



Swell Maps

Ben Durham
brings the street to
Reynolds Gallery

by Amy Ritchie

Graffiti is seen variably as art or menace, a sign of activism or of delinquency. But Ben Durham, whose drawings are presently on view at Reynolds Gallery, understands graffiti to be an exploration of personal identity and place.

Durham recently moved from Kentucky to Richmond after attending Washington University in St. Louis, becoming another national artist to make his studio in the Manchester District. As a newcomer, Durham is still orienting himself, he says, much like graffiti artists are doing with their mark making, trying to make sense of both their geographic place and their social place.

Three of the five exhibition drawings represent Richmond neighborhoods, incorporating found graffiti and street maps of the area. In this way Durham is both literally and figuratively getting to know his new city, while exploring the textual identity and voice inherent to each specific location.

This work is an extension of Durham's "Text Portraits," which use text of memories and other information to create highly realistic portraits of old school friends as witnessed from recent police reports. The text portraits span 60 inches on three-quarter-inch thick, handmade paper, giving a sculptural quality to the faces.

Physical graffiti: The 20-inch-by-28-inch "Graffiti Maps" are also on handmade paper. Neighborhood maps are projected onto the already marked paper, then cut accordingly so that the graffiti portrait and paper are reduced to

the crude shapes and lines of the street map. The human portrait silhouette, without detail and more signifier than representation, is made up of found graffiti text written in red and black ink and graphite pencil, carved and layered onto the paper. The text is mostly indiscernible, though letters and numbers jump out, including a clear "Jesus Loves You." The meditative nature of this mark making becomes visible among the resulting rich crevices of the paper.

Durham's impetus for map making, besides its revelation of place, identity and memory, comes from encountering a long European cartography tradition during a recent residency at Cité International des Arts in Paris. More specifically, it comes from the notion of psycho-geography as put forth by an anti-capitalist movement in mid-20th century France. Guy Dubord, a prominent thinker in that movement, defined psycho-geography as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."

This leads to Durham's perception of graffiti as "a kind of real-time mapmaking ... in its frustrated attempt to achieve a personal, spatial and cultural orientation" through the marking of territory and the declaration of one's presence in the world. **S**

"Graffiti Maps" will be on view at Reynolds Gallery, 1514 W. Main St., through December with paintings by Isabel Bigelow, Janet DeCover and Robert Stuart. For information visit reynoldsgallery.com.