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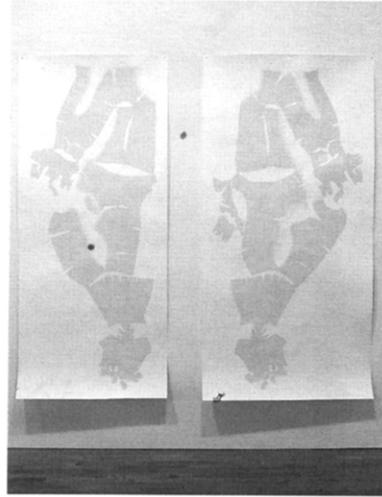
PAUL RAMIREZ JONAS

POSTMASTERS GALLERY

The desire to lasso "everything" together into a single theoretical corral drives such contemporary scientific concerns as the genome project, chaos theory, and superstring theory. Paul Ramirez Jonas borrows the semiotics of scientific inquiry for a visual language of incomplete pictures and empty gestures that question the validity of an objective, unifying system of knowledge. Referring to scientific manuals and do-it-yourself construction methods, Jonas' work examines practices intended to improve our knowledge by getting a better view.

In *Top of the World* (all works 1997) he creates a walk-in photo panorama giving a 360-degree view of the world from the North Pole. Yet this privileged perspective falls short of our expectations: the enlarged photographic image is very grainy, and the horizon line greatly curtails what one can see. The view itself is nondescript, not much more than a series of banded whites and blues sprinkled with incidentals such as oil barrels and an airplane, and might be that from any Arctic or Antarctic spot. The rickety armature that supports the images is neither seamless nor perfectly circular; and at only five feet high, it accentuates the view's artificiality by keeping the surroundings of the gallery in view.

In another work, Jonas uses his own body as a reference point. *Terra Incognita I* and *II* are a pair of diptychs with vertical forms that roughly mirror one another and together resemble a primitive map of Manhattan. Little channels and openings run throughout the form, interrupted by wider spaces like bays and inlets. On close inspection one recognizes that the various protrusions and indentations depict fingers, toes, arms, a penis, legs, and a torso. As a template of the left and right halves of the artist's body, it resembles a



Paul Ramirez Jonas, *Terra Incognita I and II*, 1997, gouache and pencil on paper, 81½ x 83" (overall).

sewing pattern, with the surface of his body splayed open like the flayed skin of Marsyas. Absent from the cartographic portrait is everything that is imperceptible to Jonas' unaided eyes: his back, head, buttocks, etc. *Terra Incognita* reminds us how limited is our knowledge of ourselves, much less the world, when it is based on empirical observation.

Compensating for the uncharted territories in Jonas' mapped body, *Circumnavigation* presents an image of the artist's head oversaturated with information to the point of redundancy. The work utilizes the technique of peripheral photography, which creates a single-frame negative as long as the distance scanned, so that we see Jonas' head unraveled into a seamless horizontal band in which his face appears four times across the wide expanse. However, this one-to-one correspondence between the scale of the photographed image and the negative doesn't just produce more detailed information; it distorts the picture into a peeled abstraction with warps in the proportions of Jonas' facial features.

Jonas uses technologies that try to concretize our world as it is perceived into understandable, codifiable truths. Yet his works imply that only the nature of our limitations is ultimately knowable. His quest is perhaps best summed up in the poetic image provided by the video loop of *A Longer Day (for R.H.)*, which shows a never-setting sun resting in the distant horizon. The scene is framed inside the windshield of a car that is driving west at high speeds to try to beat time. Paralleling this impossible chase, Jonas suggests, our epistemological methods are not unlike a cat chasing its tail.

—Kirby Gookin