographs or Bucci's rubber landmarks, the work of Brandon Morse directs you to a bleak nowhere that short-circuits the nerves, and the pushpin that marks it on the map is sticking right in your mind's eye. **CPO**

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