

The Boston Globe

At the Addison, contemporary artists push back on traditional mapmaking

Murray Whyte



A detail from Heidi Whitman's "New World." JULIA FEATHERINGILL PHOTOGRAPHY (CUSTOM CREDIT)/COURTESY HEIDI WHITMAN

ANDOVER — “They make magic lines only they can see” fretted a member of the Hupacasath First Nation of British Columbia, long ago, as colonial surveyors sliced up his ancestral lands into tidy parcels, a fraction of which would become the Hupacasath’s reservation. That quote, excavated by the Indigenous artist Sonny Assu, undergirds almost all of what matters in “Wayfinding: Contemporary Artists, Critical Dialogues” at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover.

The museum is best known as a trove of often-astonishing treasures of American Art — downstairs from “Wayfinding” is the full display of Robert Frank’s landmark photo essay “The Americans,” part of the Addison’s permanent collection. But it also happens to have a beguiling suite of maps from the earliest colonial era, a 2011 gift from patron Sidney Knafel. “Wayfinding” is one of the best examples I’ve seen of what you actually *do* with an eccentric collection misfit like this one. Assu is one of a half-dozen artists invited to respond to the Knafel collection, which ripples outward through the ages in expansive, tumultuous waves. So it seems only right that, for at least four of the six artists here, the

result is less a response — an ambivalent term — than an indictment. Given centuries of colonial savagery woven through the prettified idiosyncrasies of the Knafel maps, I'm here for it.

Any map is predicated on pragmatism: What's where and how to get there. Drawn in the heady times of faraway new worlds, the Knafel maps are all but giddy with the spirit of discovery, with elaborate script and fanciful figures from sea monsters to moose. But they're also loaded with subtext — of brutality, of dispossession, of laying claim. The natural mission of "Wayfinding" is to draw it all to the surface.



A 1628 "America" map by Gerhard Mercator. BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY/COURTESY PHILLIPS ACADEMY

There's no particular way through "Wayfinding"; you can go any direction from the museum's top-floor landing, where an expanse of wall holds a cluster of maps from the collection that span the 15th to 19th centuries — a stage-setter, the before to what comes after. But it's hard to not be pulled hard right into the gallery where Heidi Whitman's "New World" seethes, all but alive on the walls. The gallery, modest-size but not small, is jam-packed, a claustrophobia of intent. Knotted rope dangles from the ceiling, evoking the holds of slave ships heavy with human cargo. On one wall, a patchwork of hand-stained blue canvas strips stand in for the sea, the colonial byway. Squatting adjacent is a glittering heap of ragged fabric and paper spattered red, black, and gold; it's bleak, decadent and violent. Beside it, a pinwheeling eruption of tar-black poison spews chaos in all directions.

It might take a skim of the wall text to know that "New World" is Whitman's version of colonial history in three chapters: the crossing; the ravages of arrival and displacement; and its perpetual, toxic aftermath, of which 2020 serves ample evidence all on its own. If you read a map as the will of conquerors imposed in the conquered — as you should — then "New World," for all its chaos, rings clear and true.



A view of Heidi Whitman's "New World" installation. HEIDI WHITMAN/JULIA FEATHERINGILL PHOTOGRAPHY

There's no work in the show more visceral than Whitman's, an explosive bout of reckoning that envelops and engulfs. That's not to say others don't resonate. Andrea Chung's "The Westerlies: Prevailing the Winds" is cosmic and delicate, a geodesic dome draped in a cyanotype galaxy, the stars there to serve as early warnings of colonial marauders charting their path across the seas. Less cosmic would be Josh T. Franco's work, centered on a snake cobbled out of colored stone and splayed on the gallery floor. Step carefully over and through and you'll develop a sense of communion with the wonder of Franco's evocations — of ancient cave paintings and wayfinding mechanisms, eons before European explorers ever thought to draw lines on a map. Franco's work forges a connection — in color, in form, in the ground underfoot — across millennia, then to now. In a set of painted panels on the wall, he quotes Aby Warburg, the German cultural theorist who more than a century ago visited the Hopi tribes of New Mexico, moving him to see modern European culture as a blip against the vast arc of Indigenous practice despite centuries of attempts to destroy it. "It is only the contact with the new age that results in polarization," he wrote.

"Wayfinding" is wonderfully ambitious, not least in that it invited all six artists to make new works with the Knapfel Collection in mind. Inevitably, there are divergent takes. We shouldn't necessarily be surprised that two-thirds run on thematic parallels. Perhaps we should be more surprised about the one-third that don't. Spencer Finch's work here is what you might call romantic minimalism: Landscapes, of a sort, distilled to their essence in small color swatches the artist encountered on nearby hikes (a piece called "Maine Landscape" features little daubs of watercolor free-floating; various breaths of blue are labeled "ocean," the green "Doliver Island," and red "a boat.") They're spare, beautiful and dreamy, and there for you, if you need a break.



Spencer Finch's "Maine Landscape (Atlantic Ocean From Isle au Haut, low tide) afternoon effect," from 2017. DAN BRADICA/COURTESY SPENCER FINCH AND JAMES COHAN GALLERY

I wouldn't say the same of Liz Collins, though her "Map Key," a cartoonish sculpture with a drape of white fabric hung between thick vines, bleeding profusely, isn't what you'd call aloof. But there's still some distance plied between subject and form and how she resolves it. Collins's work burrows into formal convention, dwelling in the arcane qualities of markers and navigational calibration as hard-edged abstraction. One lovely piece, a drape of silk suspended from the ceiling called "Stretched Markers," could be Bauhausian tapestry, if not for the navigational title.

It makes a strange companion in the show's one big room, with Chung's dome glowing nearby, and Assu's pair of video game consoles laced with acid wit. One of them is called "Look At What I Columbused 2"; the other "Landback," both in goofy '80s-arcade font. They're not playable — I tried — but the flickering screen, blinding and cold-white, says a lot as you poke and toggle at button and joystick. It made me think of the restive jitters of generations of Assu's ancestors, Poltergeist-like, triangulated onto tiny land plots where the surveyors' magical lines said they belonged. Isn't that what was Columbused — a new world, carved into an old one active and thriving?



Sonny Assu's "Look at What I Columused 2" and "Landback." FRANK E GRAHAM/COURTESY SONNY ASSU AND THE EQUINOX GALLERY

“Landback” would be a revenge fantasy if it wasn’t actually happening, at least in Canada and in tiny bits and pieces. Assu’s Kwakwaka’wakw First Nation is [one of many engaged in the slow-walk process of treaty negotiation with the provincial and federal governments toward repossession of lands and resources and self-government](#). Along with it will come a map sure to be redrawn, as, in this broken world, they seem destined to be.

WAYFINDING: CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS, CRITICAL DIALOGUES

Through Feb. 28. At the Addison Gallery of American Art, 180 Main St., Andover. Timed tickets must be purchased in advance. An online exhibition preview is also available. 978-749-4015, addison.andover.edu