

Map quest

Bill Gilbert

By Matthew Craggs

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When people first began to record the world on globes and charts, mapmakers sometimes filled in unexplored or dangerous regions with frightening pictures of mythical creatures. Fueled by rumored encounters between sailors and sea monsters, the imagination didn't have far to jump between writing, "Hey, we don't know what's here," and, "Here be dragons."

In modern times, the technology and knowledge available to cartographers is exceedingly advanced, but Bill Gilbert believes that maps continue to lead us astray, showing us a world that doesn't accurately reflect nature's reality.

In his current exhibit, *Physiocartographies*, at the Nevada Museum of Art, Gilbert attempts to show what he refers to as the disjunction between our perception of the terrain, represented by the maps, and the actual terrain.

"I try to walk the grid," the co-founder and director of the Land Art Program at the University of New Mexico explained in a recent phone conversation, "One hour north, east, south and west."

During the U.S. expansion into the West, the government carved the territory outside the states into neat little 160-acre squares with right angles that defied the natural terrain. The resulting U.S. Geological Survey maps, and these grids, form the base layer of Gilbert's art. On top of the maps, he uses GPS tracking to record his movements and experiences as he attempts to follow the borders of the grid. Included in *Physiocartographies* are "York Ranch" and "Wendover," each named after the USGS maps Gilbert used. Across "York Ranch" Gilbert wrote the sights, sounds and tactile sensations he encountered walking the grid. "Wendover" uses an audio recording Gilbert made during his journey to add the sensory elements usually absent from a map. He encounters natural and man-made obstacles not clearly defined on a map.

"We all have these patterns of how we absorb the world," says Gilbert. We're just barraged with information, and we work out a habitual way to navigate. We do things at high speed, we multitask, and we're very goal-oriented. It's just the way our society is."

Our society has an unprecedented access to information, and it's forcing us to alter how we interact with the world. Location-based social media, such as Foursquare, Pepsi Loot and Loopt, encourages people to place themselves on the map, literally. Participants can use smart phones to virtually "check in" at restaurants, shops or points of interest and earn in-game and real world rewards while instantly notifying their network of friends what they're doing. Along with GPS navigation, reliance on maps is extending into all aspects of contemporary life. However, if maps are an interpretation of the world we live in, these forms of social media and satellite-guided directions are only extrapolations of an already abstract idea—the dragons of our time.

Gilbert doesn't see the rise of technology as a clear-cut danger, though. "I'm trying to find a way not to pit nature against culture, earth against technology. What I'm trying to do is find a synthesis here. It's 2010. Technology absolutely permeates our lives; it doesn't have to diminish our awareness of the environment."

In the past dragons were born from ignorance. Today, they fill the maps not from a lack of information but from too much of it. Instead of using our eyes and ears to view what's around us, tiny screens that never leave our side deliver, digest and discard the world in seconds. Ask Gilbert how to pierce the soft underbelly of the scaly beast, and he'll tell you to take a hike—it doesn't matter in which direction. Just go for a walk and take a look around.



Artist Bill Gilbert wants you to take a hike.

Physiocartographies is on exhibit through Sept. 26 at the Nevada Museum of Art, 160 West Liberty St., 329-3333,

www.nevadaart.org.