Maps as Metaphors: Recent Work by Joyce Kozloff

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My library contains a world atlas that I purchased in 1989. It is full of the names and outlines of countries that disappeared, broke apart, changed names, or merged in the tumultuous final decade of the twentieth century. On these pages one can trace, for instance, Czechoslovakia, Zaire, and Burma - now just names without a country – as well as a divided Germany. And spanning a huge swath of the globe is a united Soviet Union, an empire that is now merely a ghost, hovering maliciously over its former states as they break up and assert their independence in bitter and often bloody battles.

Why do I keep this obsolete set of maps? In part, I suppose, it so graphically demonstrates the ephemeral nature of geopolitical "certainties." But as a memory prod, transporting me for a moment to a reality that has evaporated: In 1989 the notion of the Evil Empire still inspired fear in some quarters, whereas Sajarevo, Rwanda, Kosovo, Chechnya, and Sierra Leone were still untouched by the tragedies that would later engulf our consciousness of them. Hindsight colors these maps with both innocence and naïveté. They offer mute testimony to the fact that we lived in a different world just a little over a decade ago.

My atlas is proof, were any needed, that the power and charm of charts extend far beyond their instrumental purposes. As anyone knows who has pored over a map, dreaming of exotic travel or searching out obscure locations that suddenly were thrust into public awareness, mapping operates on many levels: it tells stories, incites fantasies, affirms dominion, promises wealth, and lures the adventurous to fame or disaster.

For the last nine years, cartography has provided Joyce Kozloff with a steady source of inspiration. Long acknowledged as a pioneering feminist artist, Kozloff has expanded her concerns to include such issues as the history of Western ethnocentrism, the meaning of public space, and the artificial separation of fine and applied arts. These all come to bear in her intricate, jewel-like paintings. She has drawn on many sources - cosmological charts, antique maps, topographical maps, nautical charts, and even nineteenth-century real estate maps - and has incorporated these into works that explore a range of topics: the spread of Spanish, French and British colonialism; the mix of fact and fantasy which constitutes America's consciousness of Vietnam; the relation between earth, surface and body; and the physical manifestations of the imperialist impulse.

While Kozloff clearly loves maps in themselves, becoming intimate with each tributary, road, cove and elevation marking as she painstakingly translates them to paint, it is clear that her real fascination is with map as metaphor. They become the means to explore her larger interests - the psychology of domination, the seductions of power, and the fallacies of the patriarchal and Western-centric vision of history.

But maps also function as art. Kozloff works magic on her sources, transforming fragments of real maps into tapestry-like paintings, liberally altering colors, overlaying

areas with related images, outlining and dividing them with decorative borders, and allowing pieces of unrelated maps to flow into each other in ways which amplify the context in which she intends them to be read. The resulting works function in the hazy territory between representation and abstraction, reminding us that maps themselves are artificial constructs, standing in for something that we perceive to be "real."

Though Kozloff has weighty matters to consider, the seductive beauty of these paintings prevents them from falling into mere polemic. This is evident in her most recent map-related works. For the first time she has created objects in the round, wrapping images drawn from flat cartographs around three-dimensional globes, yet she has kept the arbitrary nature of the whole enterprise of mapmaking in the forefront by refusing to disguise the edges and borders of the flat diagram which is their source.

Created during a residency in Rome, these globes are a continuation of her *Knowledge* series of flat fresco paintings, which also incorporated antique maps full of geographically incorrect information. The fresco format helped emphasize the nature of maps as craft, while also placing them within a historical period.

Kozloff's new works employ standard Rand McNally globes, covered with a layer of plaster, and then painted with watercolor, thus sustaining the aura of fresco. They are based on iconic cartographic pieces dating from first- century Rome to early seventeenth-century Europe and encompass the Western world's key eras of global exploration and conquest. But despite their makers' efforts at accuracy, by modern standards these maps are full of errors. For instance, in *Knowledge #77*, a globe based on Giacomo Maggiolo's 1564 Genovese Mappamundi, Europe is well realized and Asia is recognizable, but the southern hemispheres are tiny, reflecting, one assumes, the Italian Renaissance's lack of interest in that part of the world. By contrast, in *Knowledge #76*, a globe based on a 1602 map of China by Jesuit priest cartographer Matteo Ricci, the South Pole is dominated by a huge land mass which seems to be purely the result of Ricci's fantasy.

From a present-day perspective, such errors can be read as geographical Freudian slips, whose distortions reveal their users' underlying assumptions about the nature of the world. But in *Knowledge #78*, Kozloff reminds us that we are not without such biases ourselves: In this work, based on a world map created by Arab cartographer al-Idrīsī in 1154 for King Roger II of Sicily, she has followed the cartographer in inverting the usual north-south orientation of the globe, a reversal which underscores the fact that there is no up or down in space.

The more we examine these globes, the more ambiguous the title of this series becomes. Knowledge is always partial, always conditioned by our assumptions, and the search for it is more likely to be motivated by the desire for mastery than by mere curiosity about the universe. Powerful nations and individuals pursue knowledge in order to enhance their positions, yet its quest has also contributed to the betterment of mankind. Along with conquest and colonization, maps like these are also by-products of trade and exchange. They have helped to make the world smaller by spreading advances in technology and scientific information.

A striking feature of the *Knowledge* globes is the diversity of languages inscribed on them. *Knowledge #73*, based on the "Tabula Peutingeriana," a famous map of the Roman empire in the first-century A.D., is in Latin, the common language of politics and commerce at the time. *Knowledge #75* appropriates the Hereford Mappumundi, created in medieval England more than a thousand years later which is also in Latin, indicating the continued widespread usage of that ancient language. Giacomo Maggiolo's sixteenth-century Genovese Mappamundi is in Italian, however, pointing to the emergence of the nation-state. Other maps incorporated into Kozloff's globes suggest the presence of alternate centers of learning. Though created for the king of Sicily, al- Idrīsī's world map is in Arabic, Matteo Ricci's is in Chinese. These works by the great cartographers of the past are a reminder that ours is not the only age in which globalization represents a struggle between diversity and homogeneity.

For a modern viewer, one of the most engaging features of the *Knowledge* globes is Kozloff's incorporation of the pictorial motifs with which medieval and Renaissance cartographers embellished their maps. Some, like the tiny buildings on the Roman roads or the sixteenth-century sailing vessels on the Italian Mappamundi, provide a glimpse of the technological advances which made political and economic expansion possible. Other maps are scattered with tiny figures and creatures that speak of the accepted cosmology of their period. Most charming in this respect are the unicorns, centaurs, griffins and biblical figures that grace *Knowledge #75*.

Kozloff's pleasure in these maps, however, is colored by the sobering facts of history. This is particularly evident in *La Conquista*, a larger globe which incorporates elements from a variety of sixteenth through eighteenth- century maps and charts. More overtly polemical than the others, it is a meditation on the conquest of the Americas. Many of the components are laced with a sense of tragedy: diagrams of slave ships, views of slave ports, drawings of indigenous peoples as exotic savages, and most poignantly, a map of Tenōchtitlān sent home by Spanish Conquistador Hernando Cortés so that he could preserve a record of the city he was about to destroy. In *La Conquista*, Kozloff has painted the sea black, an apparent gesture of mourning for the destructive impulses this work conveys.

The premise of *Targets* is equally chilling, though again Kozloff has presented her ideas in an alluring format. Created during the same residency in Rome which produced the *Knowledge* globes, *Targets* is an enormous walk-in globe with an open oculus at the top, in homage to the Pantheon, the second-century Roman temple and one of that city's great architectural treasures. The exterior of the globe is of plain, unpainted wood; step inside and one is engulfed by a vividly painted mosaic of map fragments. Shaped a bit like sections of an orange, each map is painted a different color. Some are inverted, so place names must be read upside down. The feeling of disorientation is accentuated by a reverberating echo which amplifies and distorts any sounds originating from within the globe.

After a moment, the viewer begins to focus on the specifics of the twenty-four

segments of the sphere's interior. Each section is based on a contemporary aeronautical chart of a country that the United States has bombed since 1945 – for example, Korea, Guatemala, Congo, Vietnam, El Salvador, Iraq, Libya and Yugoslavia. The door section, which is built on wheels, depicts Colombia, a slight departure from the globe's scheme. This section makes reference to the destructive aerial defoliation of coca crops to which the U.S. has contributed under the guise of its "war on drugs."

For *Targets*, Kozloff borrowed from maps produced by the United States Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration National Ocean Service (NOAA). They come from two series: Tactical Pilotage Charts (TCPs) and Operational Navigation Charts (ONCs), both of which are created to assist military and civilian pilots. Adding a note of unsettling authenticity are occasional advisories printed on the maps as to the location of no-fly zones and other military hazards. Kozloff has greatly enlarged the map sections and painted each with a different palette in order to emphasize a sense of discontinuity.

The scientific precision of the maps Kozloff uses in *Targets* is in sharp contrast to the almost whimsical inaccuracies in the *Knowledge* globes. It serves as a reminder of the impersonality of modern warfare, where places in which civilians work and live are abstracted into a set of sight lines and landmarks for the purposes of disengaged destruction. This work also takes note of the clinical manner in which modern warfare is made palatable for a media audience, the most egregious recent example being the television coverage of the 1991 Gulf War. Using antiseptic diagrams of schematic bombs hitting stylized bull's-eyes, thereby masking the reality of the casualties and destruction they were causing, the presentation lulled the public into an acceptance of the war. Similarly, the sites referenced in *Targets* are, for most Americans, far away and somewhat unreal places that were necessarily sacrificed to uphold the geopolitical balance of power in the cold war and post cold war world. Kozloff quotes a startling statistic from the 1995 book *Killing Hope*, in which historian William Blum maintains that since 1945 several million civilians have been killed worldwide by American bombs. By painting maps of target countries on the inside of her globe, Kozloff withholds the satellite view that enables us to distance ourselves from such facts. We are forced to confront the landmarks and details that turn abstract charts into real places. Both *Targets* and the *Knowledge* series are informed by Kozloff's awareness of the arrogance of power. For all their beauty, the maps on which these works are based serve as instruments of control and domination. Mixing visual seduction with uncomfortable realities, Kozloff's globes quietly argue for more humane uses of our expanding knowledge and technology.