

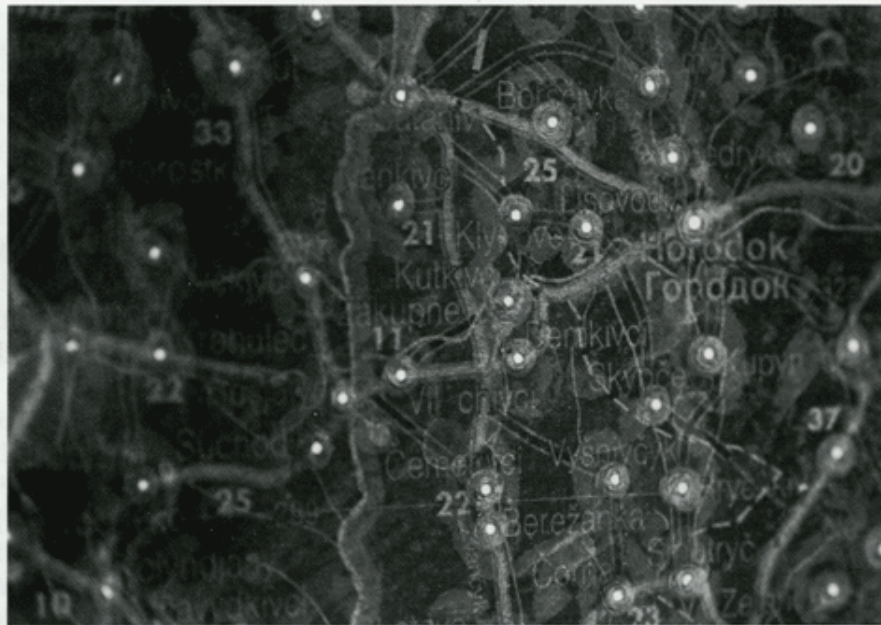
Kathy Prendergast

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At first sight, you'd be forgiven for surmising that Kathy Prendergast's 'Black Maps' are an attempt to chart the outer regions of the galaxy. Large and austere, these inky works on paper are peppered with white dots, like a starry night sky. Closer inspection, however, reveals a far more terrestrial concern, for these are, in fact, effaced road maps. Prendergast produces these works by meticulously inking out extensive areas of international motoring maps, save for the small white circles denoting points of habitation. Topographical detail, borders and other signs of geopolitical territoriality are erased, as cities, towns and villages of all shapes and sizes are reduced to uniform specks that litter the works' surfaces with varying frequency. For instance, the highly developed areas represented in *Poland* (all works 2010) and *Ukraine* both contain a dense plethora of dots, whereas in the adjacent works, *North America Southwest* and *North America Pacific Northwest*, the constellations are sparser, reflecting the fact that conurbations here are spread out over much wider areas. Large expanses of black in these maps suggest the presence of mountains, forests, deserts or bodies of water – geographical features that long ago impeded cultivation and settlement of the landscape. In addition to ink, the surfaces of these works are covered with creases and folds, serving to remind us of their original status as commercially available, consumer items, as well as their pragmatic agenda. However, despite being obfuscated with black marker, the original cartographic content of the five maps on show is not entirely expunged, for certain place names and other details can still be discerned through the semi-opaque ink. In *Poland*, for example, recognisable place names such as 'Warszawa' or 'Berlin' show through, and in *Ukraine*, snaking motorways and multiple trunk roads can just be perceived beneath the indelible coating. To this extent, the maps engender a desire for knowledge, to solve the puzzle of where places are, and to comprehend what has been obscured.

Cartography has been an enduring area of enquiry for Prendergast throughout her career. For instance, her meticulous 'City Drawings' series, 1992-2006, for which she is perhaps best known, renders city maps as biotic networks of faint pencil lines, divested of any coded information. In her 'Lost Map' series of 1999, digitally constructed maps of North America eliminate all place names except for those containing the word 'lost'. Whereas these previous projects sought to examine the way in which mapping might reveal the organic nature of city development, or demonstrate our penchant for instilling meaning and emotion into places via language, Prendergast's current series ostensibly highlights the artifice of cartography and its reductive nature.

Maps are, of course, highly artificial and fallible constructions, which, as classicist Christian Jacob elucidated



Kathy Prendergast
Ukraine 2010
detail

in his 1996 essay 'Toward a Cultural History of Cartography', can be considered either 'transparent' or 'opaque'. Likening the 'transparent map' paradigm to the cinema screen, Jacob explains that the map vanishes behind the information it displays: 'the map becomes merely an external reality and an archival device for objective knowledge or reality'. In this way a map is not considered as a visual, material artefact, rather it is viewed as a neutral, purely descriptive device. The opaque map, on the other hand, comes to the fore when we start to consider the object itself and the way in which information is displayed on it. As Jacob writes, 'it is then possible to consider maps as visual artefacts and to study them from graphic, aesthetic and structural points of view and see them in a complex architecture of signs'. Prendergast's 'Black Maps', with their sweeping negations of cartographic information, enforce an 'opaque map' paradigm, compelling us to consider the way in which the designers of these particular maps have selected, abated and abstracted their data. Her blotting out emphasises what is omitted, drawing attention to the flawed nature of these graphical constructions. Yet the 'Black Maps' do more than merely offer up a cartographic critique; through Prendergast's own selection and abstraction they reveal complex patterns of habitation that express our imposition onto the landscape. Appearing like scattered grains of salt, Prendergast's evocative constellations can be read as poetic maps of collective human presence that erase difference and overlook social disparity. In this way, Prendergast's reductionism also encourages a consideration of the transparent paradigm, that is to say that they invite a contemplation of the world and its inhabitants beyond these acutely abridged representations. For all their negation and absence, the true subject of these works reveals itself to be presence. ■

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