

SARA GRAHAM & MONICA TAP StreetFinder

By Gary Michael Dault

**SARA GRAHAM
MONICA TAP**
STREETFINDER
MKG127 Art Gallery
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Ottawa, 2012
Lightjet print on dibond

While this exhibition essentially belonged to Sara Graham, there were two recent landscape paintings by Monica Tap in the gallery's ante-room-like "front space" which served to announce Tap's first appearance at MKG127.

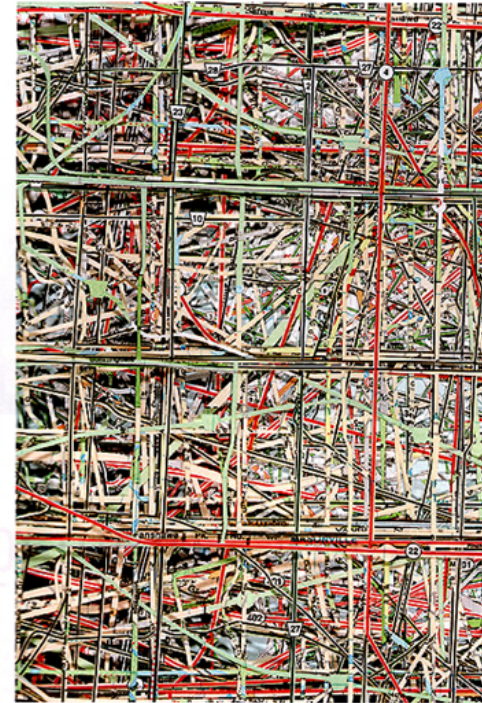
It is invariably a pleasure to encounter Tap's exquisitely produced paintings. Lushly worked, with a deftness and a brio that bespeak a deeply considered and refined practice, Tap's landscapes—which always seem fluid and strangely un-tethered to any particular site—are, in fact, the result of her eschewing any fixed point of view from which to paint in favour of her employment of the 30-second, low-res video clips she harvests from her digital camera while traveling in cars and in trains and buses.

As she noted in a *Globe & Mail* review of her work a few years ago, "Given that my paintings are based on roadside video captures, the exact spot I end up painting is impossible to locate. It's a tiny fragment of a second somewhere between here and there". Building on the ramifications of this placelessness, the MKG127 press release for the exhibition contains this searching statement: "There is no better place", it suggests, "than the edge of failure to expose how something really works. Tap is interested in what is revealed when systems-of technology, of perception-break down and, consequently, open up to other realms."

This McLuhan-ish idea of the-breakdown-that-leads-to-breakthrough also informs a good deal of Sara Graham's exhaustingly brilliant *StreetFinder*.

For this third solo exhibition at MKG127, Graham showed eleven large-scale photographs (lightjet prints on dibond) that actually originated, fifteen years ago, in the artist's having then painstakingly cut into the pages of the series of Rand McNally *StreetFinder* mapbooks (now no longer extant), trimming away (with a precision that seems almost supernaturally exacting when you look at the books themselves) all of the information provided by the maps except for the highways, expressways and major roads.

Given that she did this for every map on every page of each *StreetFinder* booklet for every Canadian city for which there was a book (what punishing labour it seems now!), the see-through, web-like, latticework pages—now viewable, within each book, in accumulation, one lacy page lying atop another—become a graphic language, a set of urban glyphs, speaking to the inexorability of metropolitan growth, its irrationality, its ordering of the everyday life and experiences of city dwellers and, ultimately, to the amplifying of nagging, often innate questions about the "truth" of mapping. Do maps lie (or at least obfuscate), Graham asks, or do they make the truth more visible and therefore usable?



London, 2012
Lightjet print on dibond

While the actual cut-up *StreetFinder* books (there was a selection of them at the gallery's front desk) are, in Graham's hands, astonishing artifacts, dizzying in their vertiginous detail, the large photographs made from them—which constitute the exhibition proper—partake both of the urban issues raised by the altered books and the wider, if less precise, experience of graphic energies set free.

When I saw the exhibition, there were a couple of gallery visitors who kept muttering the name "Pollock". One might just as easily have muttered the words "pasta primavera". For Graham's gnarled, tumultuous highways and expressways have been to a large degree set free by their being so ambitiously enlarged. At this scale, it is impossible not to see them both as maps and, at the same time, as pictures.

There is nothing amiss in this—the now doubled thrust of the meanings of the photographs is invigorating rather than divisive—but, it does introduce the works, just in the act of enlargement, to the realm of the decorative: a clear and present danger, and a repositioning of the maps from their originality being cautionary to their now being the enjoyable outwash of what has become a kind of acceptable beauty. ●