

BORDERCROSSINGS

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BORDERCROSSINGS

Amy Schissel

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Crossovers

Ara Osterweil

“Cosmography” is the word that came to mind as I stepped into Amy Schissel’s recent exhibition. Spanning from floor to ceiling, Schissel’s black and white works on paper scintillate like a planetarium clustered with stars. Up close, they overwhelm with kinetic energy and intricate detail. Lines, circles, drips, dots, loops and pixels combine to map impossibly complex geographies in which suggestions of mountains, rivers, waterfalls, snow drifts, constellations and distant galaxies compete with dizzying renderings of digital noise. What strange world might all these frenzied marks suggest? Without initially understanding why, I somehow knew it was our own.

Schissel’s work draws upon the tradition of Renaissance cosmography and its fascination with terrestrial, celestial and representational space. The practice itself goes back to the Greeks: the Aristotelian conception of the cosmos insisted that correspondences could be mapped between the corruptible, elemental *mundus* and the incorruptible, ethereal *caelo*. Cosmographers aimed to uncover the laws that govern the dynamic relationships between these elements. To do so, they relied upon methods of graphein: drawing or description. Of course, Renaissance mapmakers did not have computers to create interconnected digital models, like we do.



Amy Schissel, installation view, “Alternate Futures,” 2023, Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Montreal, acrylic, oil, graphite, ink on paper, dimensions variable: approximately 7.32 × 17.68 metres. Photo: Maxime Brouillet. Courtesy Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Montreal.

Mining the potential of contemporary technologies to offer alternative perspectives of our emplacement within the universe, Schissel’s “maps” merge handmade marks with highly mediated images of digitally produced data. Large-scale paintings on paper—which the artist refers to as “vignettes”—were affixed to “wallpaper” covered in repeating patterns of linear webs and networks. The effects of these multi-layered compositions were simultaneously awe-inspiring and vertiginous, like an exponentially expanded painting by Jackson Pollock collaged over with even more labyrinthine webs.

At heart, Schissel is a painter in the abstract expressionist tradition whose innate curiosity about the world, and spiritual quest to understand her own precarious place within it, led her down the rabbit hole of digital mapping. What she found, to her astonishment, was a visual language with an uncanny resemblance to painterly abstraction. Recognizing the affinities between pixels and pointillist dots, as well as the futurists' "divisionist" brush strokes and the clusters that form in digital mapping, Schissel began to wonder whether the very process of digitization stemmed from the dissection of abstraction into its smallest gestures.

What does it mean for an artist committed to what Harold Rosenberg described as "action painting" to extend her own sweeping bodily motility with forms of technology that can both mimic and mediate it? After becoming fascinated with programs that scientifically visualize our cyber locations and social media identities, Schissel began to incorporate elements of these lexicons into her drawings. Transfixed by the notion that each of us is simultaneously an embodied being traversing different physical locations, as well as a vector in a seemingly disembodied world of data, she became intent on merging cybernetic and more traditional cartographic forms of mapping.

Schissel first draws upon the tropes and methods of abstract expressionist mark making that are the foundation of her practice. After freely and intuitively covering her surfaces with small black dashes, scribbles and lines, the artist enshrouds it with a veil of white paint, which she then partially rubs or sands off to reveal the intricate designs beneath. The resulting surfaces resemble monochromatic moonscapes. Mid-century artists would have let these uncanny topographies be. Yet Schissel forges ahead, coaxing these paradises of marks and mountains into more frenzied representations of urban

sprawl and cyber surveillance. By doing so, the painter indexes our fall from an AbEx Arcadia into the dystopia of the digital present.

Throughout her process, Schissel retains her commitment to the handmade mark. Although she includes layers of digitally produced materials, she nonetheless insists on her own idiosyncratic interpretation of the cosmos. As the artist explained to me, even her wallpaper is generated in the interface between digital and analogue processes of abstraction. After photographing her own gestural drawings, Schissel uploaded them to a coding program that enabled her to alter them algorithmically. She then printed them out with the help of a large “pen plotter” that inscribed her designs through the arm-like manipulation of a digital “pen.” Once they were printed, Schissel laboriously reinscribed these images with her own fleshy hand, thus returning them to the analogue and artisanal realm. Emerging from the relationship between the artist and the machine, the drawings on view suggested a kind of endless feedback loop, or what the artist herself has described as a “rhizomatic amorphic structure” defined by its intensely clustered densities of space.



Amy Schissel, installation view, “Alternate Futures,” 2023, Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Montreal, acrylic, oil, graphite, ink on paper, dimensions variable: approximately 7.32 × 17.68 metres. Photo: Maxime Brouillet. Courtesy Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Montreal.

Throughout her process, Schissel tracks her own movement on the painterly ground that she has prepared, while remaining hyperaware of the inevitably gendered ways that she has navigated her various homes: first, in Alberta, at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, later at the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains in West Virginia, and— for a briefer stint—when she was a regular traveller through the Scottish Highlands and isles. By mentally mapping her embodied memories of these places, Schissel reproduces elements of the landscapes that had become ingrained in her daily routines. As in the unconscious itself, every one of them leaves a trace. No wonder so many mountainous forms appear in the abstractions of this peripatetic Canadian artist.

Of course, when marks meander as far as the eye can see, they threaten to lose their meaning. I am not usually impressed by art whose primary feature is that it took a lot of time, patience and/ or equipment to make. Neither do I gravitate towards works that fetishize or aestheticize the means of our technological alienation. Although Schissel's installation required a staggering amount of time and patience, hers was not yet another indifferent encounter with Art in the Age of AI. The endlessly variegated mark making on view did not blithely celebrate the wonders of technology but bore down on the artist's commitment to the painterly gesture as idiosyncratic intervention. The mental and bodily endurance required insists on the continued relevance of embodied forms of artmaking. I could not help but wonder about the hand that made these marks, the body to which those hands belong, the brain struggling to map a universe that defies mastery.

Though we are subjected to endless forms of surveillance and bio-mapping, we remain stubbornly corporeal and unbearably fragile. The fact that Schissel completed this project while recovering from a surgery that removed two tumours from her brain—compelling the new mother to fear for her child's welfare as well as her own life—adds an unspoken pathos to her ambition to graph the visible and invisible contours of a cosmos in which we are each but one vulnerable pinpoint of light. The true nature of the world can be understood only as a kind of sacred geometry. The most any of us can do is leave our mark. ■

“Alternate Futures” was exhibited at Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Montreal, from October 7, 2023, to December 2, 2023.

Ara Osterweil is an abstract painter, as well as a writer, critic and professor at McGill University. She will have a two-person show, with her

father, Allan Osterweil, at Hudson Hall, Hudson, NY, from June 7, 2024, to July 28, 2024. Her work is available at www.araosterweil.com.

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