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STYLE & ARTS STUDIO

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March 9, 2008

Past Editions...

He Knows Airports From ATL to ZRH

In what may be the smallest art gallery in the United States, you can discover the whole world. Or at least its airport terminals. Atlanta, Berlin, Vilnius, Bangkok, Calgary -- all up there on the walls of Curator's Office in Washington. Charles Cohan, a 47-year-old printmaker and art professor based in Hawaii, has transformed diagrams of these terminals and 43 others into a room-filling installation called "Airfield." Each terminal is represented by a simplified aerial plan of its facilities, turned into a clean black shape and printed onto a 22-inch square of fine paper. "I've always been interested in the way in which knowledge is ordered and codified," says Cohan, "and in its translation into the artistic medium I'm working in." His almost-abstract prints, with their luscious blacks, can look as much like letters or symbols or hieroglyphs as like diagrams of actual structures. Cohan is also fascinated by the high-security "nether zone" of the airport terminal itself. He cites "the contradiction between the supposed freedom the airport represents, in terms of arrival and departure and transport and travel, and yet within that there is increasing security and surveillance. With the luxury of the freedom of travel, there is anxiety in the hub or epicenter of that travel, which is the terminal."



How do you get your images of airport terminals?

The images initially started being generated from the diagrams at the back of in-flight magazines -- I was spending too much time on airplanes. Once I got a critical mass of those, I then started going to the Internet.

I'm only interested in international airports, where there are borders being breached by the flights

in and out.

I do feel that I want to continue the project toward a certain relative point of completion. And I don't know what that point is. Many of what are known as international airports are also used for military purposes, and many of those airports are not available for their plan diagrams. If we have 265 or 270 terminals on the official airport sites, I'm imagining an equal number of unofficial airports.

And then there's the fact that there are airports being built constantly. And the remodeling of airports causes another level of completion that would be necessary to call the project finished.

It's been going on now for over four years, and I can certainly see it continuing in earnest for another four or five.

I have printed 62 of the airports, and have made 90 plates -- so I'm getting to the point where I'm almost at the halfway point of the officially recognized international airports.

Airfield: Works by Charles Cohan is on view through April 5 at Curator's Office, 1515 14th St. NW. Call 202-387-1008 or visit www.curatorsoffice.com.

-- Interview conducted and condensed by Blake Gopnik

PHOTOS: Breck Brunson -- Curator's Office; WEB EDITOR: Amanda McGrath - washingtonpost.com

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