

JOYCE KOZLOFF: GLOBAL PLOTTING

Lucy R. Lippard

In the course of her long-time fascination with “decoration” from global cultures, and a staggering travel itinerary over the years, Joyce Kozloff has also become a visual historian. Unlike many of her 1970s colleagues, who remained faithful to the primarily formal vitality of the “Pattern and Decoration” movement, Kozloff has never neglected content. Initially committed to offering a two-way passage between so-called “fine” or “high” art to the “minor” or “traditional” arts of other cultures, she began in the late 1970s to extend her vision through public art to a certain topicality, establishing senses of place through regional expressions. Mexican and Islamic architecture, textiles, and decoration provided the original sources for her experiments.

Kozloff’s themes have ranged from pornography to folklore to crafts and then, in the early 1990s, came to rest with maps -- celestial and terrestrial, often military – as metaphors for power, culture, and conquest. In the process she has also chronicled “civilization’s” unending wars, including the one in which the U.S. is now misguidedly engaged. (Since the 1960s, Kozloff has been a tireless peace activist with various artists’ organizations – currently Artists Against the War out of New York.) *Boys’ Art*, a ravishing portfolio/artist’s book published by DAP in 2003, consists of hand-colored pencil copies of antique maps and battle scenes, with the collaged addition of superhero drawings by her son Nikolas as a child and the war art of the old masters, reduced by association to boys themselves.

Kozloff’s *Voyages + Targets* installation at Thetis, in the Venice Arsenale in 2006, brought her attention to the rich history of this once powerful multi-island empire, the

vortex of variously motivated travels, now primarily a tourist mecca for artists and rubbernecks. (As one of them, I was recently reminded of her work by the large globes, roman numeral/zodiac clocks, and wall-scale maps of the world as it was known in the 17th century, found in the ornate Doges Palace.) *Voyages* is framed by eight wall-hung banner painting/collages combining geometric pattern and figurative references through which Kozloff examines the history of navigation and cartography and Venice's major role during "the age of discovery."

A series of painted masks brings in the history of Carnival, still a major event in Venetian life, and -- a new addition for the New York exhibition as *Voyages* appropriately continues to expand -- a series of tondos, round paintings based on 17th - century cosmological charts. As in most of Kozloff's work, one theme leads to another and then another geographical site -- a world cut and pasted and reinvented. The layered and interconnected motifs from the Americas, Asia, and the Middle East include Mexican *papeles cortadas* from the Dia de los Muertos, cheery Halloween ghosts, and festival images of skeletons and skulls -- subjects considered macabre by our death-resistant society, paradoxically portrayed in joyful color.

The carnival masks sold in the ubiquitous Venetian mask shops (*carnevale* there is traced back to 1268) are locally decorated in infinite variety, some resulting in fine art, some in crass kitsch -- a fusion right up Kozloff's alley. She has painted hers with maps of islands from around the globe and down through history. On close scrutiny, the imagery reveals complex narratives and nationalist illusions of grandeur. Carnival itself is a kind of travel into mysterious realms of possibility, where identities can be lost and found and new destinations sighted. And maps, as is often pointed out, are vehicles for

mythical truths/lies. Often deceptive and easily manipulated; they have always been the tools of imperialism and colonization, as well as unconscious cultural mirrors. As in much of her work, especially *Targets* – a 9-foot walk-in globe that maps places where civilians have been bombed by the U.S.-- Kozloff subtly criticizes American global dominance, creating a political geography that exposes an obsession with empire building.

In the “American History” series, Kozloff presents the myths on which this country has thrived, borrowed at times from cartographic gameboards from her mother’s childhood. “Sing-along American History” offers music and rosy pictures of cheerful explorers, noble Indians, happy Black people, hardworking immigrants – “dearly held myths,” she points out, that surface today in American popular arts. Beneath this series lie nine sepia etchings of an 18th-century French fort rejected from a print edition, a fact irrelevant to the content but typical of the kind of palimpsest that sparks the densities of Kozloff’s work. Her weaving together of male/female, local/global, past/present is so thorough and so detailed that the seething, intricate surfaces of these pieces resemble a kind of postmodernist textile. Their multiplicity is a visual translation of a collective sensibility. Kozloff is a true collagist, creating new realities by severing images and narratives from their original meanings and endowing them with a cornucopia of possible relationships, so tightly knit that they recall Vuillard’s intimate dissonances.

The introduction of the body/mask as the medium of conquest raises questions of gender, as do Kozloff’s studies of war and masculinity. Maybe no man is an island, but women have historically been forced into isolation; masks were a recurring image in 1970s feminist art as women tried on new faces and tore off imposed identities. The

eerily blank eyes staring out from the expressionless faces of Kozloff's Venetian masks evoke the human fates triggered by maps of "exploration." The potentially violated body stands in for the planet, evoking the Gaia hypothesis – earth as a single organism. (In an earlier series on the Baltic Sea, Kozloff superimposed human veins on the waterways, merging circulation with the routes of humankind across the globe.) At the same time the mask is also flirtatiously elusive like the maps themselves, which often contradict their own logicity. Or, taking a different turn, these masks can be seen as celebrations, skin tattooed or painted like the personal body art of many cultures.

Kozloff's work is about as visually and narratively complex as art can be. The tondos, for instance, first seem to be direct translations of ancient maps, but they also incorporate contemporary references to Star Wars, time travel, and future wars in space. Initial impressions -- of brilliant color, pattern, texture—can be successfully enjoyed on a superficial basis. But to get it, the viewer needs to spend time, enter the images and stay a while. A lot is going on in there. Overlays and interceptions transform anything like a straightforward picture into a swirling, not-quite-chaos of references offering first one meaning, then another, undermining both truths and lies. The relationship of detail to whole could be a metaphor for the self in society, for the fragility of boundaries. This is what history really looks like.