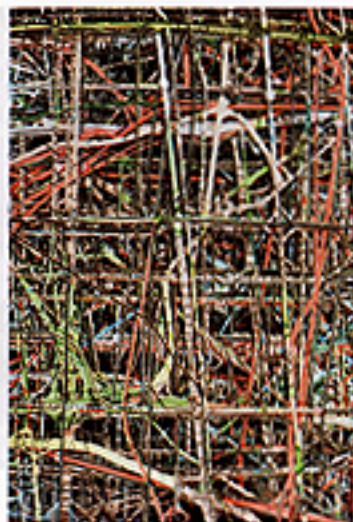


The Success Geography Lesions

Salt Seller



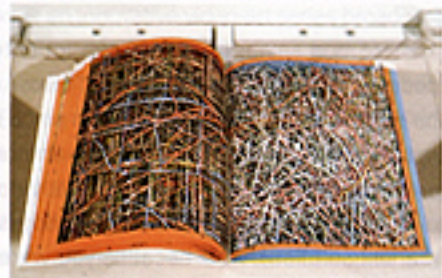
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Sara Graham, the multimedia artist now based in Port Moody, British Columbia, has always been fascinated by maps. Her experience travelling across Canada three times and living in a number of Canadian cities has occasioned her reliance on these tools of navigation and location. But the more attention she paid to them, the more she realized what they didn't provide—elevations, topographies and landmarks—and from those deficiencies she began a process of remaking maps. She viewed them as objects that could provide new and different narratives. By taking a surgical scalpel to roadmaps of 11 Canadian cities and removing everything but the roadways, she has not only fashioned a compelling object, but has raised a number of questions about what maps do and who they serve.

Graham's "Streetfinder" Rand McNally roadmaps were originally altered 15 years ago but have been digitally printed from 4 x 5-inch negatives for this exhibition. The resulting photographs are smart-looking, impressive and suggestive. From a distance they look like a certain kind of abstract painting, as if Jackson Pollock had found employment in an urban planning department. The photos themselves take on individual characters; each of the cities is a portrait with a quite different personality. Calgary and Edmonton are more grid-like and organized; Ottawa and Toronto are interwoven and layered. Put in a painterly frame, the Alberta cities are like Mondrian's Broadway Boogie-Woogie; the Ontario pair seems to have come out of Brice Marden's Cold Mountain paintings.

They also seem to be something other than they are. In one reading they are gutted computer boards;

in another they seem to be a detail traversing the inside of the body. Graham is aware that the works are susceptible to a number of readings. "The downtown is the heart of the city and we talk about road systems as arteries, so there is a natural link to those kinds of metaphors. But now, 15 years later, there is more of a connection to computerized systems."

By taking out so much of the content of the maps she uncovers layers of visual information in a kind of urban archeology. "Streetfinder" is about space but it is equally measurable through a sense of time. Graham sees them as relics because mapbooks are now obsolete, having been replaced by GPS, iPhones and Google. The series was also produced by way of an outmoded technology, which is why she had to have her 4 x 5-inch negatives scanned. "Nobody prints from the negative anymore, which I thought was appropriate because the technology used to document the books was also obsolete."

She finds comfort in the work's out-of-timeliness. "Quality of life for me is not an economic measure but is determined by the flow of a city and how I can navigate through it." Her photographs suggest how varied that cut-up navigation can be. ■

1. Sara Graham, "Streetfinder," Toronto, 2012, photograph mounted on Dibond, 121.3 x 81.3 cm
2. "Streetfinder," Halifax, 2012, photograph mounted on Dibond, 121.3 x 81.3 cm
3. "Streetfinder," London, 2012, photograph mounted on Dibond, 121.3 x 81.3 cm
4. "Streetfinder," Toronto, 1998-1999, altered Rand McNally mapbook, 13.8 x 24.7 cm, installed at Stride Gallery in Calgary, Alberta. Courtesy the artist and MKS123, Photograph Hutch Hutchison