

Matthew Northridge's (Im)Possible Journey

When scientist and philosopher Alfred Korzybski stated “The map is not the territory” in 1931, he was articulating his desire to distinguish models of reality from reality itself. If Korzybski were alive today how would he respond to a society in which a map no longer exists solely as a static object printed or drawn on paper, but also in the form of a pixel-based graphic, moving in “real time” and instantly accessible from anywhere in the world? Surely, he would immediately recognize the increasingly paradoxical notion of what is real. Matthew Northridge’s cartographic strategy relies on an empiricism based on both the virtual and the real to create works that function as relevant cultural signifiers. Northridge is a consummate collector, a discerning iconographer, an inveterate classifier, and a gifted topographer, who constructs a metaphysical landscape that is at once fantastical and yet rooted in reality. And just as Korzybski’s ideas on general semantics were articulated and understood within a larger existential context, Northridge’s collages, sculptures, and installations are also part of a metalanguage, reminding us that many questions raised by Korzybski remain timely today as we march toward an ever-increasing remove from the real.

Northridge’s engagement with the landscape provides a portal through which we can enter his extraordinary world. Some of his works function as ostensible maps for this journey, while others appear to illustrate its outcome. With titles such as *Twelve Ladders, or, How I Planned My Escape* and *An Astonishing New Collection of Oddities from Every Corner of the Globe*, they can appear as a loosely knit narrative of this remarkable adventure. The ladders leaning against the wall and leading to a small window onto a bucolic landscape in *Twelve Ladders* are reminiscent of a scene from a Pedro Almodovar film, in which masterful depictions of escapism transport us to an entirely new realm. Likewise, *An Astonishing New Collection of Oddities* is a visual travelogue in miniature—an accumulation of places visited or perhaps simply imagined. If we could only just scale those ladders and climb into that picturesque scene of the countryside we might be able to collect those astonishing oddities from every corner of the globe.

The ongoing series of map-based works represent an important part of Northridge’s practice. They are geographic recontextualizations that always contain a subtle subtext and are often presented in a physical state of unattainable remove. *Map of Washington D.C.* for example, is ensconced in a slender round metal cage that is installed hanging from the ceiling. *Map of Antarctica*, *Map of England*, and *Map of the Maritime Provinces* (not to mention a number of other works not included here) are installed in an equally inaccessible way often partially enclosed in a box or other container. In doing so, Northridge is denying us the very function of the map’s purpose, perhaps in a clever nod to that paradoxical notion of the real. These are cartographic constructions, but not the current type found through the connectivity of a hand-held device that today we take for granted. These maps—and perhaps by implication, the actual locations themselves—lie just beyond our reach.

In *The World We Live In* Northridge has created a continuous indexical series of collages that read like the well-worn pages of a travel atlas. They incorporate photos as their backgrounds that have an inherent “you were here” or “you *should* be here” quality about them. They are nostalgic and suggest snapshots or postcards from some transcontinental journey or the enticing Technicolor allure of a travel magazine from the 1950s. But are these images an invitation to visit these sites or a discouraging admonition to stay away? Attractive representations of desert, forest, mountains, and coastline are starkly interrupted by paper constructions, designs, blank paper labels, and other materials that could signal either a “Scenic Overlook Ahead” or a cautionary “Road Closed.” The larger yet no less enigmatic collage *Welcome Back to the Nuclear Age* is filled with seamlessly joined colorful diagrammatic sections that bend, crossover, and circle back

on each other in an endless game board fashion. Throughout the piece is an unwavering black line that clearly denotes a pathway. Is it a metaphysical breadcrumb trail leading back to our point of origin? Perhaps, but by virtue of the fact that this trail has no beginning and no end it becomes a biting commentary on the naïve optimism that once characterized hopes for a better society in post-war America.

Whether it be a specific geographical region on land or at sea, an imaginary place created by the artist, or that nebulous domain of the virtual arena, Matthew Northridge's diagrammatic collages and installations are inherently tied to the places they represent. On the surface they may appear nostalgic. At the same time, however, they transcend conventional notions of place and operate within a matrix of technological determinism. Technology has become a force beyond our control and *Pictures by Wire and Wireless* not only implies the great leap from analog to digital, but is also a poignant visual metaphor for Korzybski's dilemma. We can now understand his statement equally as both critique and as prophesy as the "map" has become merely a collection of data in the form of ones and zeros. Similarly, while the map may no longer chart a path along an interstate or country road, in Northridge's hands it nevertheless provides a route for an otherwise impossible journey.

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