

# RYAN LEE

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## ARTS ATL

### Cullum's Notebook: Surveying doom, gloom, human nature and the vagaries of weather

Jerry Cullum | February 19, 2020



Josh Dorman's impressive "How This Will End" collage is 4 feet by 4 feet.

Josh Dorman's bravura exhibition *Higher Ground* — curated by Georgia State University printmaking faculty member Stephanie Kolpy — raises the stakes on all levels. It may, in fact, suffer from its combination of technical skill and breadth of vision. See it through March 13 at GSU's Ernest G. Welch School Galleries.

The 4-foot-square *How This Will End*, for example, appears to be nothing less than an immense allegorical collage depicting the evolution of life out of the oceans, the rise of civilizations mostly devoted to warfare with neighbors and within themselves, and the eventual collapse of civilization back into rising waters. It's an accomplishment reminiscent of the greatest Renaissance masters in terms of complexity and scope, but it requires a visual familiarity with biology, anthropology and art history for full comprehension, or an immense key to important moments.

That sort of key would be impossible, and beside the point. These works are not allegories. They are intuitive, yet only partly surreal, acts of free association shaped by a great deal of background

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knowledge. The collaged images may come from scientific sources, but their final arrangement is a matter of subconscious choices that outstrip rational ones in terms of impact, and sometimes insight as well. For that reason, Dorman's work has been celebrated by similarly minded writers of experimental fiction, such as Paul Auster and Michael Chabon, both of whom use reason for deeply subrational purposes.

To make matters worse (or better), Dorman creates highly poetic animations that engage the viewer on the more contemporary ground of the moving image.

This is the sort of exhibition that should have been accompanied by an interdisciplinary conference, but Dorman is not a household name and such a conference likely would have been poorly attended. Still, this is the sort of show that opens dialogues far in excess of the work itself, which is spectacular enough to hold our attention long before its multiple implications sink in.

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## Numéro Cinq

Ode to Meaning, or The Joyful Apocalypse  
| The Art of Josh Dorman  
— Mary Kathryn Jablonski  
2017



*I have placed there a little door opening on to the mysterious.  
I have made stories.  
—Odilon Redon*

I read Josh Dorman's works like a Mary Ruefle essay. See how she writes about a revelation she had and the connections it revealed for her in her essay "Someone Reading a Book Is a Sign of Order in the World:" "I was reading the dictionary, where I came upon the meaning of the word speculum: 1) an instrument inserted into a body passage for inspection; 2) an ancient mirror; 3) a medieval compendium of all knowledge; 4) a drawing showing the relative position of all the planets; and 5) a patch of color on the secondary wings of most ducks and some other birds." Ruefle asserts, "there can be discoveries, connections... that explode the day and one's heart and the long years that have led to the moment."

Just so, artist Josh Dorman discovers a scrap, a tidbit, a piece of tinder, something recognizable (or not) and turns and turns it in his hand or mind appropriating it in his collage/multi-medium

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works, intuitively painting, drawing, layering, until it becomes more, becomes Other. The connections in his mind are revealed to him and/or us — or not; the lush, deep labyrinths open to some Home, or swallow us entirely blissfully lost.

Mary Kathryn Jablonski (MKJ): I'm very interested in how a piece begins for you. Do images you find suggest a narrative? Do you collect some images for use in collage based on the intrigue or beauty they hold for you alone? Do some images, which to the outsider might seem to have nothing in common, beg to be grouped with other images? I'm picturing files upon files named for various subjects in your studio, not unlike in collage artist Michael Oatman's vast studio space! Tell us some of your sources. I'm most familiar with your paintings on antique maps, but you seem to be moving away from these a bit.

Josh Dorman (JD): I'm first struck by your mention of Oatman's vast studio space. Picture my studio as more of a small cave packed with collections and piles of moldering detritus. Overflowing shelves filled with hundreds of antique books and yellowing paper: catalogs, diagrams, ledger books, topographical maps, player piano scrolls, but mostly textbooks. I use only printed materials from the pre-photography era: 1820s-1950s. They're categorized by subject: Engineering, Biology, Botany, Architecture, Ornamentation, Cellular Structure, Human Anatomy, Geology, Geography, etc. It's an obsession.

I still can't resist when I stumble across a crusty tome at a yard sale. It's not that the items are valuable, but that they contain images made by hand and knowledge that is outdated. Last summer I found a hardware catalog that's eight inches thick, bound with rusty metal shackles. I've been mining images from it all year. It moves me that each hammer, hinge and screw was rendered and printed so carefully and beautifully by an artist whose name we'll never know. I see it as part of my mission to give these drawings a new life.

Only once did I hire an assistant for a month to cut out collage bits from my books. Though those categorized clippings served me well, my process now is more organic, and I usually cut out images as I go. I have no set system for creating a painting (to be honest, I'm skeptical of art that arises out of preconception).

A piece for me can take several paths. As you mentioned, sometimes the beauty of an image can call out to me and I'll build a painting around it. A good example of this is "A Knight Errant," where the hardware bits I mentioned were the inspiration. In a clear case of pareidolia, I formed bodies around the faces I saw in the hardware. These then interacted with pieces cut from a 1790s Italian architecture book, and finally, reminding me of a childlike fantasy/delusion, I inserted a quixotic mounted rider.

I work in a subconscious state. A narrative may assert itself, but more often, multiple narratives and connections emerge. You guessed right when you asked about images that beg to be grouped together. It's almost as if they're whispering when the pages turn. It may come from my formalist training or it may be much deeper rooted, but I feel the need to connect forms from different areas of existence. A birdcage and a rib cage. A radiolarian and a diagram of a galaxy. Flower petals and fish scales. Tree branches, nerves, and an aerial map of a river. It's obviously about shifting scale wildly from inch to inch within the painting. I think the reason I'm a visual artist

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is because it sounds absurdly simplistic to say in words that all things are connected.

As I write this, it occurs to me that most of my closest friends are poets and novelists, who can do this with words. I recently did a large commissioned version of “The Tower of Babel” for the writer Michael Chabon. He’s a “maximalist” novelist who takes dozens of tangent paths and generates stories within stories. I’m often inspired by writers: Italo Calvino, Richard Brautigan, and Li-Young Lee. I’m drawn to work that suggests rather than prescribes. I’d say the same about my art heroes: Klee, Redon, Turner, Pinkham Ryder, Brueghel.

MKJ: Oh, make no mistake, your studio still sounds a lot like Oatman’s in many ways, believe it or not, as does your sensibility regarding preserving the past. Although I cannot speak for him, I don’t think he’d mind me saying that. And his studio may have been vast, but that does not mean it was not also cave-like and jam-packed, sorted obsessively, floor to ceiling. I love what you’ve just said about these artists and writers, especially since you’ve included one of my favorite poets. I do see what you mean about generating stories within stories. Like Mary Ruefle, Li-Young Lee is a wonderful example of one who makes remarkable, unique associations. You’ve mentioned to me that you titled a solo exhibition of your work in London *The Missing Pages of the Sea*, a phrase found in the first few lines of his poem “Pillow,” which has superb examples of just such associations.

Li-Young Lee is also a perfect example of a poet for us to compare with you because often, like Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s, his poems circle back on themselves over and over as they are woven, or as they unravel in deep meditation, just as I feel your artwork does in some way. And his poems at times are inexorably linked. Labyrinthine, they form an intricate network of passages that could lead only to the next poem or story, with no other possible exit. Take a look at “Words for Worry” and “Little Father,” printed consecutively in *Book of My Nights*. I feel this sensation too in some of your works, both within them, and when seeing them together. Lee also judiciously and poignantly uses the Question in his poems, as I feel you do in your works, Josh, addressing both yourself and the viewer.

I imagine that once a work starts going for you it takes on a force of its own. Do you find this to be true — that what you had in mind for a piece or a group of images can end up being far from the direction in which the piece eventually leads you? Tell us about some of the detours your work has taken you on. In this way, what has the act of making art taught you or revealed to you? What would you be doing if you weren’t an artist?

JD: In the 90s, I would begin a painting by gluing down topographic maps and letting the swirling lines guide my drawing and collaging. More often now, my works (especially the larger panels) begin with a compositional sketch, and maps are only used tangentially. In fact, many recent panels begin with a base layer of player piano scroll paper. This provides a tone, a history, and beautiful perforations that generate a rhythmic structure. I then sketch forms quickly and lightly in charcoal and begin the layering of paint and collage. I work on five to 10 paintings simultaneously. Some emerge in a matter of days; others can take a year or more.

If any element of a painting happens too easily, I’m skeptical, and I usually destroy it. Part of the reason I use collage is to remove my hand from the process. For the same reason, you’ll see areas

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in most of my paintings where I've rested living plants or metal gears and wires, poured ink and allowed it to evaporate. These "stain/stencils" for me, feel like a natural phenomenon, outside of my self. I'm not saying that I give over to Dadaist chance in my work. I need composition and structure. But within that initial framework, it's about endless improvisation.

Looking at one recent piece called "Night Apparitions" might illuminate a bit about my process. This might sound laughable, but I consider this a minimalist work for me, since I managed to pare it down to a reduced palette and space. It began with a ream of rice paper I purchased on a trip to Taiwan. In this case, I broke my own "rule" by using non-antique paper. Since the paper was lightly gridded or lined for calligraphy practice, I cut it into varying sized rectangles and soaked them in India ink of different densities. My initial sketch had two essential structures: the central mountain form and the halo surrounded by a dark border. I expected multiple mountainscapes and horizon lines to emerge, but in this case, the gradation of light to dark from the center kept insisting itself until the end. As soon as I'd add a new landscape element, I'd wipe it out with the light or dark. In recent years, I've been trying to avoid imagery (animal, vegetable, machine) that identifies as only one thing. So, each hovering entity is a conglomeration – a hybrid form. Only one (located at 11 o'clock) contains human-made forms, and there's only a hint of architecture in the contour of the mountain. I'm always aware of the disconnection we humans imagine and reinforce between ourselves and other living things.

Here, I could go off on a lengthy tangent about the election, and the fear, anger and ultimate despair I felt while making this piece. That's all in there, and that may be why the painting is so dark. But again, I'm not interested in artwork that illustrates or prescribes meaning. I'm interested in what each viewer will bring to the piece.

There are creatures that are buried under the pink haze or in the dark black. Things that aren't visible to the viewer are still crucial to the evolution of a piece. Some detours and quirks — I can say that the seashell mountaintop came late to eliminate a silhouette effect. The "whole" birds also remained at the bottom, to ground the piece and further call the reality into question (birds should fly). In the end, as with most of my work, I suppose my goal is to generate a feeling of joyful apocalypse. My dreams do influence my work deeply, but I shy away from association with Surrealism, most of which I view as too pat and literal.

It's a never-ending cycle, trying to understand the world, art, my own process. In the same way that I don't like to interpret dreams, I also shun too much breakdown of my work. I need to know just enough to guide me, but not too much to remove the mystery. As Georges Braque said, "The only thing of value in art is that which cannot be explained." As for your question about what I'd be doing if not this, I've always been fascinated by archaeology and I began college as a psychology major, but I quickly realized that it was not for me. Frankly, I can't imagine doing anything else.

MKJ: I appreciate that you say you've been trying to avoid imagery that identifies as only one thing. I've always admired this quality in the written word as well: poetry whose lines slant in both directions, tying them to the previous or following line, which can happen with well-thought-out enjambment and punctuation (or lack thereof). And when you say you value things that aren't visible to the viewer, which are still crucial to the evolution of a piece, I couldn't agree

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more. Perhaps these are the most important aspects of a creative work.

Most viewers expect your collage pieces to be two-dimensional surfaces, yet in your new works you are exploring depth as well, carving pockets into panels and pouring in resin, at times in pools up to two inches deep with a watery shine difficult to reproduce in photographs. What inspired this sculptural necessity? Do you see it going further?

JD: The poured resin layering is yet another manifestation of my own rule-breaking. While I have never been drawn to making sculpture, I'm intrigued by creating illusions of depth, and in this case, tricking the viewer with a bit of tangible depth.

I've found in my artistic life that a medium or subject will present itself, and only years later will it find its proper home in the work. It was this way with the topographical maps, which lingered in my studio for five years before I dared draw on them, and it was this way with the clear resin, which I tried out twenty years ago and failed. I'll admit that Fred Tomaselli, with his resin-embedded pills and leaves left me daunted. I admire his work, but I'm after something different. In fact, just as with collaging gorgeously rendered engravings, one runs the risk of gimmickry with resin. Pour this glossy stuff on a child's drawing or a newspaper page and suddenly it looks luscious. I'm still experimenting with it, but it's incredibly exciting. I'd fallen into a rut for a year or so, and creating these space pockets is reinvigorating me. It has reminded me that play is crucial. Ha! Perhaps, I can also credit Trump with causing me to seek new territory. I suspect many artists right now are on fire, making protest statements or constructing even richer worlds to escape to.

MKJ: Yes, at a time when we could all use, as Mary Ruefle says, some Sign of Order in the World, we'll leave that struggle in the category of more things that aren't visible to the viewer.

Your paintings are really multi-medium works that include collage, painting and drawing (and as we've said, now sculptural processes as well). How do these pieces differ in your mind from the black and white drawings that you make, which to me seem very fluid and in some mystical way reminiscent of William Blake.

JD: The graphite drawings are almost a form of meditation for me. In making them, I eliminate all questions of medium, color, size, and layering. Even composition and subject matter disappear. I'd never encourage a drawing student to do this, but these horizontally oriented works emerge from the lower left and move eastward, with no sketch or outline. I love the traveling journey aspect of Chinese and Japanese scrolls. For me, it's a mysterious process and not unlike a physical journey. I rub the pencil until shapes and images start to reveal themselves. They are not sketches for the paintings. They exist on their own.

MKJ: I am delighted to learn about this drawing process! And now I see them as even more riveting. I hope you do not find this in any way a diminishment of your collages/paintings, but the drawings may be your works I favor most. They are magical to me and unfold or reveal themselves, to this viewer at least, in perhaps the same mysterious ways in which they were created, which I find marvelous and complex.

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Although it took place awhile ago now, I do want to mention that I also found your project for the Memory Bridge Foundation, which “maps” the internal geographies and memories of Alzheimer’s and dementia patients, moving and inspirational. Describe how this project has changed you. Tell us how memory plays a role in your work, if in fact you find that it does.

JD: The Memory Bridge project influenced me in ways I didn’t understand at the time. The obvious answer is that the old paper I use has its own memory: it’s physically from another time and place. The images I use were created in a world without the ubiquitous photograph, let alone computers and the thousands of images we’re barraged with daily. I’d like my work to feel like it’s not of this time and place.

When I was commissioned to create the Memory Bridge portraits, I listened and sketched as six people with dementia were interviewed. I could see bits of memory coming and going, interweaving with the present, imagination, and chaos. Later, back in my studio with my notes, while making a “portrait” of one particularly unreachable woman, I found myself in a mental state not unlike hers. It was disturbing and liberating. I sat on the floor with my canvas and piles of books and papers. I began reaching for images in a frenzy of free association, pasting them down and drawing on top. This state of unknowing is where I try to be now when I work.

We can never be certain that we are communicating on a common wavelength with anyone else. I trust in that lack of tangibility and certainty. If people ask me what my paintings are about, I stumble. I know they are not about nothing... I know, in fact, that they are utterly specific. But some people will embrace the ambiguity within the specificity, and others will reject the work, needing a concrete meaning and resolution I can’t provide.

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Josh Dorman was born in Baltimore, MD and lives and works in New York, NY. He received his MFA from Queens College, Flushing, NY and his BA from Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY. Josh has been the recipient of numerous residencies and fellowships including Yaddo, Art Omi, and the Millay Colony. He has been a visiting artist and lecturer at numerous institutions including most recently Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY and Mass Art Graduate MFA Program, Boston, MA. His work is held in numerous collections across the country and he has exhibited nationally and internationally. In 2014, a collaboration of seven animations he made with composer Anna Clyne, titled “The Violin,” was released on DVD. Currently, Josh is represented by Ryan Lee Gallery in New York City, Koplín Del Rio Gallery in Seattle, and John Martin Gallery in London.

A gallerist in Saratoga Springs for over 15 years, visual artist and poet Mary Kathryn Jablonski is now an administrative director in holistic healthcare. She is author of the chapbook *To the Husband I Have Not Yet Met*, and her poems have appeared in numerous literary journals including the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Blueline*, *Home Planet News*, *Salmagundi*, and *Slipstream*, among others. Her artwork has been widely exhibited throughout the Northeast and is held in private and public collections.

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## Nature Tries Again: Josh Dorman at Ryan Lee

by William Corwin



Josh Dorman: Whorled at Ryan Lee  
September 4 to October 11, 2014  
515 West 26th Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)  
New York, 212 397 0742

In the beginning was the Word; but after that came a whole lot of little tiny carefully cut-out-and-collaged pictures. Josh Dorman's work, and his most recent cycle of paintings/collages in his solo exhibition, "Whorled" at Ryan Lee, seem initially to be about dainty narratives set up on some kind of floating Pollock's Toy Theatre stage, but his fantasies are more about moving words: typologies, taxonomies and nuance. Because of this, Dorman has bridged the gap between the Word made flesh — via the excised bits of numerous catalogs, dictionaries and manuals — and evolution in all its forms: natural evolution, as well as industrial and architectural, though perhaps the point here is there is little difference. In the background of all the paintings (save one) Dorman has laminated the monotonous and regular, yet ever-changing pattern of a player piano roll, a visual metaphor of the flexible inclusiveness of his visual framework.

Scouring antique books to appropriate their diagrams and illustrations, Dorman tricks the viewer into thinking that his work is about images, but the proof is in the democratic way in

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which he weighs the individual collaged entities in expansive, landscape-format paintings, such as *Memento Mori* (all 2014). The collage depicts a wide variety of apes and monkeys frolic on the shores of a lake with a similarly variegated collection of architectural diagrams. There is the all around equanimity of man and nature that marks a Bierstadt-like sensibility, despite the gross-disparities of scale and rendering techniques.

In *Memento Mori* there are also machine parts such as cams and cogs. The unit within these paintings is not the organism, but the cut-out. Much like a Joseph Cornell box, Dorman creates his drama via an assortment of things. The artist reminds us of the origin of his search by including several entries from a dictionary: “myrrh,” “myrtle,” “myself,” “mysterious.” Past all the smoke and mirrors of feathers, antlers, gears and spots, all of this mess neatly falls into the space between A and Z — the fundamental logic of why everything is there in the first place is irrefutable. Though he flirts between the almighty and Darwin, Dorman plays it safe as a something of a technocrat, or perhaps an encyclopédiste.

He is definitely partial to images of the natural world and this is echoed in the themes of the pieces *Unintelligible Design* and *Natural Selection*. But there is a latent criticism of the human need to find a narrative direction in scientific law: the climax, so to speak, of *Unintelligible Design* is a de-railed locomotive in mid-air over a body of water. The march forward, which begins on the left side of the painting with a horse, ends in a steam-powered disaster. Similarly, in *Memento Mori* an otherwise innocent-looking primate is munching on the bloody wing of an unfortunate avian. The images are meticulously sliced from the yellowed pages of old books and prints — they are inky and decisive, crosshatched and precisely detailed in the way that only an etching can be. Dorman places his cutouts with fantastical natural backgrounds or dystopian urban/industrial nightmares of elevated bridges and walkways — within a stage set too wild to be real, ironically enough his characters/actors take on an increased individuality, often heightened with touches of color.

*Book of Hours* is the most didactic and ambitious of the pieces, where Dorman posits a narrative on par with his method. The triptych relies heavily on a series of painting tropes to get a message across of the inevitability of ruin; anthropocentric or otherwise. The first panel depicts a Hicks-like Peaceable Kingdom; in the middle, he pauses for breath in an inky and etched purgatory of a Piranesian Carceri; and comes to rest with a Pieter Breughel-like hell. Predictability is not an issue here; as a painter, Dorman has free access to use many of the time-worn images that his predecessors have used again and again, but is more concerned with contemporary questions of what these tropes mean for us now, and do they still mean at all? More poignant is the video piece *Sometimes We Find a Broken Cup*. As with *Book of Hours* it has a message, but similar to several of the collages, it moves in a circular motion, presenting good and bad within the context of the natural world where such moral and aesthetic judgments do not apply. It bears a lovely similarity to Tacita Dean’s gorgeous, nihilistic 2010 film *The Friar’s Doodle*, and in fact, paired with Dorman’s folded Chinese book *A Clawfoot Lamp*, the video shows his thoughtful drawing technique to great advantage.

In the end, Dorman’s message seems to be both anarchic and deeply rational, much like the expanse of ideology he encompasses in the work. The paintings are chaotic; streams of illustrations and diagrams act as stand-ins for a series of historical and art historical pantomimes,

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but there is such a profusion of actors that it almost seems the director has lost control of his set. The joy in looking at the works is getting lost in the detail — but as with evolution itself, the detail is so multitudinous that missing links are hard to find and it can all seem very haphazard and miraculous even. But here is where the methodology brings comfort even if it doesn't make sense of the disorder (which it does not). Process at least allows the viewer some comfort — Dorman's alliterative categorical practice reminds us that no matter what scene these actors are playing or how they overlap or distract from each other, they are merely taking a brief vacation from the pages from which they were liberated, and one merely needs to pull a book from the shelf, or google a few letters of their name in order to return them to their epistemological safe haven.

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# BOMB

Josh Dorman  
by Haleigh Collins

*The dreamlike state of drawing from nature.*



I met artist Josh Dorman the second day of my freshman year of high school. His office, a nook in my new drawing classroom, was covered with detailed scientific drawings on stripes of off-white paper. As he led students through elementary drawing exercises, his precision and love of intricacy rendered a simple still life of a pepper into a deeply complex organism. Over the course of the next few years, admiring his drawings as I washed my paintbrushes, I began to better understand the science and further appreciate the imagination of his art. His drawings involve a detail that is simultaneously obsessive, methodical, and enthralling.

I exalted Dorman's work from afar, frequently scrolling through the paintings on his website. In my drawing class my first year of college, I chose him for an artist project, in which I used his method to recreate one of his earlier works. This June, walking coincidentally through the RYAN LEE, I recognized *Tower of Babel* (2008), from an exhibition of his works that was on view at Spence, my high school. In this painting, he demonstrates his ability to balance intricacies against grand scale, creating an imposing, mountainous form composed of machinery and architecture. When I noticed that the aged, yellow canvas was made of antique maps and piano scrolls, I knew the work had to be Dorman's. I discovered he had a solo show at RYAN LEE scheduled for

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September, right after I left for school. Luckily enough, Mr. Dorman, now officially Josh to me, welcomed me to his studio, tolerated my numerous questions, and gave me a private showing of his latest works.

**Haleigh Collins** You've developed a pretty distinct style over time, how has it evolved?

**Josh Dorman** I tend to resist the word style, because it reminds me of forcing a certain look, whereas I'm always trying to get away from what's predictable, and even what's predictable within my own work. But I think you can see the essence of an artist's work in their childhood drawings. I don't know if you saw it in the show at Spence, I had a drawing up that I made when I was ten years old called *How TV Gets to Your House*, and it has all these gears and springs and liquid pouring from one thing into another, and I named every gadget in the picture.

**HC** Like a diagram.

**JD** Right, I've always been interested in diagramming and making things with tiny little pieces.

**HC** I've always really liked that too, and I discovered that when I took a class at SVA called Drawing the City. It was all about drawing architecture and I found it very cathartic to draw little pieces that don't feel very technically trying. Maybe I'm just easily impressed by detail, but if I persevered and maintained a strong composition, I was usually impressed by how cohesively the detail came together.

**JD** You probably remember this from my teaching, I really believe that artists should get obsessed with other artists from history; I think it's healthy to get lost in imitating them, until you realize you're being too influenced, you're copying. So I've been through a lot of that, and I think at times, I was mired in other people's art. In grad school there were teachers that were pretty harsh on me because the influence of artists like Paul Klee or Fernand Léger or Picasso were too apparent in my work. I was looking at those artists, but also at ancient art, Romanesque and Byzantine art. But I was stuck, I realize when I look back ... but I think it's okay to be stuck for a while. Coming out of that, after grad school, I found the invented landscape as a motif, and that sort of opened things up. I was looking at people like Turner and Odilon Redon, mysterious, atmospheric, painterly painters. There's a tremendous amount of space in their pictures, but you can't always read what's going on. The ambiguity is what pulls you in.

**HC** Yeah, it's very mystical and hazy. I definitely think that's apparent in your work. But I find it interesting that you take inspiration from these painters because your work is so illogical.

**JD** (laughter) Are you kidding?

**HC** Maybe you didn't know that, but your paintings aren't realistic. (laughter)

**JD** I think that's why I make them, to create an alternate universe. I want to merge different systems and spaces. And I'm really attracted to the polar opposites of Turner, with his murky sea spray and Bosch or Bruegel, with their crisp little figures.

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HC That's true, there are parts of your pieces that are so familiar, and so human and real, and then there are parts that are extremely fantastical and dreamlike.

JD Right, I mean the funny part is that—even though Salvador Dalí was one of my favorite artists when I was a kid—I really resist the comparison to surrealism. To me, Dalí is too realistic, the way he portrays things. Dreams are more disjointed and in less of a logical space.

HC There's no one clear message in dreams.

JD That's funny that you say that because people love to interpret dreams, and I think there's something to be said for it. Because once in a while you'll have a dream where obviously you're trying to work out this problem in your life and that dream reflects that. But I prefer when a dream is really magical, to just leave it alone. I dream at least two or three times a month of floating above water and looking at fish just below the water's surface.

HC That's an awesome dream to have.

JD Going back to the paintings, that is the kind of disjointed logic I hope for. When I'm working, I just let my brain wander. So if the monkey in this picture is sitting there, and something about the curve of his tail reminds me of a tree root or a coiled spring, I'll grab a collage fragment of a tree root, or go to an old Engineering textbook to hunt down the right coil shape.

HC So you mentioned working upstate, and I was wondering if that was a thing you normally do, and if the landscape, or location, influences your work?

JD For five years now, we've rented a place in the Catskills, just to be away from the city. And now my kids are in camp, so I can work during the days. I mean, for a while, either we've done that and/or I've gone to an artist residency where I can be isolated for a month or be around writers and artists. In fact, a lot of this work started at Art Omi, which is a colony in upstate New York, near Hudson. It was very communal: thirty artists from around the world, and only six of us were American. And, unlike other residencies, they have visiting critics and curators, and they come in your studio and give you a critique, which is somewhat weird at this stage of my life. But it was interesting; I got something out of it. But being upstate, it's really important to get out of the city. And I really need that time, to get some breathing room.

HC Hmm. Do you think you work any differently in the city versus being out of it?

JD That's a good question. It's more about the sustained time I have upstate, being able to work until one in the morning. Actually, one tangible thing is that in some of these paintings I use plants and foliage to make stains and stencils, so being in the country I can just grab different shaped leaves and literally make their shape on the paintings.

HC I think the most distinguishing quality of your work, and I mean this as a good thing, is the feeling of being overwhelmed when I look at it. (*laughter*) There are many things to look at, yet if you zoom out there is sort of a uniting landscape. What looks like a lake from a distance may be illegible when seen from close-up. In a good way.

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**JD** Yeah, I think that's reality. I think if I could go to the microscopic level, I would. I mean I certainly use images that represent that, like cells, radiolaria. But my fear, or the danger with my work, is that if there is no bigger structure, then it just becomes a bunch of chaos. So especially with the large pieces there has to be a clear composition.

**HC** What do you figure out first, though? The composition or the details? Is it top-down or bottom-up?

**JD** I have these small sketches, very basic compositional sketches.

**HC** Have you ever tried printmaking?

**JD** I did some etchings years ago during a semester in Florence, and I enjoyed it, but it was a little too indirect, too process oriented. The result wasn't quick enough. But I do like the idea of printmaking, and I do incorporate it in a way. By incorporating the leaves that make stains, and making stencils ... so I do like the idea of an indirect method. I guess I just contradicted myself. That's art. I kind of reject the Abstract Expressionist idea that the personal mark is all powerful. I love de Kooning and Philip Guston, but when I see artists who still rely on the gesture to hold the whole work? For me, it's not enough. So, even though I still draw and paint in my work, part of the reason I ended up using a lot of collage is in order to get away from the personal mark.

**HC** I find it very settling to look at something that incorporates more formal elements. It's enjoyable to lay your eyes on something that's partly real, that's tangible and relatable, but still different and otherworldly in some ways. I remember reading on your website a line that remains very vivid for me, where you were describing your fascination with information that is no longer relevant. I've been thinking about that recently in the context of psychiatry, and how one form of psychiatry is just analyzing the stream of consciousness. And I feel like that's kind of similar to analyzing information that's no longer relevant, or a belief that isn't true. There's something very pure and intimate about beliefs that once held weight but now have been dispelled by science or a different set of beliefs. Because it still has all these thought processes and rational reasons for why people thought it was relevant or true, but it's not actually grounded in anything external or natural. Do you see a connection to your role as a teacher? You're teaching things that may seem irrelevant as compared to science and math, but could mean more in the end.

**JD** The reason I wanted to teach in the first place is because I do value the art of art, the craft of it, and the knowledge and language of it. I don't think that's irrelevant, and I don't think it ever will be. Because it's about, you know my cliché, learning to see, because if you can learn to see, you can learn to draw. Anyone can draw. I believe that. So I don't think it's outmoded. Most art you see in galleries right now might not be dependent on drawing from life or from still life, but that was just a way to train the students' brains. And then from there, once you have those skills, you can go anywhere. But in terms of outmoded technology, that echoes with the fact that in almost all of the paintings in the show, the base layer on the panels is old player piano scroll paper. Player pianos play themselves by "reading" these scrolls—air blows through these holes and triggers a piano key. Each scroll I used is a different song. I'm obsessed with old paper, but I had a few of those scrolls for years before I figured out how to use them in my work.

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**HC** I was thinking about the machinery that's no longer useful, and the maps that are no longer accurate that you also employ. Or information that just isn't true, like the idea that the world is flat. Like why were they so sure of that? Trying to figure out the foundation and rationale behind false reasoning is very compelling to me.

**JD** I know. And think of all the things we're so sure of now.

**HC** That's similar to dreams, because you're so convinced that the dream is real while your dreaming it. Our brains have an incredible ability to convince us that something is real even if it's not. At least mine does.

**JD** That is the key to what I'm trying to do in collaging all this information and different subject matter—machines next to biological things, and tiny things next to huge things, mixing all that up—to just create a new logic and question everything.

**HC** How does your work incorporate the evolution of imagery as it is passed on, as in your use of texts and old diagrams? You said before that you tend to use pre-photographic era texts, when the illustrations were drawings.

**JD** Yes, I still have issues with photography. Because it's so accessible now, and cell phone photography is such a huge part of our lives—making photo images that are art seems even more challenging, and rare. So I like using images that were made during an era when the only way to make an image was with drawing. You had to make an engraving and maybe mass-produce that engraving. But for people to know what a baboon looked like, someone had to draw it, and maybe even someone else did the traveling to see that creature and then tell an artist what it looked like.

**HC** I think it's interesting that that person who went to the foreign place is totally convinced that what they are relaying is accurate. Like, Oh, no it definitely had ears.

**JD** Right, so you end up with Dürer's magnificent rhinoceros with armored plates and scales, and that's what everyone thought a rhinoceros looked like. So, I'm obsessed with hunting down these old books. I have a bookshelf for machines, one for plants, cell structures, animals, old tools. And I like that the information is translated through human interaction. A lot of the graphic sources that I use are not art. Sure, some of the animal engravings are beautifully drawn with beautiful line quality and elegance, but some of the images are completely utilitarian, like books with diagrams for doctors to see what diseases look like, or crude drawings of cranks and pulleys for a builder to use.

**HC** I've always liked diagrams because their intention is so obvious and honest.

**JD** And the beauty of it comes from its function being portrayed. So I love taking those things out of context and making them into art.

**HC** And related to that, the other thing that's so interesting about your work is the how it questions the relationship between humans and nature. It reminds me of Bill McKibben's book

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*The End of Nature*, where he talks about how there's no more wildlife in the world that humans haven't impacted, because we affect the air. And the idea that there is no more untouched nature is incredibly anxiety inducing for humans because we have no way to self-identify. We've touched everything, and therefore can't set ourselves apart from it. It's like the way we view nature is one-sided, it's only the human perspective.

**JD** Yeah, and we think we have ownership of it, whereas I suspect we will disappear before a lot of stuff on the planet does. I think that's definitely in the work.

**HC** Because the humans in your work ... well, when you look at it, you don't think of humans, you notice the composition and these whimsical forms and then huge oceans and aspects of nature.

**JD** The humans are often small or dwarfed by their surroundings. I used to be really committed to not having any humans, just having a lot of evidence of humans. But now I'm okay with some humans. But they're just part of the picture. Their impact is huge because there's all the architecture and machinery. And it's true that we touch and destroy everything we come across.

**HC** We define ourselves by our being not nature, and we define nature as not human. But if you believe in science at all, then you know that distinction is totally blurred.

**JD** It is, but still so many people don't agree. A lot of my work deals with evolution, like the painting *Unintelligible Design* (2014). I had a similar piece titled 35%, which is the percentage of Americans who believe in evolution.

**HC** It's crazy that the world can seem so small sometimes. The way we live right now is so different from the way we lived 2,000 years ago, that it can't be that much of a stretch to think that 10,000 years ago we looked a little different.

**HC** Can you tell me about the paintings in the show?

**JD** Well, the largest piece in the show is *Memento Mori*, which is a medieval spiritual practice, a reflection on death and that life is fleeting. In Renaissance art it has to do a lot with remembering you are going to go to heaven or hell, and that the earthly is just temporary. My message isn't about that, but it's about an awareness of the fleetingness of everything. One thing in this painting that I've had a lot of fun with are the clippings I included from antique dictionaries along the bottom of the painting. One thing we've lost with Wikipedia and Google is the joyful discovery you used to have when you flipped through a dictionary, and found one word right there next to another. So, just by scanning one page, you'd jump from one subject to another. Money to Monkey, Rhyme to Rime.

**HC** Right, and on the Internet, pages link to others that are very popular or are similar to the one you're viewing. Especially now with the amount of data computers pick up about what you search and then suggest things to you. You don't just come across things so randomly as you might in the dictionary. I just heard about this website where you click a button and it shows you links to YouTube videos that have less than ten views. Where it's just so random.

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JD Wow. *(laughter)* That's good. That's a hopeful thing.

*Josh Dorman's exhibition, Josh Dorman: Whorled is on view at RYAN LEE through October 11, 2014. For more information on his work, visit [joshdorman.net](http://joshdorman.net).*

*Haleigh Collins studies visual art and English at Bowdoin College.*

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## *the* PARIS REVIEW



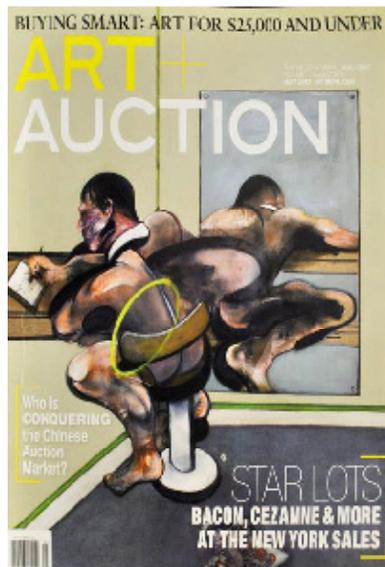
This Saturday is your last chance to see “Whorled,” Josh Dorman’s vast and imaginative solo show at Ryan Lee Gallery. Dorman paints vibrant, dreamlike landscapes and festoons them with found images: illustrations, fragments, and diagrams from old textbooks and catalogs, all of them from the seemingly prelapsarian period before photography, and all carefully (though still jarringly) collaged into the paintings. Parades of flora and fauna coexist with kids tossing guns; lakes are made of hammers, mountains grow from maps. You’d expect all

this to devolve into chaos, a kind of jackdaw’s nest, but Dorman’s compositions are precise, even orderly, which makes them all the more uncanny—as beautiful as they are, the paintings evoke a state of basic contradiction that has a way of getting under your skin. —**Dan Piepenbring**

**October 2014**

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## Omer Fast at Postmasters and the Whitney; Anthony McCall's 'Leaving'; Josh Dorman's 'New Works'

by ROBERT SHUSTER

JANUARY 12, 2010

### Josh Dorman: 'New Works'

If Josh Dorman had been born in the 17th century, he would have become one of those eccentrics who curated the Wunderkammers, the room-size collections of oddities taken from nature, science, and myth. Aesthetically rooted in the past, Dorman is doing something similar in two dimensions, assembling found, antique images into marvelous collages of retro fantasy that suggest (as Dorman admits) Bruegel, Redon, and Chinese landscapes. On old U.S. Geological Survey maps, Dorman conjures new worlds based on the original locations. Careful in his progressions of color and shape, but never far from dreamed chaos, the artist inks backgrounds and textures, and layers dozens of items (often engravings) meticulously clipped from 19th-century miscellany.

In *Thirty-Five Percent*, a kind of madcap Darwinist vision, Dorman has surrounded the Pacific with monkeys, outmoded mechanical devices, and zoological imagery, all embedded in sinuously flowing topographies of jungles and mountains. In *Versus*, emphasizing the collection's recurring dualism, a precarious pile of manmade things (devices, tools, architecture) stands across from a hill populated by animals and insects both odd and familiar. Like a "Where's Waldo?" puzzle, Dorman's rich clutter keeps you searching for the next intriguing detail.

Mary Ryan Gallery, 527 W 26th, 212-397-0669. Through February 6

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## TWO COATS OF PAINT

January 19, 2010

### Josh Dorman: Madcap Darwinian visionary

by Sharon Butler



In *The Village Voice* Robert Schuster writes that had Josh Dorman been born in the 17th century, he probably would have become one of those eccentrics who curated the Wunderkammers, the room-size collections of oddities taken from nature, science, and myth. “Aesthetically rooted in the past, Dorman is doing something similar in two dimensions, assembling found, antique images into marvelous collages of retro fantasy that suggest (as Dorman admits) Bruegel, Redon, and Chinese landscapes. On old U.S. Geological Survey maps, Dorman conjures new worlds based on the original locations. Careful in his progressions of color and shape, but never far from dreamed chaos, the artist inks backgrounds and textures, and layers dozens of items (often engravings) meticulously clipped from 19th-century miscellany.

“In ‘Thirty-Five Percent,’ a kind of madcap Darwinist vision, Dorman has surrounded the Pacific with monkeys, outmoded mechanical devices, and zoological imagery, all embedded in sinuously flowing topographies of jungles and mountains. In *Versus*, emphasizing the collection’s recurring dualism, a precarious pile of manmade things (devices, tools, architecture) stands across from a hill populated by animals and insects both odd and familiar. Like a ‘Where’s Waldo?’ puzzle, Dorman’s rich clutter keeps you searching for the next intriguing detail.”

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In City Arts Mario Naves reports that Dorman's new work has an welcome philosophical concentration. "It's a spoiler's game to pin-down the meaning of art as various (and fun) as this, but Dorman's thoughts about the limits of human understanding are fairly patent. Pseudo-Biblical, pseudo-mythological, pseudo-Darwinian and uniformly wistful, Dorman's art posits a cosmos where fact is forever embellished and sometimes hoodwinked by caprice. He may be more of a realist than we think."

"Josh Dorman: New Paintings," Mary Ryan, New York, NY. Through February 6.

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## Los Angeles Times

Josh Dorman's collaged paintings on display at the Craft and Folk Art Museum

His works are built of topographical maps and other elements.

By Leah Ollman, Special to The Times  
August 30, 2008

Josh Dorman's show at the Craft and Folk Art Museum opens with a warning, but not the usual sober sign you see at the entrance to certain exhibitions, aiming to shelter the unprepared from "inappropriate" content.

The notice, painted in sprightly letters on a plum-colored wall, alerts visitors that viewing Dorman's collaged paintings may cause them to experience instability or dislocation. They might lose track of scale, gravity, time. "While clear answers may or may not reveal themselves," the wall text declares, "the loose logic of a dream state will surely reveal much truth."

Most of the work in "Within Four Miles: The World of Josh Dorman" is based on old topographical maps that the artist has cut out and collaged onto panels or canvas, drawn into and painted over. Typically, maps offer certitude and a clear sense of positional relationships. Dorman's versions shed the anchors of rational order. They trade scientific method for poetic instinct. In finding a new use for old materials, Dorman has also resuscitated an obsolete definition of the word "map": "to bewilder."

For Dorman, losing oneself and finding oneself aren't such contrary propositions. "Most of the time I have no idea where a piece is going to go or what it's going to end up as," he said in a conversation during the opening weekend of his first museum show. As deliberate in his speech as he is spontaneous on the page, he added: "I don't trust the idea of forcing something. I want to find ideas organically. I find an entry point, like an edge of a landscape element, and just add things and sometimes subtract things. It's like an adventure, discovering stuff in the process."

Dorman's works are all journey, no destination -- or perhaps multiple destinations. He toys with place names on maps, adding or blocking out letters to spell puns or playful descriptions. From old books, he cuts out diagrams of machine parts, botanical specimens and microorganisms, charts of celestial schema and ancient languages, weaving them together into a fluid, fictive realm. Forms give way to other forms with free-associative ease. Planes tilt and warp; scale and perspective shift radically. Epic themes infiltrate raw sensation. The antiquated and schematic merge with the new and immediate.

With his boyish face and earnest, old soul, the New York-based Dorman, 42, is of a piece with his work. He gravitated toward outdated printed matter nearly 10 years ago, when he was painting what he calls "invented landscapes" and feeling trapped by the medium -- "Something

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about covering the entire surface, and though I didn't think about it consciously, the weight of the history of oil paint." Finding a stash of old ledger papers inspired him to pick up ink and draw again. "The yellowed, weathered quality of the paper really opened up something. It took me back, almost to childhood, the freedom of being able to include everything and anything. It opened up the space. I didn't need horizon lines. I could have figures and creatures and landscape."

The L.A. show picks up where the ledger drawings left off, when Dorman started incorporating topographical maps into his work. He had used such maps as a boy at camp and was drawn to the beauty of their veiny, sepia lines, but it took some time before he felt brave enough to treat them as raw material for his art, first using single maps as a base for drawing and painting, and then cutting them up and collaging them.

He usually has four or five works in progress at a time, small "poems" he draws and collages fairly quickly and large, multipanel spectacles like the nearly 8-foot-tall "Tower of Babel." He "messes with" the panel pieces while riding the subway and during his day job teaching art to middle and high school students at a private school in Manhattan. He had a panel of "Babel" with him at the hospital when his 7-month-old twin daughters were born. One of the infant's footprints graces the painting's moody sapphire sky. Mostly, though, he works lying on the floor, a posture common to children when they draw. "I literally lie on top of [the works]. And sometimes I nap on them, which I think is somehow like getting my dreams in there," he says, laughing.

It's a practical method as well, since Dorman needs to be close to the surface to work on dense networks of detail. This intimate dialogue with surface, ink and paint is, in part, what attracted Maryna Hrushetska, director of the Craft and Folk Art Museum, to organize the show: "His love of materials, his commitment to working by hand, his love of storytelling. It may sound a little outdated in the 21st century, but the work is made with a lot of love and meaning. There's an honesty to his work that's very touching."

In 2005, Dorman's work caught the attention of the founder of Memory Bridge, dedicated to reasserting the individuality and humanity of those with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. He was flown to Chicago, where he listened, sketched and took notes while foundation staff interviewed patients of a rehabilitation center. The organization produced a documentary, "There Is a Bridge," which continues to air on PBS stations. Dorman created interpretations of each subject, map-based portraits of his or her interior world, which turned out to have a lot in common with the cosmos in his work. Several Memory Bridge commissions are in the show.

The CAFAM invitation was both an honor and a surprise, considering that he is well-schooled and widely shown in commercial galleries. (The George Billis Gallery, in Culver City, opens its third show of Dorman's work on Oct. 7.)

"I'm flattered to feel that my work can be viewed as 'folk art,' as some sort of natural product," he wrote in a recent e-mail. The contrivances, slickness and irony of much contemporary art puts him out of sync with the current moment, though he feels some kinship with James Siena and Daniel Zeller, whose meticulous line drawings, he surmises, have something to do with asserting control of a small, self-contained world when "we've lost control and we've lost having

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our say in the greater world.”

The timeless theme of hubris threads through Dorman’s work and, as with “Tower of Babel,” he frequently reaches back to biblical metaphors to address recent cataclysms.

Art of the past consistently nourishes him: the unpretentious, inventive watercolors of Paul Klee; the precisely rendered parables of Bosch and Bruegel; as well as the murkier, ambiguous atmospherics of J.M.W. Turner, Odilon Redon and Albert Pinkham Ryder.

Lately he’s been reading Italo Calvino and marveling at the connection with his own sensibility. “If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler,” Calvino’s 1979 novel, “feels exactly like my work to me. A million stories in one. They might not be complete, but you sense that there are overlaps and connections. You know it’s going to leave you hanging a bunch of times, but it’s really satisfying.”

“Within Four Miles: The World of Josh Dorman,” Craft and Folk Art Museum, 5814 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 937-4230, through Jan. 11, 2009. Dorman will talk at 3 p.m. Oct. 12.

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**ARTnews** SUMMER 2008  
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## Josh Dorman

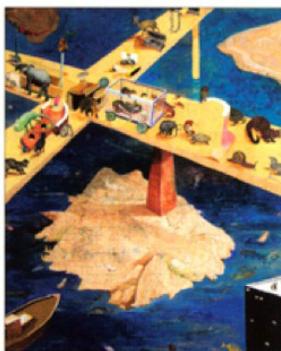
**Mary Ryan**

This show of collage and map paintings invoked Babel in both name and imagery. Indeed, Bruegel's own painting of the biblical tower appeared, in miniature reproduction, in one of the works. But Dorman's paintings are distinctly of the 21st century. One is not likely to see a more poignant image of environmental crack-up than *Dangerous Intersection* (2008), with its parade of elephants and other animals strung along a highway that doubles as an illustration for two-point perspective.

Dorman organizes his work like a map. With *A Cautionary Tale* (2008), he summons a mountain range, cityscape, and oil refinery from the contours and elevations of a topographical chart.

And while there have been a number of map-based painting shows over the last year—many filled with mainly decorative works—in Dorman's case, the maps make formal sense as settings for his sometimes bewildering cut and pasted imagery.

*Sum* (2008), a large multipaneled painting and a kind of summation of the show, is an elephant's graveyard of architectural renderings, geometric abstractions, and the freehand drawings, encircled by the artist's inky black line. The surface of *Sum* brought to mind a sidewalk billboard plastered with advertisements and coated in whitewash. In terms of composition, the work skirts chaos. But it has a grandeur of vision, as though Piranesi had discovered Google. Perhaps that's why Dorman paints on maps.



Josh Dorman, *Dangerous Intersection*, 2008, ink, acrylic, antique maps, and paper on panel, 42" x 34".  
Mary Ryan.

—Alex Taylor

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## The New York Times

### Collages Go to College, and Behave Accordingly

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

DEC. 16, 2007

Most paintings, particularly abstract and impressionistic ones, pull into focus from a distance, but when it comes to looking at collage, you really have to get up close.

I was reminded of this wisdom while visiting “Bits and Pieces: The Collage Impulse” at the Lehman College Art Gallery. It is an enjoyable show of almost 40 collages by 33 emerging artists and those better known for working in the collage medium. Works are grouped by content and materials, but by and large all the artists are interested in making art by piecing things together.

Collage comes from the French word *coller*, which means “to stick.” It is a technique that was popularized in the early 20th century by Picasso and Braque, both of whom began to stick newspapers, bus tickets and other kinds of printed material onto their compositions in search of greater verisimilitude.

Much of the work assembled at Lehman is also built from pieces of paper or a similarly malleable material. These include assemblages of bits of lottery tickets and product packaging by Yunsook Park and Michael Cooper and collages by Mark Wagner and C. K. Wilde that use banknotes.

Mr. Wagner’s contribution — an “employee of the month” poster made out of cut and pasted pieces of United States currency — is especially memorable. It is a joke on corporate America, where some lowly paid workers, though treated poorly by their employers, are occasionally acknowledged in an effort to make them feel more appreciated.

What is common to all collage is intentional compositional disharmony — that is, a forcing together of materials, objects and images of one kind or another that do not properly belong in the same realm. It is an easy thing to do, but to create a good artwork from this process is another thing entirely.

In the early 1920s, the Dada artists used collage to create spontaneous juxtapositions of objects; the Surrealists carried this idea into paintings. In the current show, several artists rely on Surrealistic painting conventions, including irrational juxtapositions and incongruities of scale, and have a preference for garish colors. They often combine drawing and collage to create fantasy landscapes — those of Josh Dorman, Alejandra Villasmil, Melissa Barrett Lundquist and Dodi Wexler are especially impressive.

When it comes to collage landscapes, you want to see how the image or object is made, how all of the little pieces fit together. Then you can step back and take in the whole thing. That is the case

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with Mr. Dorman's "More and Less Lost" (2007), a busy concoction of ink drawing and collage over an antique map. The imagery is arranged vertically, much like a Chinese scroll painting, though much busier, with many things happening simultaneously — a kind of postmodern Brueghel.

There is also a great deal of abstract collage, which is to say artwork that doesn't pretend to represent anything at all. Among the artists exhibiting that kind of work are Mario Naves, Barbara Landes, Jerry Mischak and David Poppie. Their works are delicate and gorgeous if generally inaccessible, for as much as I enjoyed looking at them I had no idea what they were about.

Other artists make works with found materials and the discards of daily life, though the show stops short of including the work of grunge-assemblage artists like Rachel Harrison. There is no collage sculpture or installation art here at all, at least not any installed on the floor. However, strangely, there is one video, made up, like a sequential collage, of fragmented stills.

Images clipped from cartoons and children's books are another popular source of collage material. Their use here often results in intricate, intimate-looking fantasy scenes. Some of these works are provocative and thoughtful, including Oliver Peterson's messy mixed-media take on American history and the mythology of the Wild West. It is easily overlooked, mingled here with the more decorative works.

One of the great virtues of this exhibition is the way in which it shows off a diversity of collage strategies and techniques. Clearly the collage impulse is alive and well in contemporary art.

"Bits and Pieces: The Collage Impulse," Lehman College Art Gallery, Lehman College, 250 Bedford Park Boulevard West, the Bronx, through Jan. 11. (718) 960-8731 or [www.lehman.edu/gallery](http://www.lehman.edu/gallery).

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## THE NEW YORKER

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

DECEMBER 26, 2005 & JANUARY 2, 2006

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### GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

#### JOHN J. O'CONNOR / JOSHUA DORMAN

It's probably safe to declare that when history lists the art tropes of this decade, near the top will appear systems analysis and its subcategories topography and cartography. O'Connor and Dorman both exemplify the trend, albeit in very different ways. O'Connor's huge works on paper are Pop-inflected, jagged, splat-shaped hybrids that attempt to map, via an arcane method of textual-to-numeric-to-visual translation, borrowings from Dante and the Atkins diet and everything in between. Dorman, meanwhile, paints on antique maps themselves, constructing fantasy lands and visual puns with the wonky, romantic intensity of a daydreaming ten-year-old. Through Dec. 23. (Pierogi, 177 N. 9th St. 718-599-2144.)

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# ARTFORUM

## Josh Dorman

CUE ART FOUNDATION

137 W 25th Street, Ground Floor

October 21, 2004–November 27, 2004

That there is often an essential sentimentality to creative endeavors—a reconnecting with memories, with the past—is a fact long made manifest by Josh Dorman's paintings. In recent years, however, Dorman's precise landscapes have recontextualized their relationship to history, moving from the personal toward something broader. In this show, curated by Paul Auster, the pictures on view are representative of a new body of work. The modestly-sized paintings—acrylic, oil, and ink on panels or canvas—have grounds of collaged antique maps. In Dorman's literal reworking of the topography of recollection, we find not only a celebration of our memories, but a release from them; in summoning the past, we also destroy it. His paintings, no doubt influenced by the changing topography—both political and physical—of our planet, have taken on the immediacy of an editorial cartoon, with works like *The Funnies*, 2003, consciously invoking that conceit. Driven by anger, paranoia, blind hope and tenderness, Dorman is a cartographic zealot, not only correcting the misapprehensions of memory, but mapping the New World Order.



*The Funnies*, 2003.

Driven by anger, paranoia, blind hope and tenderness, Dorman is a cartographic zealot, not only correcting the misapprehensions of memory, but mapping the New World Order.

— John Reed

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## GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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**ART**  
GALLERIES-CHELSEA

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### JOSH DORMAN / BRIAN MOSS

Dorman's paintings depict the dream territory of ocean trenches filled with sunken boats, or translucent, geometric cityscapes rendered in hot colors. Lest the drama of such imagery suffocate its wit, Dorman paints on top of old maps, which he collages into ~~Rossian~~ ~~Borghesian~~ countries of the imagination or seizes as occasions for ~~doody~~ ~~margin~~ marginalia (a place called Rabbit Hill is adorned with an otherwise incongruous white rabbit). The maps' utilitarian cool balances the frenetic painted scenery, keeping it, as it were, grounded. A series of richly colored photographic self-portraits by Brian Moss (made with multi-hour exposures) are also on view. Through Nov. 27. (CUE Art Foundation, 511 W. 25th St. 212-206-3583).

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## Art in America

March 2004

### Josh Dorman at 55 Mercer

In his fourth solo exhibition at 55 Mercer, Josh Dorman showed dozens of his strangely romantic, abstract landscapes (dating from 2001 to '03). From 3 inches to nearly 4 feet wide, many of the works were paintings or collages, and many more were made with colored inks on antique maps or ledger paper. The topography of the maps is often an inspirational starting place for the artist's fantasies. A combination of childlike doodles and imaginary visions amid Turner-esque tumults, Dorman's worlds belong to the tradition of Blake, Klee and Redon, but these creations are uniquely his own.

Dorman's titles—*Apparition*, *These Were My Toys*, *Some Candy Mountain*, *Beast*—conjure

up mystical and episodic encounters. Squiggles, stains and flying monsters coexist peaceably in these landscapes with Seussian contraptions, flying furniture and buildings, as well as anthropomorphic flora and storms. It is as if energies, objects and enigmatic creatures were all journeying together on a secret quest. Equally intimate and obsessive, his vistas taunt, tease and intrigue. The best works are the larger oils, including *Where We Lived*, *Ascension*, *Reckoning* and *Aurora*. Pterodactyl-like apparitions emerge, as if from out of the ooze, from swirling washes of red, violet and yellow—color shifts that undulate like the northern lights.

Intestinal and earthy forms dominate the long, horizontal *Pilgrimage*, where hundreds of tiny, peculiar creatures crawl or float through a meandering black tunnel. From the faceted, fragmented structures in *Lost Travels*, to the planetary, watery or microscopic realms in *Maritime*, the paintings deal with a range of free associations and approaches to abstraction.

Picasso once said of Miró that he should grow up and quit running after hoops. Working successfully with childlike imagery, Picasso knew, is difficult. It takes a visionary like Klee to do it believably. In most of Dorman's paintings, color and drawing act independently and have yet to fully coalesce; but I have faith in this young artist's abilities. Dorman's bursts of atmospheric color resonate with a fireworks-shimmer that is beautifully emotive. And there is complexity in the drawing that is genuine and deep-seated, as if he were close to resurrecting something essential from childhood. In these landscapes, I sense that the artist is most at home while running after hoops, and I look forward to wherever that takes him. —Lance Esplund



Josh Dorman: *Where We Lived*, 2002, oil on panel.  
38 by 48 inches; at 55 Mercer.

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## MODERN PAINTERS

Lance Esplund

### Seasons, Fields, Dreams

Artists and the landscape

**Modern  
Painters**  
Summer 2001

In Josh Dorman's recent show at 55 Mercer Gallery was a small, untitled ink drawing of a tree flying over a landscape. The drawing is almost childlike, and weird enough to remind us of the drawings of the insane. The tree's branches appear to flail and to lift like a bird's head in the wind, as its roots dangle, tail-like, trailing clumps of earth.

Never, while viewing this work, was I reminded of hurricane winds or other forces of nature or man that might have flung the tree skyward. Nor was I to believe that I was viewing a fairy-tale world where trees uproot themselves and take to the heavens. Dorman's forms are both more fantastical and less literal. The tree is neither itself nor a bird, and the sky in his drawing is no more above than the earth is below. If this begins to sound like a riddle, well, maybe that is what Dorman intends. In his landscape paintings



Josh Dorman, *Red Hill*, 2001, oil on wood, 35.6 x 30.5 cm

and drawings, he does not seem to have created a world where trees fly, but, instead, a world where trees are never really trees at all, and if, for moments, they are, they could just as easily have taken root in the sky.

In Dorman's artist's statement for this show, he describes his childhood drawings as 'strange contraptions, moving out from and into each other in a circular pattern ... gizmo-piece[s] (picture cake batter pouring from a blender into a buzzing electric socket)', and associates them with a recent adult experience of his at a Thai restaurant. Just before he began his meal, a 'wriggling thumb-sized creature - a sort of pale grey, plump sea millipede - crawled from the mouth of his whole deep fried Red Snapper. 'What joy!' Dorman writes, 'How often do our dream images enter into our daily waking lives and truly startle us?'

Out of such experiences, and the discovery of Ernst Haeckel's *Art Forms in Nature*, Dorman began to draw again, very much in the way he had when he was eight years old. He included a number of these small, sparse ink drawings, painted on antique ledger paper, in the show. They are miniature worlds, a mixture of botanical or zoological studies and Dr Suess-like doodles. Sea life, clouds, animals, figures, smouldering cities and winged plants interact and interchange with each other. At their best, the drawings are enigmatic and resemble swirling energies more than recognisable forms.

These drawings appear to have freed up Dorman's imagination, while the colour in his larger oil paintings of invented land/dreamscapes has become much richer. Dorman's new work moves beyond the illustration of romantic ideas, as each painting finds, and is carried by, its own colour range and captivating mood. Dorman appears to be nurturing the particular quality of autumnal gestation in each of these strange, abstract landscapes, which are as much Elysian fields as they are dark, unconscious wanderings.

Although I am in my studio in the mountains,' writes Joan Snyder, about the origin of her new series of abstract paintings, entitled 'Primary Fields', 'I am dreaming



Stanley Lewis, *Tree from John's Room*, 2001, pencil on paper, 120.7 x 130.8 cm