

# His map quest: self-discovery

By LEAH OLLMAN  
*Special to The Times*

Josh Dorman's show at the Craft and Folk Art Museum opens with a warning, but not the usual sober sign you see at the entrance to certain exhibitions, aiming to shelter the unprepared from "inappropriate" content.

The notice, painted in sprightly letters on a plum-colored wall, alerts visitors that viewing Dorman's collaged paintings may cause them to experience instability or dislocation. They might lose track of scale, gravity, time. "While clear answers may or may not reveal themselves," the wall text declares, "the loose logic of a dream state will surely reveal much truth."

Most of the work in "Within Four Miles: The World of Josh Dorman" is based on old topographical maps that the artist has cut out and collaged onto panels or canvas, drawn into and painted over. Typically,



ANNIE WELLS *Los Angeles Times*

**FITTING:** *Josh Dorman creates collaged paintings.*

maps offer certitude and a clear sense of positional relationships. Dorman's versions shed the anchors of rational order. They trade scientific method for poetic instinct. In finding a new use for old materials, Dorman has also resuscitated an obsolete definition of the word "map": "to bewilder."

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# Topography of Dorman's ideas

[Dorman, from Page E1]

For Dorman, losing oneself and finding oneself aren't such contrary propositions. "Most of the time I have no idea where a piece is going to go or what it's going to end up as," he said in a conversation during the opening weekend of his first museum show. As deliberate in his speech as he is spontaneous on the page, he added: "I don't trust the idea of forcing something. I want to find ideas organically. I find an entry point, like an edge of a landscape element, and just add things and sometimes subtract things. It's like an adventure, discovering stuff in the process."

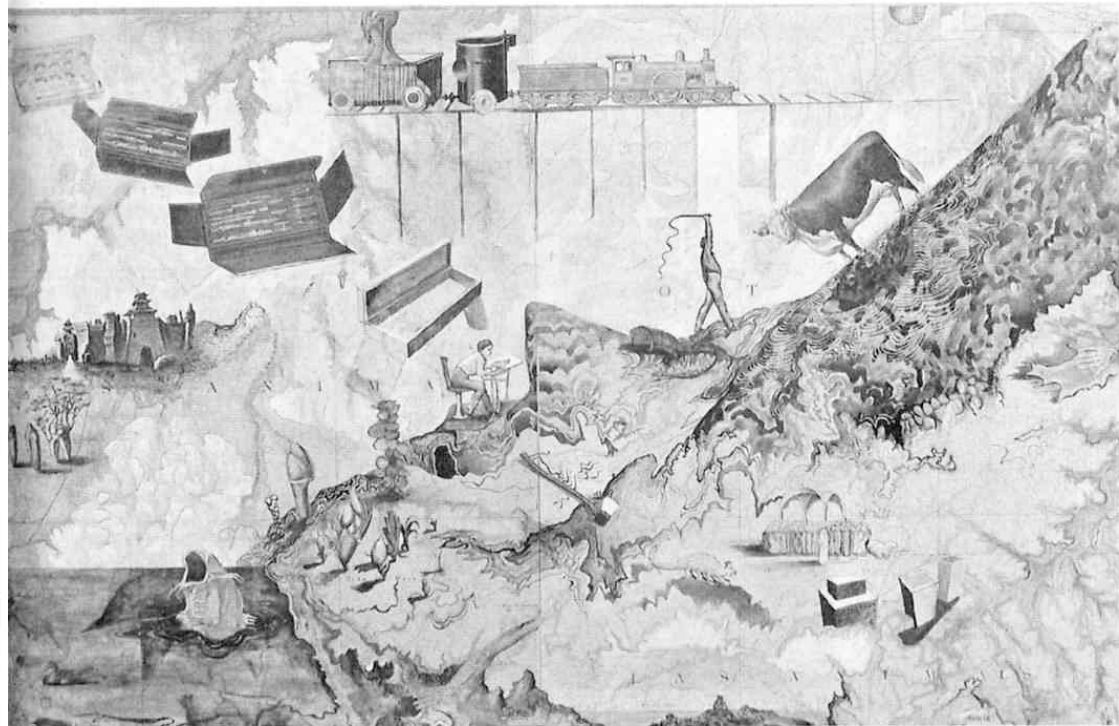
Dorman's works are all journey, no destination — or perhaps multiple destinations. He toys with place names on maps, adding or blocking out letters to spell puns or playful descriptions. From old books, he cuts out diagrams of machine parts, botanical specimens and microorganisms, charts of celestial schema and ancient languages, weaving them together into a fluid, fictive realm. Forms give way to other forms with free-associative ease. Planes tilt and warp; scale and perspective shift radically. Epic themes infiltrate raw sensation. The antiquated and schematic merge with the new and immediate.

With his boyish face and earnest, old soul, the New York-based Dorman, 42, is of a piece with his work. He gravitated toward outdated printed matter nearly 10 years ago, when he was painting what he calls "invented landscapes" and feeling strapped by the medium — "Something about covering the entire surface, and though I didn't think about it consciously, the weight of the his-

tory of oil paint." Finding a stash of old ledger papers inspired him to pick up ink and draw again. "The yellowed, weathered quality of the paper really opened up something. It took me back, almost to childhood, the freedom of being able to include everything and anything. It opened up the space. I didn't need horizon lines. I could have figures and creatures and landscape."

The L.A. show picks up where the ledger drawings left off, when Dorman started incorporating topographical maps into his work. He had used such maps as a boy at camp and was drawn to the beauty of their veiny, sepia lines, but it took some time before he felt brave enough to treat them as raw material for his art, first using single maps as a base for drawing and painting, and then cutting them up and collaging them.

He usually has four or five works in progress at a time, small "poems" he draws and collages fairly quickly and large, multipanel spectacles like the nearly 8-foot-tall "Tower of Babel." He "messes with" the panel pieces while riding the subway and during his day job teaching art to middle and high school students at a private school in Manhattan. He had a panel of "Babel" with him at the hospital when his 7-month-old twin daughters were born. One of the infant's footprints graces the painting's moody sapphire sky. Mostly, though, he works lying on the floor, a posture common to children when they draw. "I literally lie on top of [the works]. And sometimes I nap on them, which I think is somehow like getting my dreams in there," he says, laughing.



Craft and Folk Art Museum

**ENEATH THE SURFACE:** Josh Dorman's "Drawing Board" (2000) is built of topographical maps and other elements.

It's a practical method as well, since Dorman needs to be close to the surface to work on dense networks of detail. This intimate dialogue with surface, ink and paint is, in part, what attracted Maryna Hrushetska, director of the Craft and Folk Art Museum, to organize the show: "His love of materials, his commitment to working by hand, his love of storytelling. It may sound a little outdated in the 21st century, but the work is made with a lot of love and meaning. There's an honesty to his work that's very touching."

In 2005, Dorman's work caught the attention of the underdog Memory Bridge, dedicated to reasserting the individuality and humanity of those with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. He was flown to Chicago, where

he listened, sketched and took notes while foundation staff interviewed patients of a rehabilitation center. The organization produced a documentary, "There Is a Bridge," which continues to air on PBS stations. Dorman created interpretations of each subject, map-based portraits of his or her interior world, which turned out to have a lot in common with the cosmos in his work. Several Memory Bridge commissions are in the show.

The CAFAM invitation was both an honor and a surprise, considering that he is well-schooled and widely shown in commercial galleries. (The George Billis Gallery, in Culver City, opens its third show of Dorman's work on Oct. 7.)

"I'm flattered to feel that my work can be viewed as 'folk art,'

as some sort of natural product," he wrote in a recent e-mail. The contrivances, slickness and irony of much contemporary art puts him out of sync with the current moment, though he feels some kinship with James Siena and Daniel Zeller, whose meticulous line drawings, he surmises, have something to do with asserting control of a small, self-contained world when "we've lost control and we've lost having our say in the greater world."

The timeless theme of hubris threads through Dorman's work and, as with "Tower of Babel," he frequently reaches back to biblical metaphors to address recent cataclysms.

Art of the past consistently nourishes him: the unpretentious, inventive watercolors of Paul Klee; the precisely ren-

dered parables of Bosch and Bruegel; as well as the murkier, ambiguous atmospherics of J.M.W. Turner, Odilon Redon and Albert Pinkham Ryder.

Lately he's been reading Italo Calvino and marveling at the connection with his own sensibility. "If on a Winter's Night a Traveler," Calvino's 1979 novel, "feels exactly like my work to me. A million stories in one. They might not be complete, but you sense that there are overlaps and connections. You know it's going to leave you hanging a bunch of times, but it's really satisfying."

*"Within Four Miles: The World of Josh Dorman,"* Craft and Folk Art Museum, 5814 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 937-4230, through Jan. 11, 2009. Dorman will talk at 3 p.m. Oct. 12.