



# MapQuesting the Mind

With a cartographer's eye and an explorer's soul, Heidi Whitman plumbs the relationship between external and internal worlds.

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TEXT BY LOUIS POSTEL // PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEWART CLEMENTS

**H**ow do you paint what's going on inside your skull? Heidi Whitman comes from a long line of artists who make such invisible things visible. In fourteenth-century Florence, the architect and painter Giotto di Bondone thawed out frozen-faced divines with a human warmth. Painters such as Mary Cassatt and Henri Matisse infused pictures with light and movement. Later, in the twentieth century, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Franz Kline made painting itself an event that would last long past their lifetimes.

In the same tradition, Whitman performs the magic of bringing unseen

networks, both internal and external, to life. In comparison, an fMRI scan is but a pale shadow. Take away the hard matter of our skulls, says Whitman, and observe how the networks within us enmesh themselves with the networks outside: streets and train tracks, switchbacks and footpaths, rooftops and road signs. No matter how meticulously an archaeologist records his digs through ancient ruins, the conflation of brain inside to world outside requires the imagination and drawing prowess of a Whitman to describe.

Whitman discovered her love for drawing while in film school in New York. She realized that, unlike film, drawing didn't involve perpetually raising funds,

or working with stubborn machines. She delighted in the fact that all drawing asked of her was to maintain a direct connection between brain, eye, and hand.

In 1980, she graduated from Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts and shortly thereafter joined its faculty. Her drawings, paintings, and paper constructions are shown in the U.S. and abroad, most recently at TAG Fine Arts in London, and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City; her work also hangs in a multitude of private and corporate collections.

In her South Boston studio, pieces from her latest paper-construction work, *Lost Cities*, are pinned to the freshly painted walls, one on top of another, old-school-salon style. Whitman considers the net of shadows cast by the pieces as a key medium in her mixed-media constructions and mashups, as elemental as paper, paint, canvas, and glue.

**ABOVE:** From Whitman's *Lost City* series, *Lost City of T* (2016), ink, gouache, acrylic, paper, canvas, and cast shadows, 20½"H x 15½"W x 2"D.



Maps—of contemporary city grids, of ancient ruins, and of the human brain—are a source of inspiration for Whitman. *Mappamundi 3*, for example, with its intricate, fragile, interconnecting paper lines, illustrates her combined passion for

ancient worlds and the classical cartography that is suggestive of the mind's mysterious terrain. "I have always been in love with maps," she says. "Even as a little girl, I loved those stories featuring maps—*Treasure Island*, *Winnie the Pooh*.

I got so into mapping brains, people started asking if there was something going wrong with mine."

Under Whitman's studio worktable lies a cardboard box of scraps, bits of canvas, old map shreds, odd papers she had painted for other projects. Such waste you couldn't pawn off on Goodwill, but with an X-ACTO knife (routinely "using up zillions of blades"), tiny scissors, and a glue gun, Whitman transforms it all into crisp topographies and tracteries of the mind, grids of pure consciousness.

This is not to say that the work is without humor. In her construction titled *Lost*





FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Lost City of G* (2016), ink, gouache, acrylic, paper, and cast shadows, 25½" x 19"W x 2"D; *Night Voyage* (2015), ink, gouache, acrylic, paper, and cast shadows, 43"H x 21"W x 2"D; *Small World* (2015), ink, gouache, acrylic, paper, and cast shadows, 5'H x 15'W x 5"D; *Mental Map (27)* (2016), ink and gouache on paper, 10"H x 17"W. BELOW: The artist at work.



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*City of G*, a train track leads incongruously nowhere, mocked by an upside-down palm tree. Loops, marshes, switchbacks, and various topographical markings cause a double take: are they real, or merely symbols standing in for mental activity? In *Lost City of G*, the colors are of the desert, which, explains Whitman, is hardly colorless. Her travels through various deserts taught her that. A recent sojourn in Central Asia inspired *Lost City of G*'s palette of sand, blue, green, orange-brown, and slices of red.

How many other lost cities lie under those Central Asian sands, or under the entire spinning crust of our planet, for that matter? And how will they seek out the networks in our minds to make some unifying connection? Conversely, what do our minds yearn for, one wonders—what do our memories hold, our dreams conflate, what happenings within and without our skulls trigger us, deaden us, confuse us, uplift us, and awaken us to art? Whitman's art explores those very questions. •

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Heidi Whitman is represented by Carroll and Sons, Boston, [carrollandsons.net](http://carrollandsons.net). To see more of her work, visit [heid whitman.com](http://heid whitman.com).



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