

Mira Dayal Maps a Gallery Floor

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Louis Bury March 19, 2021



Mira Dayal, "...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Discipline of Geography. - Suárez Miranda, Viajes de varones prudentes, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lérida, 1658." (2021) (all images courtesy Spencer Brownstone Gallery, New York, photography by Daniel Greer)

Except for the wall-mounted metallic fans ringed round the room, a bit below ceiling height, Spencer Brownstone Gallery appears empty and still. The small, caged fans hang equidistant from one another and are connected to a weather vane installed in the yard visible just beyond the back wall's sliding glass doors. Only one or two of the fans blow at a time, in correspondence

with the direction of the wind outside. When you cross its path, the secondhand breeze feels like a whisper on your skin.

The installation's ground-level centerpiece is even more subdued than the fans above. Using a graphite stick, artist, curator, and critic Mira Dayal has rubbed a 1:1 topographical map of the gallery floor directly upon the same floor. This absurdist conceit comes from the plot of Jorge Luis Borges's 1946 short story, "On Exactitude in Science," in which the "Cartographers Guilds" of a fictitious empire design a "vast," "Useless" map "whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it." The full exhibition title, which I will shorten to ...*In that Empire*, consists of the entire text of Borges's approximately 150-word story, creating a disparity between the prolix title and the terse installation.



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This impish conceit lends itself to any number of allegorical interpretations. The 12 wall fans ("Twelve Winds," 2021), for example, reference the 12 classical compass winds, which were depicted on ancient maps as human heads blowing air, and which are represented here as the ornament atop the weather vane ("Lips," 2021). The fans' "Global Industrial" brand logo perhaps

hints at a more contemporary allegory about anthropogenic climate change. The rugged graphite floor map (“Map (40°43’15.0”N 73°59’05.51”W),” 2021) can be understood as anything from a barren, post-apocalyptic landscape to a commentary on artistic labor, or even a parable about COVID-era confinement, in which the bounds of one’s world become near-synonymous with a particular indoor space.

Yet, for all its Borgesian layers of meaning, ...*In that Empire* affirms the importance of the physical gallery experience. The floor map, in particular, makes itself known in tactile ways. It’s slick to walk upon, without unbalancing the visitor, and contains shiny as well as matte regions, depending on how the light falls and how visitors’ footsteps have redistributed the graphite. The boundary line between the map and the entry hallway provides a before-and-after sense of the extent to which Dayal has darkened the unfinished gallery floor and given it chromatic uniformity. And the placement of artworks at floor height and near ceiling height, but not in between, calls attention to the gallery’s bare white walls.



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Many of Dayal's previous installations also subtly détourned gallery architecture, in ways that bespeak the influence of artist and critic Brian O'Doherty's touchstone 1976 book, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, which critiqued the pretensions to neutrality of Modernist gallery display. Her exhibition *Anagen* (2018-19), for instance, consisted of dangling, flagella-esque wisps of Dayal's hair sewn into tiles and installed as an uncanny drop ceiling in Lubov Gallery. *A Hairline Crack* (2019) displayed drawn trompe l'oeil cracks on Gymnasium's walls. For *Slow Lick* (2017), Dayal and artist Amanda Turner Pohan coated an Abrons Art Center gallery with artificial saliva.

These quiet deformations of gallery space suggest another allegorical layer to ...*In that Empire*: the way in which cultural values change across time. In Borges's story, each new generation finds fault with the previous generation's "Unconscionable Maps" and elects to redraw or discard them. A similar generational transvaluation of whiteness — as a wall color and, especially, as a concept — is at play in Dayal's exhibition. In the era of Black Lives Matter and Trumpian white nationalism, the phrase "white cube" seems more than just a commentary on the purported neutrality of gallery walls, as O'Doherty intended, but also a commentary on the purported neutrality of whiteness as a racial construct and that construct's historical role in shaping gallery norms. The absurdity of Dayal's 1:1 mapping gesture suggests that today's progressive arguments about race, while urgent, are not entirely new. And the soft-spoken contrast between ...*In that Empire*'s darkened floor and its bare white walls demonstrates how Dayal's artistic practice addresses such concerns through sensory and phenomenal nuance, allowing visitors to experience some of the ways in which contemporary maps of the art world are being redrawn.

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