



Shona Macdonald, *Patchwork Earth, Dark Hem of Hedge*, 2004, gouache on paper, 15" x 20"

Mapping the Infinite Possible

To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.

— Robert Louis Stevenson

Some years ago an obscure psychological study came out that claimed to prove that travelers with a map, any map, even the wrong one, felt less lost and had more success reaching their destination than travelers with no map at all.

Seemingly strange at first, on second thought this phenomenon makes a deep kind of sense. Perseverance requires hope, and chaos makes hope impossible. We all need order in life if only to rebel against it.

Map making is an effort to find order in the world, to place oneself in a context, and the pursuit of this order requires a kind of creative optimism not so remote from the making of art. Shona Macdonald combines these two impulses to make maps, and landscapes, that are frankly fictional.

It is no accident that maps fascinate and preoccupy Macdonald, who came to the United States from Aberdeen, Scotland, as a student in 1994 and has since made Chicago her home. Every émigré has a story of her own but in one sense Macdonald's is like all of them, a story of assimilation and loss, discovery, displacement, cultural duality and memory of a place left behind. This rupture and reorganization of the facts of one's physical world are the conditions of Macdonald's

visual imagination. Add to this mix the fact that her first home was a watery place of islands, peninsulas and thousands of miles of coastline, and you end up with the essence of this painter's aesthetic.

The work is all geography and landscape based, albeit imaginatively so. Her paintings look like maps of some island nation before aerial views and measuring devices put landforms and bodies of water in geographic perspective. There are other kinds of perspective, though. She's influenced by Japanese isometric perspective and often uses a shifting point of view, painting the perception of place and space, not the objective fact of it. Her images are, in part, about the act of finding one's place in the world and marking out territory for the purpose of saying here I am, here is where I am going, here is where I have been.

Often she invents coastlines and archipelagos by tracing the real coastline of Scotland and then "unfurling" it down on the canvas in lengths, bending it to make up plausible but non-existent islands. This highly process-oriented technique of borrowing from real maps aids the illusion of travel, as happens in old books where a made-up map warps a known coastline and thus introduces us to a place in the writer's imagination. In Macdonald's case, the invention is not literary or narrative but visual and spatial. It happens in how she warps and reinvents physical space; flattening it out and popping it back up into Renaissance perspective. In a single painting we see both the craggy profile

of an island and also how it must look from above. This presentation of a composite image rather than the perceived image is a technique used by primitives and children but also in highly sophisticated and spiritual cultures, ancient Egypt for instance, when the idea of a thing is more important than its mere physical appearance.

Macdonald cites diverse influences that include Emmet Gowin's aerial photography, Julie Mehretu's paintings, Bruce Conner's drawings and fellow-immigrant Vija Celmins' vast painted spaces, which Macdonald describes as "screens for reflection and memory."

All of these artists grapple with representing or deconstructing space and so it is in Macdonald's work. Both visually and logically she leads us in and out of real space the way a deeply-felt dream remembered in the midst of a busy day leads us in and out of reality, making us question which part of our experience is more real, the inner truth or the outer. This trickery, which zooms us in and out as well as up and down – some of the imaginary aerial views contain big blue amoeba-like shapes suggestive of the depth measurements in topographic ocean maps – forces us to reconsider our notion of objective reality. And that's quite the point. Even the paint itself shifts back and forth between illusion and materiality and just as we begin to believe in a landscape a broad stroke of pure paint jolts us back to the surface.

Macdonald employs her tracing and unfurling device in her drawings too, and it is particularly notable in one where she obsessively draws

and redraws her driving route to and from her teaching job in Bloomington, Illinois. Studded with little pine tree road sign symbols that signify campgrounds, the drawing becomes a journal of travel, a map of time as well as space.

This borrowing is a powerful device that is beautiful in its own right for anyone who loves maps but which works as a metaphor, too. For what is a map but proof that we have a place in the world, that our place is connected to the rest of the world and that we can find our way out and back home again. It is also a metaphor for possibility, the repetitious drawing of a route or a border, a road or a river represents a conjuring of or longing for possible travel.

Macdonald doesn't label anything on these maps, she offers no key and doesn't name her bays and isthmuses with fanciful monikers. These are maps of the mind, which paradoxically, because they are not personalized, seem very real. She makes us believe they are simply places we've not yet discovered, and they begin to work for us the way that false map in the psychologist's study worked for the lost hikers. Each of us makes these his or her own private maps in which we see our travels and our travails and perhaps our future transcribed in all their complexity and potential.

Margaret Hawkins is a Chicago writer and critic whose work appears regularly in the Chicago Sun-Times and ARTnews magazine and who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Shona Macdonald, *Branches, Portals, Places*, 2004, pencil and gouache on paper, 23" x 29"





Shona Macdonald, *Inscape: Mountains*, 2004 (diptych), gouache, acrylic on MDF, 45" x 104"

Shona Macdonald

Born

1969 Aberdeen, Scotland. Lives and works in Chicago and Bloomington, IL

Education

1996 M.F.A. Studio Art, University of Illinois at Chicago, IL

1991 B.F.A. (Honors) Painting, Glasgow School of Art, Scotland

Solo Exhibitions

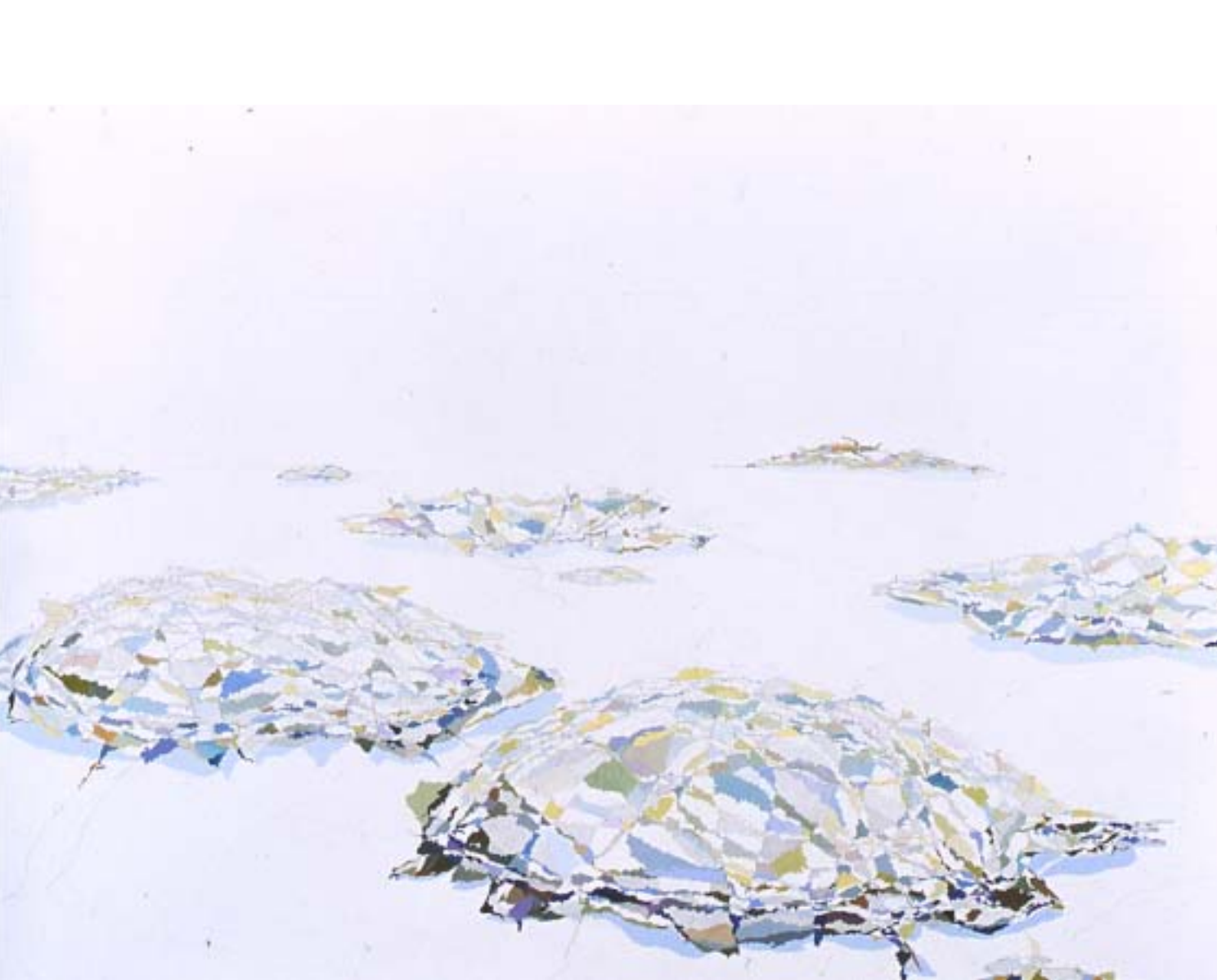
- 2005 Shona Macdonald: *Inscape*, Chicago Cultural Centre, Chicago, IL
Shona Macdonald: *Inscape*, Gahlberg Gallery, College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, IL
- 2003 *Terrain*, Julie Baker Fine Art, Nevada City, CA
- 2000 Shona Macdonald, *Project Room*, Fassbender Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1998 Shona Macdonald, *Project Room*, Fassbender Gallery, Chicago, IL

Selected Two-person Exhibitions

- 2002 Shona Macdonald and Patrick Magee, Galerie refugium, Berlin, Germany
Shona Macdonald and LJ Douglas, University of Alberta Art Gallery, Edmonton, Canada
Confluence, Julie Baker Fine Art, Nevada City, CA, (showed with Ray Charles White)

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2005 *Ground Work*, den contemporary art, Los Angeles, CA
- 2004 *New Science Fiction*, Lisa Boyle Gallery, Chicago, IL
Summer Drawings and Some are Not, Mixture Gallery, Houston, TX
Drawing Project: Chicago/London, The Stray Show, Chicago, IL
Displacement, Gescheildle, Chicago, IL (brochure, essay John Brunetti)
Under Run, Dogmatic, Chicago, IL
- 2003 *PAINTINGS!*, Central Michigan University Art Gallery, Mt. Pleasant, MI (catalog)
Faculty Biennial, Illinois State University, Normal, IL (also 2001 and 1999)
- 2000 *Surface Tensions*, Spaces, Cleveland, OH
Intonations, ARC Gallery, Chicago, IL (brochure, John Brunetti)
Brief Encounters, British Artists Abroad (BAB), Platform, Melbourne, Australia
Thin Line, I-Space, Chicago (essay, Tim Porges)
- 1999 *Emergence*, The Three Arts Club, Chicago, IL (essay, Stephanie Skestos)
It Looks Easy: A Cross-Section of Painting in Chicago, Gallery 400, Chicago, IL



Shona Macdonald, *Unraveled Coastline as Isles*, 2004, gouache and pencil on paper, 38" x 50"

- 1998 *Link: 22 Painters*, Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago, IL
Substance: A Corporeal Investigation, NIU Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1996 *Mid-States Annual*, Evansville Museum of Art, Evansville, IN (Halpert Memorial Award Prize)
- 1992 *Pacesetters*, Peterborough Art Gallery, Peterborough, England, UK
- 1988 *Paisley Drawing Competition*, Paisley Museum and Art Gallery, Paisley, Scotland, UK

Selected Reviews

- 2003 *Art News*, Review of 'Terrain' at Julie Baker, Lindsey Westbrook, Summer '03
- 2002 *Chicago Critics on Chicago Artists*: John Brunetti on Shona Macdonald, Art Fair Chicago 2004

Selected Awards

- 2005 Illinois Arts Council Finalist Award
- 2002 Illinois State University Faculty Large Project Grant (also 2001 and 1999)
- 2001 Nominated, Louis Comfort Tiffany Award

Selected Residencies

- 2004 Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Co. Monaghan, Ireland (selected for the VCCA International Programme)

- 2001 Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Sweet Briar, VA (also offered 2003)
Ragdale Foundation, Artist Residency, Lake Forest, IL (awarded Friends Fellowship)

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Barbara Wiesen,
Director and Curator

Front Cover:
Shona Macdonald, *Inscape: Isles* (detail), 2003 (diptych), gouache, acrylic and oil on MDF, 52" x 90"

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Shona Macdonald, *Inscape: Pine* (detail), 2004 (diptych), gouache, acrylic and oil on MDF, 52" x 90"

Gahlberg Gallery

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