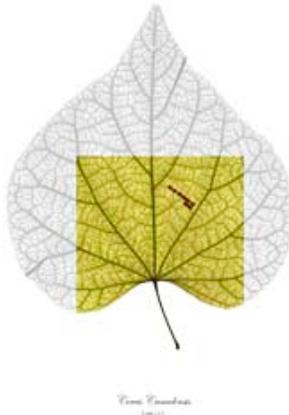


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The dissolution of Detroit

Mapping out the stories of a shrinking city



Susan Goethel Campbell's *Cercis Ganadensis (Redbud leaf)*, 2007.

One of the downsides of installing *Shrinking Cities* by thematic categories at Cranbrook Art Museum and MOCAD is that the art sometimes seems to suffocate under a blanket of theory. The related exhibition *Imprint of Place*, curated by *Shrinking Cities* program coordinator Gregory Tom, provides a welcome opportunity to see work on its own terms rather than as an illustration of some bigger idea. Before taking up art, Tom studied geography, and like that discipline whose Greek root means "earth writing," the information registered in *Imprint of Place* starts at ground level.

Several exhibitors literally map the local terrain and present the results. Inspired by Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Detroit*, architect Adrian Blackwell draws up diagrams and legend keys to show the successive waves of segregation and deindustrialization that washed over the city since World War II, leaving the half-empty shell Detroit is today. He gets at the essence of *Shrinking Cities*, which sprawls over two museums and thousands of printed and digital pages.

The postwar suburban retreat from the city, and its associated public life, is aptly summed up in architect Steven Mankouche's "Cul-de-Sac City." On three panels of gypsum wallboard, Mankouche records the late 1950s and early '60s dissolution of the Detroit street grid into the curlicue network of cul-de-sacs on the periphery. Where the grid makes the city readily intelligible (you always know where you are on the numbered streets and avenues of Manhattan, for example), cul-de-sacs render the surroundings more difficult to fathom, especially to outsiders. In a book next to the panels, Mankouche details the added irony of this increasingly privatized landscape leaving its mark on the natural environment by using idyllic place names like "Twelve Oaks" and "Lakeside" to disguise its system of

underground sewers and utility pipes, buried cables, twisting expanses of concrete, shopping malls, office multiplexes and McMansions.

That the rewriting of geography might be brought into line with nature — in fact and not just in name — is the ambition of Susan Goethel Campbell. In a new body of print work that's as beautifully crafted as anything she's ever done, Campbell investigates leaf patterns to uncover micro- and macrocosmic links between the natural world and human consciousness. Working in collaboration with landscape architects and developers, she has digitally integrated environmental drawings and enlarged photographs of leaves to suggest ways in which roads and subdivisions might be constructed according to biometric principles, serving to foster a built environment that takes its cue from nature instead of trying to rule over it. Recent developments in "green" architecture and design suggest that this is more than an artist's utopian vision.

Whether Campbell's ideas ever get put into practice is as much a function of politics as economics and aesthetics. University of Michigan master of fine arts student Toby Millman uses a United Nations map of Jerusalem and environs to show how the world we experience can be made subject to arbitrary categories of distinction and vested interest. The UN map shows Israeli settlements, restricted military areas, approved travel routes for Jews and Palestinians and other devices intended to assert control over the land and the people who occupy it. Millman isolates elements of complex cartography, using large sheets of blank white paper to cut out areas suggested by each one. The resulting works are delicately three-dimensional, fragile in their potential to completely collapse into nothingness. The equivocal nature of what constitutes "solid ground" is made all the more evident by the knowledge that the UN issues updated maps every six months.

There are other works that would be worth discussing if space allowed — John Ganis' lush color photos of America's disrespected landscape and Jacque Liu's Mylar and paper drawings of places he's lived in over the years, to name just two. Only a few pieces (primarily student work) don't fare so well against the high standards of the rest of the show. That *Imprint of Place* does so much in only 1,200 square feet of storefront space is a testament to its curator, whose own ceramic pieces are included in the *Detroit Next* show currently at Detroit Artists Market. Like those elegant works where the vessel form is reduced to permeated clay skeletons glazed in subdued earth tones, *Imprint of Place* demonstrates that sometimes less really can be more.