

Topographies

ANNA BINTA DIALLO

JUNE 10, 2023 - SEPTEMBER 24, 2023

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IMAGE

Exhibition view of *Topographies* at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2023. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid.

Interconnected Cartographies

By Vanessa Godden

Pickering-based artist and academic Vanessa Godden (they/them) interviewed artist and Assistant Professor Anna Binta Diallo (she/her) about her upcoming solo exhibition *Topographies* at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery. The exhibition runs June 10 to September 24, 2023 and showcases a new body of work by Diallo, specifically made for the show. Below is a selection of questions and answers from Godden’s interview with Diallo on April 23, 2023.

VG designates when Godden is speaking and ABD designates when Diallo is speaking. Text in parentheses are reflections Godden is inserting in response to, or expanding from, Diallo’s or their own ideas.

Vanessa Godden: Can you speak about the relationship between your collage panels and layers of time, particularly in response to land, human, and nonhuman entanglements?

Anna Binta Diallo: I really want to think about what the starting off point was for land in general—the land on which we walk, the physicality of the land, and meaning of it. Originally, I was thinking about the Plexiglas panels as layers of land in different sections and creating a sculpture. Then, as I kept working on the project, I started to think about land in different ways. I’m still working with layers, but I’m thinking about land through

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a multiplicity of ways. With this work, I’m considering the planet’s evolution and the cartography involved in that tracking process. When making the works, I was looking at a lot of images that showed how the planet and galaxy came to be and is situated in space. I was using these big ideas as my entry point, and then I would zoom in on certain moments of humans’ perception of land, humans’ dominance of land, and our place in this land. There are different entry points and I’m always trying to touch each one as I’m selecting my images. I start off with the various entry points and then I combine them. By using images made by humans, the human element is there (and ever present), so I am commenting not only on the human impact on the earth, but also on the fact that a lot of the planet’s evolution has happened before humans were here. I’m viewing it from different angles.

VG: I found that some of the ways you’re layering space on top of one another reminds me of the geologic time scale or tree rings.

ABD: That’s another way I have been approaching my compositions (as trackers of time and land). When I look at maps, there are so many points of interest and, when I layer them, they become abstracted. At the same time, maps convey other messages that everyone has different opinions about: a specific place throughout time and how that changes. The act of layering is a refusal to actually pin down a specific place.



IMAGE

Cyclical compounds in *Topographies* at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Towards Gallery. Photo by LF Documentation.



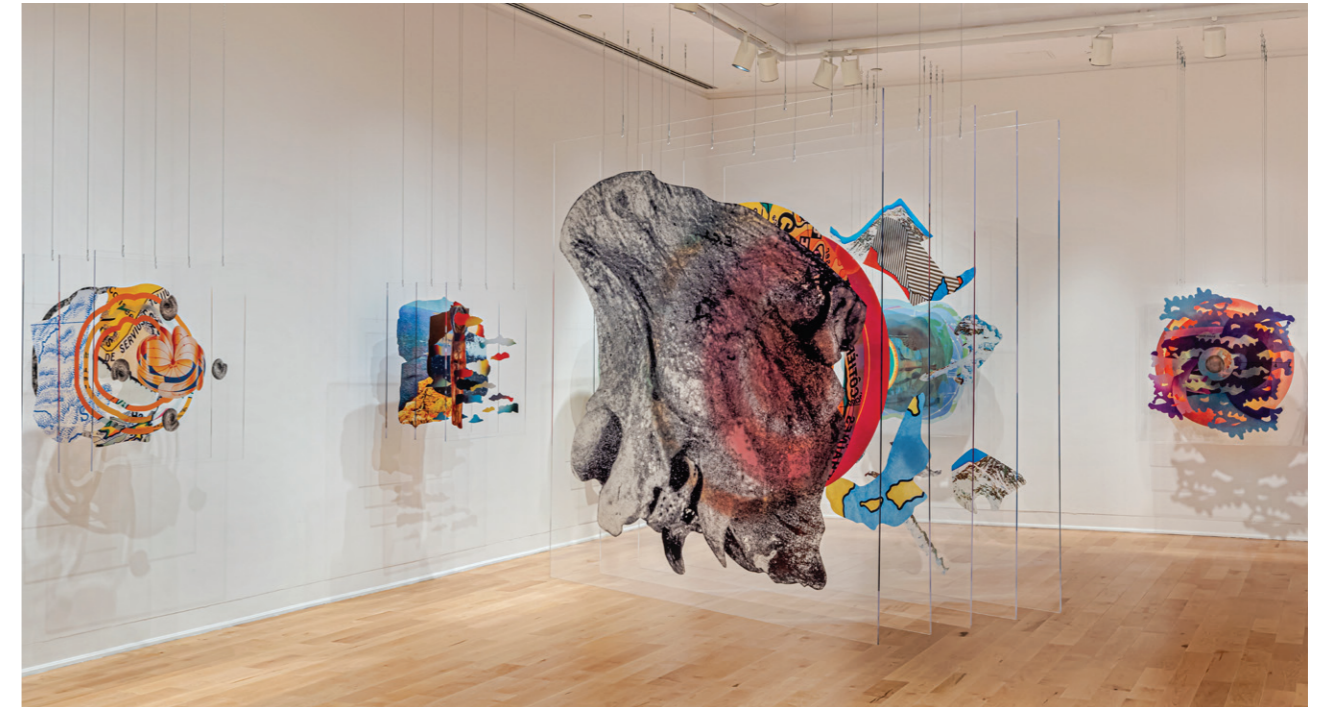
IMAGE

Detail from *Tectonic shifts*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Towards Gallery. Photo by LF Documentation.

VG: Through the act of splicing and stitching disparate topographies together you're disrupting, quite poignantly, the colonial project's drafts of superficial boundaries around territories. Would you please expand on how the method by which you've chosen to install these works in the gallery further distorts the viewer's understanding of and relationship to topographies?

ABD: I really wanted to approach this as a complete deconstruction of what a map is, so it feels like a map, but you're not really sure where the place is and what we're looking at. There are different elements that are singled out and once it's layered, it becomes an invitation to peer into the different layers. This echoes what you were saying earlier about the different layers of time; but also, the earth's crust hides all these secrets. They're not necessarily secrets, but there are things that are hidden. I wanted to invite people in. The panels are large scale and I wanted people to feel like they could approach the map, get lost in it, and try to find little clues. Each of the works has its own message that are all tied together. Maps were used as way finders, to delineate and colonize space, and to track resources for extraction. There are so many ways that you can look at a map, so I was trying to synthesize all of those uses and feelings in different works. I didn't want the work to be super flat. I wanted it to reveal itself in different layers to evoke the feeling that things change constantly. You can look at a specific place and it will constantly be changing, and it can change fast and it can change slowly. These things that I'm referencing are millions of years old and some are more recent (and some project us into the future).

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Exhibition view of *Topographies* at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2023. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid.

VG: Maps have been part of the colonial project but they have also been around long before colonization as we know it. They are a guide for people to move around space and what you're doing is distorting it further—making it more complicated to move through these spaces. That's really interesting because it is very confusing being a human on this planet, especially during this time.

ABD: Yes, definitely. Cartography is an ancient discipline. It's been around since prehistoric times for fishing, hunting, and defining territory. So, I didn't want to only focus on the colonial aspects of mapping because that's one aspect (but there are many more that influence this work). I'd like to go back further in time. We are all on this planet trying to figure out our way through different problems and mapping has been around for so long. I think this is why I am so interested in cartography in general. The way land has been represented as a flat surface, with all this information is difficult (for users to tangibly understand). As an artist, how do you synthesize that in a way that makes sense? The way that made sense for this project was abstracting it—disrupting it to make something new out of it (further complicating and confusing the map to create worlds of many dimensions).

VG: There are some really interesting textural dichotomies between the seemingly ridge-like and graininess of the materials your collages are sourced from and the sleek smoothness of the Plexi panels. Can you elaborate on how materiality is expanding your narrative of space and time?

ABD: Working with transparency, layers, and mirrors are reflections. It stems from wanting to remove the definitive nature of maps. Plexi was the material that I chose for this project because it was smooth and it allowed for transparency. I wanted to have a tension between old, textured, and ancient and contemporary/modern.



IMAGE

Sediments and sky in *Topographies* at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Towards Gallery. Photo by LF Documentation.



IMAGE

Reveries on cliffs of clay in *Topographies* at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Towards Gallery. Photo by LF Documentation.

VG: Where did you source your images from?

ABD: A lot of the images for this exhibition were sourced from a book on the history of the planet. I was drawn to the images from it. In addition, I have over 200 old maps that I used as source material. There was a lot of material around geology and the planetary. I wasn't entirely sure how I would put it all to use. Sometimes I don't really know what I'm looking for, but if it clicks, it clicks. I see maps and geologic imagery constructed by others as rich visual material. This is why collage has always been interesting to me because these images are lost or frozen in time and this is why I'm drawn to things that are a bit older: I enjoy going back and bringing them out for a new audience.

VG: Bring them back out for a new audience through a new meaning too!

ABD: A new meaning, right exactly. Some of these photos are from science books. So, putting them in an artwork is doing something different than reading about it in an encyclopedia or scientific journal.

VG: How much of the original meaning behind the images you source remains or informs the final composition of your collages?

ABD: I'm always interested in the moments where I can zoom in on little instances that reference things that are very specific at times and unspecific at others. Sometimes I reference things that are very unspecific, like a cloud or a flute. These items can be very specific but when they're next to other images, their meaning changes. I'm interested in not just one image, but also how all the images in the composition respond to one another. I see them as language or codes. When you construct an image with found imagery, it's important to focus on what one single image or pattern or texture might mean. However, it is more important to think about what it all means together.



IMAGE

Exhibition view of *Topographies* at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2023. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid.



IMAGE

Sinuous songs echoing through time in *Topographies* at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Towards Gallery. Photo by LF Documentation.

VG: You talk about what it all means together and when you brought up the image of a cloud that you used in *Sediments and sky*, I thought of how you constructed gradients of color fragments into the shape of clouds in *Reveries on cliffs of clay*. How you're shaping colors and textures to reference occurrences in other collages is really interesting.

ABD: Sometimes an image will have a trickledown effect. Often, I will start off with a mountain range and then draw that out. Then I would look for other images that respond to that and build upon it. There's always something from a map or an image—either the contour or the shape—where an echo can occur.

VG: I love the descriptor of an echo in these works, because the way that you're layering imagery really does feel like an echo.

ABD: Yes, I have one work that is called *Sinuous songs echoing through time*. I thought about how the maps function like an echo in that they get bigger and bigger or smaller and smaller. This idea of sound, or things happening in the background, has consequences in the foreground. We can still feel the echo of something that happened a long time ago.

VG: And vice versa! The things that we are producing now are being echoed into the future.

VG: This series has a very bright color palette; I love the pops of neon in a few of the compositions. They are exciting interruptions to the muted colors of some of your sourced maps. How does color inform the production of your collages and is there symbolism associated with the color scheme you have chosen?

ABD: I'm drawn to color because it is found in nature—how colors like dark blue and indigo might point to items you find in the world. I'm conscious of what certain colors can emit emotionally through their correlation to the natural world. I also found quite a few maps that were beautiful to look at because of the use of color. There were neon sections, teal, and gold. Sometimes I was drawn to the color without initially considering the context of the map itself. For instance, there was a map labeled New France, which represented land delineations in a horrible colonial context, but they were illustrated so beautifully with rich colors and patterns. It was odd to encounter and work with this map because of how attractively colonial mapping was presented by cartographers. The colors also speak to specific time periods. Some of the more graphic maps came from the seventies. The older, more ancient ones had their own aesthetic. I also used imagery that weren't from maps at all, but they were suggestions of maps.

VG: That's amazing! I didn't realize the neon sections were drawn from actual maps. I thought they were references to maps. I enjoy how the use of these maps are also speaking to another layer of how to consider time.

ABD: Everything here, the neons, the muted images, and more traditional colors, are from actual maps. I think it will be more obvious when you see them layered in the gallery.

VG: We're getting a really beautiful multi-sensory experience from these collages. For instance, we spoke about sound through signals to an echo. I also see tactility coming through in interesting ways. The patterns, colors, and textures made me think of patterns on fabric.

ABD: That's really interesting you bring that up. I was reflecting on weaving, particularly basket weaving. This is because what happens in front influences what is occurring in the back. It was very mathematical. However, instead of weaving organic materials like dried grass, I wove together imagery.



IMAGE

An ornamental oasis of dunes in Topographies at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Towards Gallery. Photo by LF Documentation.

VG: Strangely, for me, this work visualizes the feelings I experience while hearing elders in my family speak about our lineage and regional folklore. Did you intentionally integrate visual cues to folklore or oral telling? If so, can you speak about how and why?

ABD: That's really interesting that you're getting references to folklore by looking at these images. I can't separate the idea of storytelling and history or family from these things. I wasn't necessarily intentionally building references to folklore in this work, but it was a nice surprise that was mentioned.

VG: There is a fantastical element to all of these works and I'm excited to see them in person in the gallery. I'm certain that the way you are installing these works will add another layer of fantasy for me.

ABD: I was thinking a lot about the formation of the planet with this work, how things crash into each other and become something else—meteor crashes and tectonic shifts. This was about referencing those moments and inventing my own.

VG: I can't help but think about the movement of bodies through space when looking at your work. The inclusion of the earth's movement in space and how humans are connected to that seems really important.

ABG: They go together and it wasn't something that I could separate. That goes back to the micro and the macro. I kept jumping between them.

VG: In our last meeting, you mentioned your interest in the macro—how humans' time on earth is so small in relation to the history of the world. Could you please elaborate on how this manifests in this project?

ABD: I really wanted to almost not include the human form. I did end up doing so in two works: *Reveries on cliffs of clay* and *Fragile fossils*. I also thought about objects that humans leave behind. In several of the works, you might see a human-made object from Egyptian antiquity, but there are also images of fossils—fossilized animals, plants, and bones. I wanted to focus not only on the human, but how humans used resources like minerals and clay to create their culture. It was cyclical, where the earth was created and humans showed up at a very small percentage of this time. We're living in this time now, so we tend to think about ourselves in relation to the planet (and center ourselves), but I was really interested in making us the least dominant point of focus in the compositions. My primary interest was on what was done during humans' very short time on the planet, but I also wanted to consider what was done before. So, it was important to insert cues to our time on this planet but also how little that time has been in relation to everything else.

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VG: The two compositions you just mentioned are not just human forms, they are sculptures or cultural artifacts of the human form. Would you please explain how these objects relate to maps?

ABD: I wanted to have a connection for us to be able to enter this work as humans. I was thinking about specific artifacts that have been found, retrieved, or kept. I was also considering cultural objects and their significance. I wanted to go back in time. Some of these objects are from Egyptian antiquity and the Bronze Age. One of the objects is connected to ritual and beauty. It has this posture of ‘I’m looking at the world’. I thought it fit really well with what I am trying to say. The fist was chosen because it is a nice metaphor for how human hands have led to so much on the planet. We make things. We take things. It was a way to connect humanity, through both solidarity and damage. There’s power and control being referenced in the image.

VG: I think of the fist in relation to solidarity in activist movements.

ABD: Yes, I saw that as well. It’s a feeling of solidarity. I see it as more of an empowering gesture than a destructive one.

VG: Going back to the images of sculptural objects, they seem to reference the cultural artifact of the body as a map. I find that the connection between the artifact and the map is in how both archive space, place, humans, non-humans, land, and time.

ABD: The body itself could be like the mountains. The body references the land and the land references the body. Since the artifacts were made out of things from the earth, it relates to our connection to the earth in a similar way.



IMAGE

Fragile fossils in Topographies at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Towards Gallery. Photo by LF Documentation.

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IMAGE

Exhibition view of *Topographies* at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2023. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid.

VG: It also brings up our dependence on the land and overconsumption of the Earth's resources, which draws on the lengths humans will go to in the service of comfort and beauty.

VG: Where do you see yourself in relation to your materializations of the vastness of time and space in this work?

ABD: I see myself as someone who is curious about the past and enchanted, enchanted may not be the right word, by these stories. I'm curious about the things that there are no answers for and interested in how humans keep trying to provide answers—how the planet came to be, etc. In this work I was also making references to things that have consequences in our lifetime and will have consequences in the future. I'm looking at all of these things in an open and curious way. I see the dots and hope that by connecting them, certain discussions can come about or curiosities can be stimulated. I think a lot about the future. I can't think about the future without going through time. I think it's a process and I don't know if I have a specific answer. I see myself as playing with images and big concepts that are all interconnected. 'Interconnected' is a big word for me. I could be investigating only geology, or only maps, or only folklore, but I feel like they're all connected. It's hard for me to talk about one thing without looking at something else. It's another way to communicate how these concepts are interconnected.

VG: I love that you used the word enchanted because, after this conversation, I see you as a time traveler in this work. There is a certain enchantment in that. I also have to say that I

appreciate that instead of trying to find the answers, you're leaning into the mystery of it all. I think part of the problem we are faced with and have come up against throughout time is that humans are obsessed with finding the right answer. Unfortunately, in trying to find the right answer, we're missing out on the fact that there can be multiple answers that exist alongside one another and they're all a reality.

ABD: Exactly! I like the idea of time traveling and existing between different dimensions. Splicing and combining different existential questions through abstraction blends fact and fiction. So, there is an element of fantasy in the work (that may lend itself to ABD being a time traveler in her work).

VG: Is there anything else you would like to add?

ABD: This is a new body of work. As a result, it's a new way of communicating my ideas. It was an experiment. All art making is a kind of experiment, but I had a plan, set out to do it, and I surprised myself along the way as I was making this work. It opened the door to other possibilities of what making an image can be. The possibilities keep growing and sending out echoes, similar to the way the layers echo each other.

Anna Binta Diallo is a multidisciplinary visual artist who explores themes of memory and nostalgia to create unexpected works about identity. She was born in Dakar (Senegal, 1983), grew up in Saint-Boniface (Manitoba), and lived more than fifteen years in Montreal/Tiohtiá:ke/Mooniyang. She completed her BFA at the University of Manitoba's School of Fine Arts (2006) and received her MFA from the Transart Institute in Berlin (2013). Her work has been exhibited widely in Canada and internationally (Finland, Senegal, Mali, Taiwan, and Germany), in institutions such as Centre CLARK, QC, Museum London, London ON; Contemporary Calgary; MOCA Taipei; SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin, and featured in Biennales such as Momena and Bamako Encounters. In 2022, she unveiled her first public artwork, a mural integrated into the architecture of the Espace Denis Savard, in the Verdun Auditorium in Montreal. She is the recipient of several awards, prizes, and distinctions, notably from the Conseil des Arts et des lettres du Québec and the Canada Council for the Arts. In 2021, she was a finalist in the Salt Spring National Art Prize, was awarded the Barbara Sphor Memorial Prize from the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre, and received the Black Designers of Canada Award of Excellence. In 2022, she was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award. Her works are part of numerous public and private collections, including; EQ Bank; RBC Royal Bank, and Scotiabank. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the School of Art at the University of Manitoba, on Treaty 1, the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples and the Métis Nation. Anna Binta Diallo is represented by Towards Gallery.

Vanessa Godden (they/them) is a queer Indo-Caribbean and Euro-Canadian artist, educator, and curator. They are based in Pickering, the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nations, the Anishinaabe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples. Godden's transdisciplinary practice explores how personal histories and the body in relation to geographic space can be conveyed through oral and somatic storytelling in art. They draw from their multi-ethnic diasporic experiences navigating the world to build multi-sensory performances, videos, sound installations, book art pieces, and net-art that unfurl the impacts of trauma on the body, connections to community, and tethers to culture.

Godden is a sessional lecturer at universities across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area. They are also the cofounder of the curatorial collective Diasporic Futurisms. They hold a PhD from the Victorian College of the Arts (Melbourne, Australia; 2020), an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design (Providence, USA; 2014), and a BFA from the University of Houston (Houston, USA; 2012). Their work has been exhibited in group and solo exhibitions at organizations such as Articule in Montreal, The Fiona and Sidney Myer Gallery (formerly known as Margaret Lawrence Gallery) in Melbourne, Youkobo Artspace in Tokyo, ClampArt in New York City, and Aurora Picture Show in Houston.



Land Acknowledgement

The Robert McLaughlin Gallery is in the treaty lands of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation. This land has been the traditional territory of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg since 1700; before that time, it was stewarded by various communities belonging to the Haudenosaunee and Wendat confederacies. It is covered under the Williams Treaties and the Dish with One Spoon Wampum.

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