

Treasured maps



In the bag 'Tea Revives the World', 1940, by MacDonald Gill, at the British Library (above), 'River of Blood' 2010, by Susan Stockwell, at Rivington Place (below)

Creative mapmaking is being showcased in two new exhibitions. **Helen Sumpter** loses herself in the art of cartography

I can barely follow a map, I certainly can't fold one back up and I can drive round a roundabout and not recognise which exit I joined it from. Fortunately this doesn't hinder the appreciation of two very different exhibitions on the

incredible and it's the fifteenth-seventeenth centuries, before there was any real distinction between 'maps' and 'art' that highlights a golden age. An intricately detailed aerial woodcut of Venice from 1500 bigs up the Venetian Republic with the inclusion of images of fleets of sailing ships and gods in clouds puffing favourable winds on the city; an eighteenth-century map of the Goehrde hunting forest in Hanover, a favourite of George I, appears to detail every individual tree, shrub and bush.

To provide context the show groups works according to the setting

subject of mapmaking – 'Magnificent Maps: Power, Propaganda and Art' at the British Library, and 'Whose Map Is It? New Mapping by Artists' at Rivington Place, both of which are as much about artistry as they are about geography.

In 'Magnificent Maps' the British Library have drawn from their cartographic collection of almost 4.5 million items to create a showcase of 200 wall maps, atlases, books, prints and globes dating from 200AD to the present day. Aside from the complex historical and political information these works reveal about when, where and for whom they were made, the art and craftsmanship in many of them is

in which they may originally have been shown: palace galleries for the hunting ground, demonstrating a king's land and power, for example, or the bedchamber for medieval world maps (which often contained religious imagery), as a reminder of God and the eternal. The street is the location for examples of more contemporary maps, such as military propaganda posters. That these groupings seem a bit uneven doesn't detract from the overall experience because with treasures like these, it's the maps themselves that make the show.

At Rivington place 'Whose Map Is It?' features works by nine contemporary artists (all female, coincidentally), who use mapping as a starting point to explore political, social and cultural structures. These works, in a range of media including film, painting, sculpture and installation, are as much about mapping journeys as defining boundaries. Dutch artist Esther Polak equips nomadic Nigerian dairy herdsman with GPS and then recreates the graphic GPS lines of their journeys in front of them, as drawings in the dirt.

Their recognition of what each twist and knot in the line represents in real time and place (shown here in film and prints) reveals how the most advanced and the most basic mapmaking techniques, on a human

level, create the same meaning.

Alexandra Handal's more poetic sculptural installation records an action of unforgetting. By repeatedly writing the names of the 400-plus Palestinian

villages that ceased to exist after 1948, in snaking lines of text on layers of translucent vellum paper, Handal powerfully evokes the need to keep reinforcing a memory of something that has already been lost. Gayle Chong Kwan's tracing of the migration and adaptation of the rumba dance from Cuba to all over the world maps a more celebratory movement of both individual bodies and of the dance itself, but often it's the simplest of approaches that has the most emotional impact. Bouchra Khalili's ongoing series of short films show the hands of unseen individuals using a pen on a map to trace forbidden and dangerous journeys they have made, either as

migrants or as casualties of territorial disputes in their own homeland. Their accompanying narration of their often life-threatening experiences, reminds of the very human effect of what it can mean to draw a simple line on a map. 'Magnificent Maps', continues at the British Library until Sept 19. 'Whose Map Is It?' continues at Rivington Place until July 24 (see Major spaces).

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