Incognesia

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Incognesia

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The School of Art and Art History

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Dedication

To my wonderful family: my mom, Kathy, and brothers Jesse, Scott, and Travis. And to Stephane Shu Kin So. I love you all.
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Thank you to my family and Stephane, as well as friends around the globe. Your support is much appreciated.

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Abstract

A monograph for the MFA Thesis Exhibition for Holly George, exhibited in Sawhill Gallery in Duke Hall April 5, 2010 – April 10, 2010. The title of the exhibition, *Incognesia*, is indicative of the artist’s process of mapmaking. It is a fusion of other words, an invention based on fact but nevertheless on the verge of fantasy. Like each word in Lewis Caroll’s poem, “Jabberwocky,” the title calls multiple meanings to mind. It utilizes the Latin *incognitae*, meaning “unknown,” but also references its later cartographic usage of “undiscovered” lands. While the suffix, *-nesia*, links to a series of islands such as Indonesia, Micronesia, etc. and is derived from the literal Greek meaning of “the land that swims in the sea,” it also suggests the word “amnesia.” More than just unknown, amnesia indicates a consistent state of not knowing, or an inability to know. In addition, the word *Incognesia* may bring to mind anesthesia, a loss of sensory awareness, thereby flagging psychology’s idea of aesthetic apprehension, or a state of not knowing through the senses. The creation of these artist maps evokes imaginary worlds that demand a new framework – one that is fluid, anarchic, and mythical in its un-Cartesian irrationality. The maps are first situated in relation to the organic nature of the figure and the ephemeral state of fluidity. Second, they visualize an anarchic blur of space in response to the modern expectation of Cartesian logic, again referring to movement, fluidity, and now the haziness of the images. The maps are then positioned in a place of placelessness, implying a utopian space. Finally, they reference another imaginary space, the heterotopia, as an incomprehensible “other” to our mental image of the world.
When we encounter maps, we immediately and instinctively begin to decode them for information. We overlay our experience of the world onto the scientific grid of the world we encounter in map form. But what if the grid is defied? The flattened version of reality that we try to decode might be un-coordinated, de-standardized. What if, like my own photographic maps, our familiarity with map structure is stretched so far as to be on the hazy border between comfortably legible and futilely directionless, in a new space that requires active interpretation and acceptance of unreadability? Now the maps we encounter require us to restructure the expectancy of a location into a fantastic space, and they challenge our own experiences of the world when attempting to visualize them in connection with the map.

I create maps that evoke imaginary worlds that alter the meaning and concreteness of the term location. Ultimately, they demand a new framework – one that is fluid, anarchic, and mythical in its un-Cartesian irrationality. To this end, I first situate my maps in relation to the organic nature of the figure and the ephemeral state of fluidity. Second, I highlight the visually anarchic blur of the space in response to the modern expectation of Cartesian logic, again referring to movement, fluidity, and now the haziness of the images. The complexity of these elements coincides with the changing perspectives and uncertainty of the rising Internet-driven worldview. I then position the maps in a place of placelessness, implying a utopian space. Finally, I reference another imaginary space, the heterotopia, as an incomprehensible “other” to our mental image of the world. The maps
are a fiction, a mindscape, or a cyber-age heterotopia. The viewer approaches them as familiar signs that lack their signification, and therefore require individual, imaginative interpretation. They are a re-mystification of maps and a challenge to our rigid conception of the world.

In *Incognesia*, all of the maps seem to be either peeled back from a mysterious, curving, three dimensional mass, like a map projection, or spinning or unfurling in a circular movement from the depths of the paper, as seen in *Compass Spinning* (fig. 1) and *Not Yet Arrived* (fig. 19). Stretched out like new projection models of distinct, strangely-shaped worlds, the maps in this series warp cartography’s logical projection strategies of the last half-millennium into an organic space. The organic quality of these bodies of land invokes the human figure. The viewer can see an abstracted relation to the body in *Swept Away* (fig. 3), *Upright* (fig. 16), *Beneath the Surface* (fig. 2), *Narrow Passage* (fig. 14), and *Detached Shadows* (fig. 6). In addition, the burning colors in *Not Yet Arrived* (fig. 19) are encompassed by a loosely fetal form, and *Cast Off* (fig. 8) emulates a translucent bust with yellow migratory vein structure. Similar to this network of veins, *Inverse* (fig. 15) is a form held together by bursting red webs that just barely ensnare the escaping landmass. If this fugitive island can be viewed anthropomorphically, then it implies a stretching or emerging of the mind. Further, this negative-positive tension can be seen in the negative space between the two islands in *Adrift* (fig. 10). The slender space between is crucial to the relationship of the forms. If they were dancing, it would be the tango, strategically interlocked and spinning around the “sound” that separates, or perhaps fuses, the bodies of land. Likewise, the figural form and negative space in *Into Orbit* (fig. 4)
suggests abstracted legs that support the constellations in a cosmology of the heavens, causing us to wonder what kind of creature it could be that raises up the celestial realm in this new mythology. We even question whether we are truly seeing a map of the stars.

The curving and unfurling of the forms also hints at the circularity of Tibetan sand mandalas, which are maps in their own right. Much like my maps, the clarity of a worldview is not defined by evenly spaced lines, exact measurements, and solid, permanent representation. These ephemeral sand mandalas “[reflect] mythology more than they [do] geography.”1 It is unthinkable to calculate the scale of a monk’s cosmos or to visualize a world that is unrealizable.2

Moreover, there is a delicacy to my fabricated maps that enhances their imaginative and incorporeal foundation. I use Japanese kozo paper, which is deceptively delicate and ethereal, and the bleed of ink into the paper recalls soft watercolors.3 The sweeping, expansive gestures of the images themselves reference a cosmos outside of our withering geographic consciousness. The motivating force of the unknown in the cosmos parallels a spirituality in the forms and details reminiscent of Joseph Cornell’s assemblage boxes with constellations: “‘As abstractions of the stars, they are constructions of the human spirit.’”4 Like the stars, this spirit cannot live and grow in a stagnant environment. The gesture and overarching figural forms of my territories suggest a fluidity, mobility, and perpetual shifting of boundaries – both physically and mentally. As Foucault indicates in his theoretical view of the world, the maps “acknowledge the impossibility of pinning down what is always shifting.”5
My maps also include a modified affect for the map dot, the point typically designated as a stable location. The map dot may become the locus of movement or depth, or it may take on an ambiguous significance, as in *Spinning Compass* (fig. 1). Here the blue body of water is seductive and magically utopian in its vivid color, however, the very vibrancy of it is also lonely and even vaguely menacing, decentralized in a blur of warm brown earthtones and pale green swirls. The deep blue overpowers the legible material in the new map, relegating that decodable parcel to a secondary level of lucidity. By piercing the blur so starkly, the sublime blue gauges this imaginary world in a way that information in its straightforward, labeled form cannot, since the blue reaches deep into and through the emerging surface into a cosmology that the grid could never allow.

An alternative form of gauging space can also be seen in the spots of color in *L’Artefice* (fig. 13) and *Upright* (fig. 16). *L’Artefice* bares a pale pink map dot at the center of what could be a vaguely figurative head, but *Upright* has perhaps the most powerful “dot.” The suggestive, red landmass in the map is nearly centered within a cavity of a pelvic form. The implications for these vibrant spots of contrasting color are ambiguous, however they require us to question the importance of that location within the map and, in fact, that location in relation to our world.

In *Orienting* (fig. 18), we can tell by the colors that this is obviously a political map, one that is stretched and troubled. A flesh-toned map dot is centralized among this political turmoil, and it is unclear whether this spot is a haven or a trigger for its surroundings.
The contradiction between its authority and its affect is capitalized visually by its ambiguous state of emerging or being submerged as the form rotates around this point, implying the fluidity of active existence. Other forms take on this same transient fluidity by virtue of the hazy coastline and delicate inlets, and they suggest a mere moment in the action of the land, as well as a topography that sinks into and behind the paper surface.

The title of the exhibition, *Incognesia*, is indicative of my process of mapmaking. It is a fusion of other words, an invention based on fact but nevertheless on the verge of fantasy. Like each word in Lewis Caroll’s poem, “Jabberwocky,” my title calls multiple meanings to mind. It utilizes the Latin *incognitae*, meaning “unknown,” but also references its later cartographic usage of “undiscovered” lands. While the suffix, -*nesia*, links to a series of islands such as Indonesia, Micronesia, etc. and is derived from the literal Greek meaning of “the land that swims in the sea,” it also suggests the word “amnesia.” More than just unknown, amnesia indicates a consistent state of not knowing, or an inability to know. In addition, the word *Incognesia* may bring to mind anesthesia, a loss of sensory awareness, thereby flagging psychology’s idea of aesthetic apprehension, or a state of not knowing through the senses. Similar to the creation of the exhibition’s title, my mapmaking process involves photographing traditional maps through a series of manipulations, and then fusing the photographs together like computer assisted early images of lunar and planetary bodies in space. I first use an analog form of distortion via flexible layers of transparency that bend and stretch the traditional map into an unrecognizable form. The resulting photographs envisage fragmentary reflections of the map space and are then rearranged into an alternate whole so that gestures, shapes, and colors of the original map
realign in an invented construction. Only after this initial manipulation by hand do I combine and blend the map projections digitally.

From the onset, there is little truth in my photographically distorted maps, despite a history of “implied certification” and “truthfulness” – unquestioned authority – in both maps and photography. Both statements of truthfulness have already been proven misleading, as both types of representations are dependent on the subjectivity of the maker, with potential to skew or manipulate. More than just being unreliable from the stance of the maker, though, it is a paradox of subjectivity and objectivity, dependent on the context of viewing. P.H. Emerson set out for a “natural” photographic process, which encouraged a slight blur and subtle gradation of gray tones, supposedly to match our eyesight, yet today his photographs would be seen as impressionistic and therefore far from natural or objective. Eadweard Muybridge’s goal was to settle a bet about the way a horse gallops, but his results were met with dismay since the images were so far “outside of common visual experience.” The “truth” was vexing in its inability to be observed with the naked eye, and therefore difficult to accept as objective. Outrage at contemporary digital alteration in the media, such as the early example of a National Geographic cover where a pyramid of Giza was moved to better accommodate the magazine format, continues to confuse repeat-offending magazine editors. The context of viewing and the viewer’s background experience will determine the proportions of public outrage at falsity versus passive or unconscious acceptance of idealization. This confounding of subjectivity and objectivity is present in my maps as well. The simultaneous alchemy and magic of photography fuse with the concurrent fantasy and
expected logic of the maps, a confusion pushed further by the gallery exhibition, which supports a traditional objectivity for both the map and the photograph.

Through this process, a mingling of uncertainty with moments of recognizable clarity blurs the boundaries of our cognitive comfort zone. The initially familiar colors of earth, sea, and vegetation and the even more familiar four-color pastel system of politically subdivided lands is tainted by an incoherence of further recognition and a futility in seeking orientation. By stamping out the vestiges of mathematical accuracy and authoritative dividing lines, this new mapped space ceases to maintain the modern Cartesian purpose of information, power, and logic. Similarly, artist Chris Kenny invented a world by cutting bits of maps – a lake, a road, a building, etc. – and pinning them with dissection pins as if they were specimens on display, arranged in a new and disassociated viewpoint. He argues in his artist statement in the “Slash” exhibit at the Museum of Art and Design in New York that he replaces “the cartographer’s logic” with an “absurd imaginative system.”

Figure 25, Grand Island and detail, Chris Kenny, 2008, exhibited in Slash exhibition at the Museum of Art and Design, 2009.
In 1952, the Baltimore Museum of Art hosted an exhibition of ancient maps, which epitomized the progress of mathematically accurate, logical cartography. The catalog calls it “the history of an ancient art which grew to be a science.” In the very next sentence it celebrates the science of cartography “in its present state of near perfection.” The transition sought in the Baltimore exhibition is one from “crude art to an exact science.” But as later generations questioned and abandoned the absurdly precise 1:1 map in Borges’s *On Exactitude in Science*, I am questioning the objective “perfection” of that 20th century cartographic perception of the world, its Cartesian reasoning system, and perhaps its place in an art museum. I am also recycling what has become a uniform, desensitized, and authoritative physical space back into an imperfect mental space. If, in the act of de-gridding, my maps become unnavigable, then they incite imagination; if they are a source of anxiety for want of expected information, then they open the door to critical thinking. What this series of maps does *not* do is command us to our place and tell us how to think.

While at first glance my art supports an authoritative power by their resemblance to traditional maps, it soon becomes clear that it is subverted by the deliberate obscuring of dividing lines. In modern maps, the line serves to focus the viewer, implying a reliable marking of limits, “tend[ing] to employ (and therefore to reify) crisp boundaries, to the neglect of fuzziness and uncertainty.” Essentially, I have created the opposite in my maps: anarchy. The lack of clarity favors ambiguous transitions that highlight the shifting, fuzzy nature of arbitrary boundaries in lieu of the thin, sharp lines that untruthfully demark a territory. The smoky, hazy *sfumato* layer of obscurity in my map
series favors the melting of perceptible transitions and heightens the feeling of an ambiguous location in space and time.

Further, the hazy gray areas hearken back to the implicitly unsettling *terrae incognitae* of history: areas at first embellished with imagination, then left blank to beckon the explorerer/“discoverer,” then striped in the political greed of colonialism, and eventually documented with the cartographer’s eager pen, leaving nothing to the unknown, nothing to motivate the next millennia of adventurers to expand our worldview. Despite this known history and the surface familiarity of my maps, they ultimately deny us the ability to decode the place that is visualized. Information, like most place names, legends, and measurements are utterly lacking or entangled. Even latitude and longitude lines, if they are present, are severely distorted into organic curves and waves, which destroy the infrastructure of artificial location.

In 2002, artists Hendrikje Kuhne and Beat Klein created a map of paradise, entitled “A World of Difference,” using resort brochures and vacation pamphlets as a “cartographical pastiche.” Lacking a key and coordinates, their resort world was nothing more than a mirage. The loss or confusion of this information matrix causes an entanglement, visualized in my maps by the composite images, deficient locational guides, and similarity to a transient, shifting...
The mirage-like atmosphere may serve to obscure the clarity of the decipherable map underneath, or alternately, it may offer a change in perception of that mapped space, revealing a new dimension. Whether it is a muddled lens or simply an alternate viewpoint is left up to the viewer. The maps’ cosmic vision references this world, our world, by mingling with familiar topography, symbols, and even some familiar labels, but is far too mysterious and illegible to be used as a map that guides, directs, or locates. That leaves us in a mythical space, or as Robert Silberman posited, a “worldview committed to paper.”16 The rarity of place names conjures a traditional utopia, a place of placelessness.17 This placeless location, which embodies a worldview, corresponds to the practice of creating imaginary worlds for epic cosmological stories, fantastic fictions, or edifying tales.

If a utopia occupies any nameable location, it is “at the center of the cosmos,” or the “axis mundi.”18 My own maps, too, are centrally specimen-like or oasis-like by virtue of the inactive space that surrounds them, where the frame is not close enough to act as a boundary (fig. 22). Their display, too, insinuates an exotic arrangement of specimens. This formal exhibition in the modern gallery setting presents a tension between the maps as inert images and as fluid imaginary spaces. Installed, the translucent paper floats away from the surface of the wall, suspended by a single wooden reed. Its curling edges cast two graceful arcs of shadow below the bottom edge of the paper in a cradling or extending gesture (fig. 20-24). The delicacy of such an installation plays on the mysterious nature of the maps and their relation to a concrete location. Their state of being seen is in delicate balance with an active obscuring, submerging, or dissipating.
Further, the lack of a grounding, explicative label maintains this ethereal, frameless floating, in spite of the tame insinuation of objective maps on an exhibit wall.

Referring back to the utopian placement at the center of the cosmos, the exclusivity and approximate centrality of the lands also insinuates the garden. As the “smallest parcel,” but simultaneously the “totality of the world,” the garden embodies a world within a world, the perfect whole within the chaotic, fragmented whole.¹⁹ A variety of corresponding connotations accompany the idea of the garden, both secular and religious, and the garden is frequently cited as the impetus for historical references to a utopia as an island, as well.²⁰

Some of my maps recall the early science of geography, which itself began in utopian myth. *Backtracking* (fig. 12) twists in the center, daring us to enter the forbidden tropics, or, as pre-Cartesian geographers called it, the Torrid Zone. An explorer may be in danger of falling off the tip of the world in *L’Artefice* (fig. 13), with its tapered end disappearing into the ether. The body of water splicing the landmasses in *Adrift* (fig. 10) may recount Oceanus, the world river, and the exotic architecture that rifts the center of *Monumental Steppes* (fig. 9) is reminiscent of the ancient, nearly-arbitrary decision to “place” an architectural reference to the Garden of Eden in the Far East.²¹ The poetics of such myth-making in the imaging of our world visualizes a land that is siren-like in its simultaneously alluring but alien mystery. With almost all of my maps, but especially *Egression* (fig. 5) and *Narrow Passage* (fig. 14), I also emulate the fantastic
embellishment of coastlines with a “scientific” filigree. In the process of obscuring and
distorting one world, I am shaping, carving, and inventing another.

In modern times, inventing new worlds is not unprecedented. Sir Thomas Moore paired a
fictional, subtly-skull-shaped island map to his political Utopia, but the first modern
utopian novel accompanied by an imaginary map was Treasure Island, in 1883. The
Chronicles of Narnia and the like ensued in the 20th century. The masterpiece, however,
was J.R. Tolkien’s creation of Middle Earth. Its greatness lay in the fact that Tolkien’s
story was secondary to the invention of a whole world, a cosmos. While the idea of
these utopias holds much potential, we are reminded of their negative moral: they are
never as good as they first appear. Tom Moylan’s words are enlightening here, as he
made the case for utopias to remain in the realm of dreams, rather than as an actual
(mathematically precise) blueprint to rectify society’s conflicts.

As a counter to the utopia argument, Foucault differentiates between a utopia, which
exists in no place, and a heterotopia, which exists outside of our realization. In Of Other
Spaces, Foucault describes a heterotopia as a combination of incompatible places into
one space and, alternately in his introduction to The Order of Things, as an impossible
space of fragmentary coexistence. The incongruity, incompatibility, and impossibility of
such a space stems from our inability to comprehend “incommensurable orders or
worlds” that exist somewhere beyond our own. Indeed, the maps in Incognesia are a
challenge to both our physical and mental image of the world, as we cannot locate a
space that refuses to be cartographically gridded. This dilemma causes us to evaluate
whether such a space can exist in our worldview at all, especially if outside of our steadfast, established reason.

Benjamin Genocchio describes Foucault’s utopias as “projected vagaries of imagination, possibility, and hope,” mere fictions or analogies of the “real” world. While heterotopias are also sites of the imaginary, it is not because the space itself is imaginary, but because it exists in defiance to our construction of reason. Heterotopias have a place, but the place names are classified incongruously with our frame of reference. Genocchio cites a story by Jorge Luis Borges as an example that particularly excited Foucault in his introduction to *The Order of Things*:

…all animals are divided into: “a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) sucking pigs, e) sirens, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification, i) frenzied, j) innumerable, k) drawn with a fine camel-hair brush, l) et cetera, m) having just broken the water pitcher, n) those that from a long way off look like flies.”

In the story, the character finds this absurd classificatory model in the “Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge.” The book’s knowledge references a system that is incomprehensible to our powers of reason. Likewise, my maps portray lands that are rebellious to Cartesian location frameworks. Utopias are wistful in their challenge to society’s systems, – and perhaps there is a great degree of this in my artwork, – but heterotopias challenge a whole viewpoint of systems. Feelings of anxiety may
accompany this challenge and are present in viewing my work, more so than just wistfulness of a utopia.

Although heterotopias are outside of the foundations of our spatial order, Genocchio argues that they are not completely excluded or exterior, coinciding with Foucault’s description as outside, but relating to and perhaps existing within real space. How is this apparently contradictory description plausible? In “The Impulse to See,” Rosalind Krauss asks much the same question in her discussion of the invisible matrix, or rhythm, that disrupts the autonomy of the visual from within. She argues that the matrix, though it is “unassimilable to the coordinates of external space” and is in a constant state of nonidentity, must be a form due to its recurrence. A form, yet it creates disorder, a form that simultaneously allows for transgression. This paradoxical matrix can only be accessed or inferred through “the figuration provided by fantasy.” By requiring the mediation of fantasy, the matrix gives access to both the interior and the exterior (the illusion and the optics of that illusion) of the spinning zootrope, which Max Ernst uses as a visual metaphor for the mind in his 1930 collage novel, A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil.

In light of the words by Jacques Derrida that Genocchio cites, how do we think about something completely outside of our knowledge base? Rather than allow it to be mediated by fantasy, Derrida asserted that this would be impossible, and that if we did so, it was not truly excluded from our knowledge base. Indeed, while Foucault never addressed the conflict of his heterotopia descriptions in writing, he did concede in an
interview published in 1987, “‘Even to imagine another order/system is to extend our participation in the present one.’” In other words, he seemed conscious of the discrepancies in articulating a heterotopia, but may have felt that this broadened, rather than limited, the potential for his invented term. Genocchio proposes that this apparent conflict designates the heterotopia “not so much an absolutely differentiated space [but] as the site of that very limit, tension, impossibility.” Krauss’s matrix, too, may exist on the pulsing threshold between interior and exterior, order and chaos. Likewise, my maps teeter on a borderline between known and foreign, seductively recognizable and disquietingly illusive, surface and submerged. They challenge our worldview from the fringes of that known mental space of Cartesian mapping iconography.

The maps of these spaces ask us to conceive of worlds outside of our experience and reason. Their fluidity, anarchy, and mythology present the visually inviting but mentally disorienting, suggesting something just under the surface. They draw us in with sensual forms, color, and gesture, and then they demand that we open our imaginations and reconsider how we experience location. Ultimately, they prompt us to contemplate the validity of the reality we have constructed.
Endnotes


4 Fairfield Porter qtd. in Silberman, 37.


7 Akerman and Karrow, 4.


14 Godlewska, 30;


16 Silberman, 28.


18 Silberman, 21.

19 Foucault, 26.

20 Silberman, 21.


23 Clark, 243.


26 Genocchio, 37.


29 Krauss, 64.

30 Krauss, 54.

31 Genocchio, 42.
Appendix A: List of Works, provided at the Exhibition

*Compass Spinning*
*Beneath the Surface*

*Swept Away*
*Into Orbit,*
*Egression*

*Detached Shadows*
*Half Underwater*

*Cast Off*

*Monumental Steppes*

*Adrift*
*At See*

*Backtracking*
*L’Artefice*
*Narrow Passage*
*Inverse*
*Upright*
*Still Searching*
*Orienting*

*but*
*Not Yet Arrived*
Appendix B: Exhibition Images (in order of appearance in the Exhibition)

Figure 1, *Compass Spinning* and detail

Figure 2, *Beneath the Surface* and detail
Figure 3, *Swept Away* and detail

Figure 4, *Into Orbit* and detail
Figure 5, *Egression* and detail

Figure 6, *Detached Shadows* and detail
Figure 7, *Half Underwater* and detail

Figure 8, *Cast Off* and detail
Figure 9, *Monumental Steppes* and detail

Figure 10, *Adrift* and detail
Figure 11, *At See* and detail

Figure 12, *Backtracking* and detail
Figure 13, *L’Artefice* and detail

Figure 14, *Narrow Passage* and detail
Figure 15, *Inverse* and detail

Figure 16, *Upright* and detail
Figure 17, *Still Searching* and detail

Figure 18, *Orienting* and detail
Figure 19, *Not Yet Arrived* and detail
Appendix C: Exhibition Images

Figures 20 and 21, Installation photographs from *Incognesia*
Figure 22, Installation photograph from *Incognesia*
Figures 23 and 24, Installation photographs from *Incognesia*
Bibliography


