



New Work: Evan Holloway and Dave Muller

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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Evan Holloway and Dave Muller both live and work in Los Angeles, a city that suffers from and revels in its polarized identity: utopia and dystopia, sunshine and noir, spectacle and specter. Both artists have absorbed the cultural and physical terrain that surrounds them, which manifests itself literally, as in Muller's drawings of the urban landscape, and more elusively, as in Holloway's cascading tree-branch sculptures. They have drawn upon the device of the grid—the ever-expanding grid of land developers as much as the classic modernist grid—while demonstrating a proclivity for an accumulation of form. Holloway and Muller are also both interested in information systems and their inevitable failures, but their pseudoscientific investigations are always tinged with a poetic, utopian impulse.

Muller is an avid musicologist and a voracious record collector. Recently he has undertaken to draw the careworn, fuzzy spines of his collection, which numbers roughly thirty-five hundred volumes after a recent self-imposed purging. Certain names jump out, from Chet Atkins to Caetano Veloso, and coalesce into a kind of portrait of Muller based on the music he likes. The artist, who grew up in Marin County, has done something similar for San Francisco, creating a subjective impression of the city and its environs. More than one



Dave Muller, *An Ending*, 2001. Colored pencil on paper. Courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

hundred individual drawings of the Bay Area skyline have been installed by the artist on the gallery walls. Rather than a seamless panorama, his is a physically and thematically disjointed vision filtered through memory and suggestive of the myths, stereotypes, idiosyncrasies, and politics of this place. San Francisco is the newest element in his ongoing, open-ended series *Sprawling*, drawings of cities that aptly began with Muller rendering the view from his studio in Los Angeles.

Muller's installation is a piece of elegant, handcrafted conceptual realism slyly masquerading as a cover song. In 1976 the conceptual artist Michael Asher removed the glass from his New York studio windows in order to, as he explained, "enable viewers . . . to find the exterior to be as important as the interior. . . . I wanted to merge interior and exterior conditions, that is, exterior noise, air, light, and pollutants with the conditions existing in the interior."¹ Muller, who studied with Asher at California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California, painted this statement onto his first skyscape panorama, and he has achieved something similar here: Upon entering the gallery, visitors are immediately transported back outside. His use of a traditional medium like watercolor masks the nuanced conceptual underpinnings of the project. While Asher's medium was physically invisible—dematerialized—Muller's delicately hand-drawn images are redolent of facture and visibility. If this is a cover, it is equally a love song.

Over the past decade Muller has gained increasing recognition for a diverse body of work that includes what he calls Three Day Weekends—events he has staged across the globe in which he invites artists to exhibit work amid music (Muller usually deejays), beer, and genial hanging



Dave Muller, *Spatial* (detail), 2001. Acrylic on paper. Courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

out—and his own hand-painted renderings of announcement cards for exhibitions by his friends, other Angelenos, and icons such as Andy Warhol. Muller, a self-described "documentarian," is as much a maniacal cataloguer (in an early piece he attempted to list every-one he had ever spoken to), sorting through the stuff around him: records, art shows, or, in this case, the landscape of San Francisco.

The legendary curator Walter Hopps once said that good curators refrain from getting in the way—a philosophy that Muller applies to his own artistic practice.² Indeed, he has explained, "people are unaccustomed to looking at the larger picture. They can't really look at anything but the 'star' or the 'author.' But I'm not really into that. I mean, I've always been the bass player and never the singer."³ In 1969 the French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote, "[W]e should examine the empty space left by the author's disappearance; we should attentively examine, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void; we should await the fluid functions released by this disappearance."⁴ Muller has stepped into that gap and embraced it wholeheartedly; his entire practice has been marked by a fluidity

that challenges the immobile centrality of the author. In 2003, as part of the exhibition-cum-community action *17 Reasons*, based out of San Francisco's Jack Hanley Gallery, visitors to the Harrington Brothers furniture store in the Mission District could trade their favorite records for Dave Muller drawings. Though beyond the pale of the art market, Muller's bartering system succeeded in part because of the currency of his name and reputation—an indication that the bass player may be becoming the lead singer after all.

Holloway's *Map* (2003) is at once absurdly humorous and provocatively disconcerting. Made of real tree branches unnaturally joined at right angles and painted on one side with the color spectrum and on the other with the gray scale, the work engenders an instantaneous comprehension—a conscious recognition of something so ubiquitous in the natural landscape that we have ceased to see it. While the effect of the initial read is one that the artist Charles Ray has characterized as an attempt by young L.A. sculptors to "reenchant the world,"⁵ Holloway's work refuses such straightforward idealism and, intentionally or not, disenchantingly removes the cultural blinders we habitually wear in front of the seemingly harmonious trio of nature, sculpture, and Modernism. It is what Marcel Duchamp might call serious play.

Map toys with and exploits the established vocabulary of modernist sculpture: the notion that abstraction derives from nature, for example, in Alexander Calder's constellation sculptures or Alberto Giacometti's attenuated ciphers of human figures. Holloway interprets this conceit literally, by reconfiguring tree branches into an

abstract modernist grid. Moreover, his deeply intuitive sense of composition, balance, weight, rhythm, directionality, and even beauty—hallmarks of the formal language of the medium with which all sculptors must contend—is at odds with the deliciously flagrant prank he has pulled. With its contradictory impulses toward nature and the unnatural, both respectful of the hallowed traditions of Modernism and poking fun at them, *Map* is a kind of sculptural kindred spirit to the drawing *3 Rules of Plumbing* (1992) by Los Angeles-based artist Sam Durant. Durant's drawing lists

under "Modernism" the attributes of clarity, unity, and honesty, while on the opposite side of the page, under the heading "3 Rules of Plumbing," fall these corresponding cardinal rules: shit rolls downhill, payday is Friday, and don't lick your fingers.

In one of his metaphysical tales of alternate universes, the writer Jorge Luis Borges describes a group of cartographers who create a map that so perfectly charts the physical terrain on a one-to-one scale that it soon covers the entire empire; it is a complete and total simulation of reality.⁶ Holloway's *Map* is a similarly mad enterprise, but one that undoes and remakes the found object—which the artist retrieved from a vacant lot filled with dead trees—rather than simulates it. This kind of structural inversion of the readymade echoes through much of Holloway's work, such as *Music of Chopin Performed on the Reverse Piano* (2000), a CD of Chopin sonatas that the artist purportedly recorded on a piano strung in reverse. Though fundamental, the alteration is elusive, for the sonatas still resemble the original recordings, just as *Map* resembles the original form of the tree. It also hints at the artist's larger investigation of systems and their fissures, whether in music or in the medium of sculpture. *Map* is malleable enough to visually infer several possibilities: the infrastructure of a circulatory system, a grid of city streets, or simply energy materialized into sculpture.

Holloway is well aware of the kind of phenomenological experience often ascribed to sculpture, particularly minimalist sculpture of the 1960s, to which he is a somewhat uneasy heir. With *Subway* (1998), a structure that emits the same sensory-dulling fluorescent lighting found in subways,

Evan Holloway, *Reverse String Piano*, 2000. Ink on paper. Courtesy Marc Foxx, Los Angeles



offices, and supermarkets, the artist deliberately undermines such imperatives for sculpture by proffering a kind of "feel-bad" phenomenology. In particular, *Subway* riffs on the ambient, cathedral-like fluorescent light sculptures by the minimalist Dan Flavin. Much of Holloway's work evinces a *je ne sais quoi* aesthetic, oscillating between being repellent and attractive. Works such as *Map*, in which refuse is made sublime, are equally ambivalent, exuding a reluctant beauty and level of sophistication. Holloway is unequivocal, however, in his conviction that a work of art has the ability to profoundly affect its viewers. Enlightened as we "postmoderns" may be, we are collectively suffering from irony fatigue, and with *Map*, Holloway makes us all true believers.

Tara McDowell
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Notes:

- 1 Michael Asher and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Michael Asher: Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979* (Hillsdale, Nova Scotia: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 126.
- 2 Hans-Liich Obrist, "Walter Hopps hops hops," *Artforum*, February 1996, 60.
- 3 Paul Young, "Always the Bass Player," *Angeleno*, November 2002, 232–33.
- 4 Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124–27.
- 5 Dennis Cooper and Bruce Hanley, "Conversation for a New Sculpture," in *Mise-en-Scène—New L.A. Sculpture* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2000), 7. Ray, an instructor at the University of California, Los Angeles, has taught a generation of young sculptors, including Holloway.
- 6 Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, "On Exactitude in Science," in *Extraordinary Tales* (New York: Harner and Harner, 1971), 123.

Evan Holloway, *Subway*, 1998. Mixed media. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York

Evan Holloway was born in 1967 in La Mirada, California, and presently lives and works in Los Angeles. He received a bachelor of arts degree from the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1989 and a master's in fine arts from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1997. Most recently, Holloway has had solo exhibitions at Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; The Approach, London; and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels. His work has been included in *Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast in Contemporary Art*, organized by and traveling to the Seattle Art Museum; the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco. He has also participated in the group exhibitions *Warped Space*, CCA Wattis Institute; *The Moderns*, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy; *Painting on Sculpture*, Tonya Bonakdar Gallery, New York; the 2002 Whitney Biennial, New York; *Mise-en-Scène: New L.A. Sculpture*, Santa Monica Museum of Art; the California Biennial, Orange County Museum of Art; and other shows in London, Vienna, Berlin, Naples, and Amsterdam.

Born in 1964 in San Francisco, Dave Muller currently lives and works in Los Angeles. He received his bachelor's degree in chemistry and art from the University of California, Davis, in 1988 and a master's in fine arts from California Institute of the Arts in 1993. His recent solo exhibitions include *Dave Muller: Connections*, which premiered in 2002 at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and traveled to the UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; and *Spatial*, organized by the Saint Louis Art Museum in 2001. Muller has also had one-person exhibitions at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles; Murray Guy, New York; The Approach, London; and Engholm Engelmort Galerie, Vienna. His work has been included in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, New York; *Playlist*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris; *For the Record: Drawing Contemporary Life*, Vancouver Art Gallery; and in group presentations at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. He has held Three Day Weekends in cities around the world, including New York, Los Angeles, London, Vienna, Frankfurt, Athens, Berlin, and Tokyo.

Works in the Exhibition

Evan Holloway <i>Map</i> , 2003	Dave Muller <i>Sprawling</i> , 2004
Acrylic on wood 62 x 186 x 167 in. (157.5 x 472.4 x 424.2 cm)	Acrylic on paper Multiple panels, each 40 x 32 in. (101.6 x 81.3 cm)
Courtesy Marc Foxx, Los Angeles	Courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

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Reverse, left to right:
Dave Muller, *Sprawling* (detail), 2004
Evan Holloway, *Map*, 2003