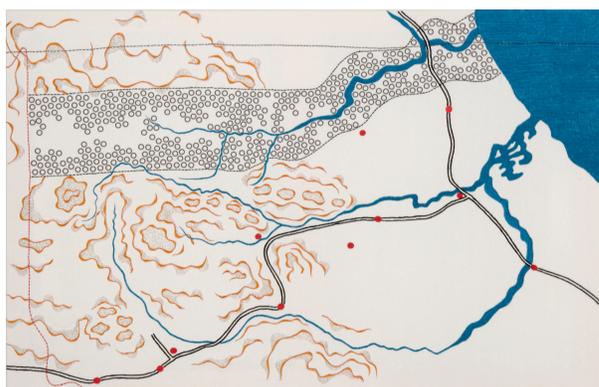




Maps from around the world inspire works in Kemper Museum's exhibition

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star



Many of Tiffany Chung's embroidered and beaded maps, including "DMZ-17th Parallel (Scratching The Walls of Memory Project)" (2010), are based on sites of conflict.

On exhibit

"The Map as Art" is at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 4420 Warwick Blvd., open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. The museum is closed Mondays. The free exhibit continues through April 21. For more information, call 816-753-5784 or go to KemperArt.org.

War, politics, alliances and annexations. Maps record them all — the countries that emerge or disappear, the name changes and redrawn boundaries, the targets and no-go zones, the spheres of influence and domination.

"The Map as Art," a new exhibition at the Kemper Museum, encompasses all of these aspects of the map and more. Curated by the museum's director, Barbara O'Brien, and Katharine Harmon, author of a 2009 book, "The Map as Art," the exhibit features seven artists who turn the visual conventions of mapmaking to their own conceptual and imaginative ends.

A large colored pencil drawing by L.A.-based Ingrid Calame hangs at the entrance and prefigures the show's emphasis on abstraction.

Calame is known for tracing and layering stains that she discovers in a variety of locations, from the street to the factory floor. Her "#112 Working Drawing" (2002), which the Kemper recently added to its collection, includes outlines of numbers and letters among its network of undulating lines.

Although the location and significance of these numerals and illegible words are lost to us, they record the urge to mark and classify and register the presence of human activity.

Like the rest of the artists in this show, Calame is concerned with the human ramifications of maps.

"The stains tell more and less about everyday life and incident," Calame has said. "By tracing this minutia, it's a way of doing the impossible, trying to represent the world."

Joyce Kozloff's "Targets," a walk-in globe lined with maps of 24 countries bombed by U.S. warplanes since 1945, occupies the strategic center of the show. The maps, copied from official U.S. charts, are positioned at different angles so that the viewer must twist and turn like a swooping airplane to read them. The curators chose to go deep rather than wide for this project, showing multiple works by each artist rather than a broad sampling of the dozens of works in Harmon's book.

The Kozloff selections include a new 12-by-12-foot painting, “Jeez,” inspired by the Ebstorf Map, an elaborate German medieval map that was destroyed during the bombing of Hanover in World War II. Taking off from the image of Jesus that appears at the top of the Ebstorf Map, Kozloff’s version incorporates 125 pictures of Jesus from a variety of sources. The images surround and inhabit a circular expanse filled with dense representations of medieval buildings, heraldic animals, medieval and Biblical figures and blue waterways.

Medieval maps were not made to be used for directions; instead they laid out the medieval world view, illustrating important players and places, stories and beliefs, and the hierarchies and relationships between them.

Philippine-born artist Lordy Rodriguez discerns an implicit world view in contemporary maps. In works such as “United States Map V (The World)” (2010), he scrambles the boundaries and locations of conventional world maps to highlight the ubiquity of the U.S. global presence.

In a colorful wall installation, Rodriguez plays with the graphic conventions of mapping in multiple closeups that suggest the world under the microscope as much as topography.

“The Map as Art” highlights artists who haven’t been shown here.

We don’t get Ai WeiWei or Maya Lin — who are in Harmon’s book — but we do get Boston-based Heidi Whitman, whose delicate abstractions float off the wall.

Whitman’s cut paper tracteries combine gestural elements with evocations of the urban grid, contrasting the unpredictable paths of daily living with the orderly blocks and streets of city planners.

Her titles — “Then and Now,” “There to Here” — similarly evoke movement in time and space. The works, in different formats — round, oval rectangular — are not flush with the wall, but hang an inch or two out from it, casting fragmentary shadows that contribute animation and dimension.

Map artists are obsessive creatures and none more so than Brooklyn-based Robert Walden, whose “Ontological Road Maps” use thousands of tiny marks of varied density and openness to conjure places that exist only in the mind. From a distance, Walden’s detailed locales present elegant shapes with tentacle-like extensions. As one nears, they exert a veritable force field of insistence, demanding close perusal of the artist’s gloriously laborious manufacture.

In a series of “Ontological Surveillance Maps,” Walden employs a diptych format, pairing the meticulous drawings in colored ink with digitally enlarged segments that speak to the interests of an imaginary surveillance operator.

Maps and memory

Vietnamese-born Tiffany Chung marks an addition to the map artists who appear in Harmon’s book. Most of Chung’s works in this show come from her 2010 “Scratching the Walls of Memory Project,” sparked by personal recollections and expanded to encompass collective experiences.

Chung was 4 in 1973 when her father, a helicopter pilot taken prisoner by the North Vietnamese, was slated to be released during a prisoner exchange. But the release didn’t happen. In a 2010 interview the artist said, “I thought about the story of my mother waiting at one side of the Thach Han River, with walls of fog surrounding her small body, and about my father who never got released to cross that river ...”

In “DMZ-17th Parallel (Scratching the Walls of Memory Project)” (2010), she revisits the site of that ill-fated prisoner release using beads, grommets and embroidery to portray the area’s geography and the movement of people.

Chung addresses the human costs of other conflicts in her beaded and embroidered map of the Berlin Wall and her circular rendition of Nagasaki, which suggests a big target.

“A lot of my work is based on treaties,” the artist has said. One map concerns the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, which helped ensure continued British access to Iraqi oil; another map shows the “Kaesong Armistice Conference Site 1951,” where negotiations to end the Korean War began.

Chung studies maps of the areas her works are based on, and her embellished renditions are geographically accurate.

Two maps of Tibet showing the differences in the country’s size and shape depending on the differing claims of the Tibetans, the Chinese, the Simla Conference and the Dalai Lama’s government, are among several delicate works in which the artist exchanges embroidery and canvas for ink and oil on vellum and paper.

Dallas-born New York artist Nathan Carter is known for his affinity for the work of Alexander Calder and the use of found objects, as seen in two recent mobile-style collections of colorful items displayed in this

show. But Carter steps away from both of these in his engaging site-specific installation, “Roosevelt Island Call and Response Hello Brooklyn Hello Swinden” (2012).

Featuring assorted colored shapes mounted on stands or projecting from the wall, the work reads as a 3-D abstract painting, with a decidedly casual air. Carter’s geometric shapes are imperfect and obviously handmade, bringing air and life to a vocabulary associated with the realm of the ideal. His palette, dominated by pink, red, silver and light blue, is as distinctive and idiosyncratic as his handling of composition. The suspended linear elements contribute a gestural flair.

In tough economic times it’s no wonder that museums want to keep their sponsors happy, but the Kemper’s latest solution comes a bit too close to advertising. More than a half dozen individual works in “The Map as Art” are accompanied by green cards, featuring bold type at the top announcing “Companies who put Kansas City art on the map” followed by a thank-you message incorporating the name or logo of a corporate or foundation sponsor.

There has to be a better way.