

Julian LaVerdiere's Imperial Designs



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JULIAN LAVERDIERE'S IMPERIAL DESIGNS

With his first museum shows and a suite of new works recently unveiled in Chelsea, Julian LaVerdiere has taken on themes of global power using a signature blend of the retro, the high tech and the frankly spectacular

BY MARCIA E. VETROCQ

When Adenoid Hynkel, Charlie Chaplin's parodic Führer, frolics with a buoyant globe in *The Great Dictator* (1940), when General Buck Turgidson advocates preemptive nuclear annihilation beneath blinking lights tracking the progress of B-52s to their Russian targets in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), we readily grasp the essential relationship between cartographic representation and the exercise of power. For notwithstanding the routine association of power with primal drives like lust and hunger, it may be that the urge to absolute supremacy requires a complementary detachment, which is, in turn, well served by the abstractions of charts, diagrams, symbols and maps.

The political interests at work in the ostensibly disinterested science of cartography and, more broadly, the encoding of Western imperial ambitions in an enduring iconic repertoire were the themes of "Time Trial," the first museum exhibition of Julian LaVerdiere. Installed in a darkened pavilion of North Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art, the 12 spotlit or, in some instances self-illuminated works covered the years 2000 to 2002. Still a relative newcomer, LaVerdiere had his first solo gallery show in 1999, at Andrew Kreps in New York; he garnered extraordinary public attention two years later as one of the team of designers of *Tribute in Light* at the World Trade Center site [see "Front Page" and cover, Nov. '01]. His participation in group exhibitions began precociously, in 1992, while LaVerdiere was still a BFA student at New York's Cooper Union, An MFA from Yale followed in 1995.

The trim exhibition at MOCA confirmed, as the 1999 debut had indicated, LaVerdiere's gift for scenographic presentation, his facility with extra-studio materials, his delight in historical arcana, his passion for antiquated technologies, and his fascination with reliquaries and memorials. The museum show also evidenced his preoccupation with political power, whose workings he invokes in impressive arrays of imagery and

information, but whose deeper implications for political art this student of Hans Haacke's may not yet have mastered.

Two monumental efforts anchored the North Miami exhibition, their significance elaborated in an audio track, a pair of smaller tripartite sculptures and eight sepia-toned Diazo prints. "Elaborated" is the operative word here: LaVerdiere's complex work, for all its visual drama, requires substantial exposition. The showstopper was *FIRMAMENT: Upon Which Time Has No Mark by Definition* (2002), a world map printed on Textalene, a vinyl-covered polyester netting, which has been stretched trampolinelike across a 20-foot-diameter aluminum frame and woven through with two sets of electroluminescent cable.

Originating in the North Pole at the map's center and extending through the familiar contours of the continents are 24 glowing blue lines which correspond to the straight lines of longitude that would demarcate uniformly measured time zones. A second, red system of 24 irregularly angled lines, also projecting from the Arctic pole, is rhythmically illuminated in sequential pairs, like the hands of an analogue clock. These red lines delimit actual time zones, any uniform and ruler-edge ideal having been bent to the will of sovereign nations such as China, much of whose land-spanning breadth occupies a single XXXL time zone, and to the practicality of looping line-straddling islands like New Zealand into a single zone. Canted from the wall and extending from floor to ceiling, the pulsing disk looms overhead, intimidating even as it offers the privileged sensation of a polar vantage point.

The diameter of *FIRMAMENT* equals that of the seal which hangs in the General Assembly hall of the United Nations, and its schematic map—the world bisected vertically by the prime meridian, with the Americas to the left and the continents of the eastern hemisphere to the right—reproduces the projection adopted as the organization's emblem in 1946. As the artist recounted in a wall text titled "The Revolving Semiotics of Peace Keeping Power: A Brief Analysis of the United Nations Emblem," the seal is a pointed revision of the U.N.'s first, provisional emblem, which was designed by American intelligence interests and had oriented the map to favor an upright U.S. capped by a tiny Canada, upending Europe and Asia while scooting the remaining unlucky continents to the periphery. The variant U.N. insignias are the subject of *The Emblem Controversy* (2001), one of four Diazo prints in the show that reproduce world maps.

FIRMAMENT's chronometerlike tracking was accompanied by *Time Trial* (2002), a one-minute audio loop engineered by Paul D. Miller, the musician and writer known as DJ Spooky. (His Web site, www.djspooky.com, and a CD of the work distributed at the museum, call the LaVerdiere-Miller collaboration *Standard Time*.) The audio, which

hijacks your cardiac tempo as only ominous electronica amped up in the dark can do, mixes recordings of two timepieces of erstwhile global authority. The first is the H4, one of Sir Joim Harrison's maritime clocks (housed today in London's Royal Observatory), whose reliability helped establish longitudinal reckoning as an alternative to star-based navigation in the second half of the 18th century, paving the way for world time zones and facilitating Britain's administration of its far-flung colonies. The second is the NIST 7, one of the cesium atomic clocks (no tick-tock here, but frequency and humming) at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) in Boulder. As audio adjuncts to *FIRMAMENT*, one signals the first age of modern imperialism, specifically the British Empire, while the other corresponds to the post-World War II advent of the U.S. as a world power, which coincided with the nuclear age and the birth of the U.N.

A triad of Western empire builders was completed by the exhibition's second large work, *Imperial Dragster: Napoleon Rebuilt* (2002), a half-scale fiberglass replica of Napoleon's tomb in the Church of the Invalides in Paris. Glossy with luxury auto paint in a resonant red, the sarcophagus sits atop a pumped-up, martial-looking undercarriage, inspired by the Lamborghini LM002, whose fat drag tires reiterate the casket's classical wreaths and volutes. A custom SUV for the six-feet-under set, the hybrid vehicle was weirdly illuminated from below through the grilled floor of an octagonal platform, on which it gleamed like a showroom totem.

The exhibition's smaller sculptures annotated the theme of empire. Echoing the imagery of tribute was *Imperial Lifecycle* (2002), three laurel wreaths, like those on the sarcophagus, framed with industrial felt. Colored red, white and blue—the hues shared by the Union Jack, Old Glory and France's *tricolore*—the cast-urethane wreaths have the commercial anonymity of Allan McCollum's 1980s “surrogates.”

Imperial Lifecycle's bland classicism found its opposite number in the work-worn scruffiness of *Allied Uranium Miners* (2002), a trio of safety lamps used to detect gases in French, American and British pitchblende mines of the mid-1940s. They emit red, white and blue light where fiber-optic devices have replaced the lamps' wicks. Souvenirs of the early atomic age and of the token protection offered industry workers at that time, the lanterns are housed in what are described as “radioactive-safe” reliquaries of cast-acrylic, a reference to the residual radioactivity, said to be harmless, which the lamps may still carry,

The show's sculptural marriage of nostalgia and the archive was complemented by LaVerdiere's retro graphics. The Diazo process is a no-nonsense and rather dated chemical technique typically used in mapmaking, surveys and engineering. For the maps as well as the prints which feature sculpture projects and the rare figure, LaVerdiere

conflates Beaux-Arts rendering with a version of mid-20th-century, middlebrow illustration—that complacent yet subtly coercive manner adapted by artists from Mark Tansey to Neo Rauch, often to play the reassuring look of the textbook diagram against unexpected or disquieting content.

“Time Trial” incorporated an exhilarating mix of idioms and tools—the gravitas of information-based art and critical inquiry, the cosmopolitan irony of commodity sculpture and art-historical citation, the calculated impact of scale-altering models and lighting effects—to conjure a cross-century panorama of ambition and vanity, exploration and exploitation, nationalism and global perspectives. LaVerdiere is one of a number of contemporary artists (Matthew Buckingham, Mark Dion, Rodney Graham, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle among them) whose works tell tales of obsolete technologies, crusading innovators, discredited beliefs and compromised ideals. He relies on both the striking physical presence of his objects (sometimes their imposing scale, sometimes the intricacy of their crafting) and the pointedly chosen facts of the accompanying texts to send a mixed message, inviting a romantic encounter with the past while counseling the viewer to ponder the political and moral lessons to be gained thereby.

To be sure, the data about U.N. maps and imperial “designs” is hardly as inflammatory as, say, Haacke’s charts of museum trustees’ corporate affiliations, which sought to implicate members of the Guggenheim Museum’s board in the U.S.-backed destabilization of Salvador Allende’s Chile, nor as revelatory as the intricate diagrams of Mark Lombardi, which visualize his investigations into global financial conspiracies like the BCCI bank scandal and the attenuated oil alliances that linked the families of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden. And the geopolitical distortions embodied in maps are a fairly mainstream target: in a February 2001 episode of *The West Wing*, the fictional Organization of Cartographers for Social Equality petitions the White House to renounce the standard Mercator projection for the Peters projection, which gives Third World landmasses their due. But LaVerdiere is not an outright crusader, and he acknowledges the allure of the imperial adventure and the scientific advances engendered in its name even as he tells of their unfortunate outcomes.

A problem does arise, however, in the delivery of LaVerdiere’s mixed message. It is neither a paradox nor a scandal but simply a truism that important scientific advances and, indeed, great works of art, can sometimes be traced to ignoble regimes and self-serving individuals. But LaVerdiere’s art, though based on an intriguing selection of historical instances, may not take us much beyond that initial understanding. His cool wizardry as a designer may even deflect the deeper thinking he intends to foster.

In 1999 LaVerdiere created two sculptures, their forms alluding to reliquaries as well as to history-museum displays, that serve as meditations on the uneasy dream of progress. A diminutive rocket model in a vacuum tube, *First Attempted Manned Space Flight* commemorates the German scientist Werner von Braun, who worked on the V-2 rocket for the Nazi war effort until 1945, after which he came to the U.S. and became a prominent participant in the space program. An accompanying captioned “news” photograph staged by LaVerdiere in the studio shows a smashed V-2 downed on the Baltic seafloor.

The companion sculpture, *First Attempted Trans-Atlantic Telegraph Cable Crossing*, presents a 9-foot model of a clipper ship encased in a cylindrical flask resting on mortuary trestles, a remembrance, LaVerdiere tells us, of a vessel lost in the 1854 attempt by businessman Cyrus W. Field to establish intercontinental communication. For his spectacular entry in the “Greater New York” exhibition at P.S. 1 [see *A.i.A*, July ‘00], LaVerdiere set the ship model in a soaring open-sided memorial structure bathed in spectral light and inspired by Albert Speer’s design for Germany’s pavilion at the 1937 World’s Fair in Paris.

LaVerdiere seemed to have brought to light a largely forgotten though by no means inconsequential episode in the history of technology. But veracity was neither the means nor the end of the art work: no ship was lost, no lives sacrificed, in the project to lay the transatlantic cable. That fiction has been perpetuated since the model was unveiled, pavilionless, in LaVerdiere’s debut show, at which time the gallery’s press release solemnly reported that “the mission was lost to some of the coldest and most inhospitable waters on Earth.” (The misinformation was repeated in LaVerdiere’s statement on the CD accompanying the P.S. 1 show and found its way into numerous print accounts of the work.) When asked about the fabrication during a studio visit last February, LaVerdiere replied that a tragedy had been necessary, the pathos of sacrifice required, in order to get the audience’s attention.

The “lost” ship is on the order of the calculated fact-bending of the biopic and the TV melodrama “ripped from the headlines,” though its roots are deep in art as well, as many a royal portrait and history painting will attest. Elsewhere, a less than punctilious treatment of particulars may have more to do with expedience. For example, although “Time Trial” suggested otherwise, the atomic clocks of NIST (an agency of the Department of Commerce) actually play no direct role in administering international time zones or maintaining standard time and global positioning systems for navigation and military purposes, the functions which are central to the installation’s linking of clocks, maps and empire. Those tasks belong to the atomic clocks at the U.S. Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C. (a division of the Department of Defense).

How much truth does art really need? The truth, and a lot of it, may matter a great deal if that is what fires up the artist in the first place. Then again, we may never know or care if there is more to the biology of sexual differentiation than Matthew Barney comprehends or applies in his work, since his extravagant fantasies unspool well beyond the fact checker's purview. But there are works that claim the viewer's involvement precisely with the authority of the information or the authenticity of the situation they purport to convey. When the art collaborative General Idea mounted 1,825 styrene capsule-shaped elements to illustrate one year's worth of an AIDS patient's AZT (1991), we had to trust that appalling number; when Fred Wilson erected empty pedestals at the Maryland Historical Society to Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, African-Americans whose lives had gone unrecognized in their state's institution of remembrance (1992), it was inconceivable to suspect that one of the illustrious trio might have hailed from any other place. And if truth and fiction are to be joined—as when Pierre Huyghe videotaped the real John Wojtowicz on a blatantly fake set for a 1999 reenactment of the Brooklyn robbery that was re-created in the 1975 film *Dog Day Afternoon*—the thoughtful viewer has to discriminate between fact, falsehood, individual memory and artistic vision in order to be able to meaningfully reflect upon how they interact, overlap and merge.

Such discrimination may not be encouraged by LaVerdiere's works, which often seem pitched to a public that is presumed uninformed and credulous. On that, it's helpful to read his own characterization of *First Attempted Trans-Atlantic Telegraph Cable Crossing Memorial* in the CD catalogue for "Greater New York." The artist explains, "This manner of historical hypertexting is not intended as didactic, critical commentary or as cautionary tale-telling, but rather as inspirational, romantic propaganda to help continue the march of progress that has brought our civilization from the Industrial to the Information Age." The idea of "propaganda" is key here, for it tells us that LaVerdiere's intention is not to instruct but to persuade.

LaVerdiere's considerable persuasive skill may have been honed by his special-effects work (pyrotechnics, robotics, model building) for the theater and advertising, first as a student and later as a principal of Big Room, the production-design firm which he and two friends formed after their Yale graduation. The clipper-ship model in *First Attempted Trans-Atlantic Telegraph Cable Crossing Memorial*, for example, is a residual prop from an ad campaign for Agilent Technologies. (Interestingly, Agilent, formerly the technology division of Hewlett-Packard, developed the atomic clocks used at NIST and the Naval Observatory.)

In a discussion of his studio work and commercial enterprises (*Sculpture*, December 2001), LaVerdiere tells of working on an ad for the Hugo Boss company. Aware that the firm had manufactured Nazi uniforms, likely using slave labor (the story was carried by the international press in 1997), he and his colleagues at Big Room designed an artily minimalist-looking set for the Hugo Boss shoot that was based on an interior photo of a World War II German stronghold from Paul Virilio's influential book *Bunker Archaeology*. On the limited effectiveness of this type of subversive gesture, LaVerdiere comments, "Nine times out of ten, this esoterica would never be recognized, but at least it helps us believe that we are doing our part, rather than just making money."

For an artist intrigued by technological arrogance, the dark side of genius and the seductions of empire, tales of the Third Reich are likely to beckon. LaVerdiere neutralizes the references in his work, eschewing the heartless jokes of much of the work in last year's "Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art" exhibition at New York's Jewish Museum. Though he claims to have found the 1854 transatlantic cable attempt inspiring, LaVerdiere says in the 2001 interview that he chose Speer's 1937 World's Fair pavilion to house the clipper-ship model at P.S. 1 because the structure was intrinsically sinister: "This [Speer's pavilion] in essence was the signing of his Faustian contract in which he was transformed from an innocent young genius to a commercial architect for the Nazis." But Speer's moment of truth is as specious as the tragedy at sea. A party member since 1931, the 32-year-old Speer was neither young nor innocent in 1937, and his deal with the devil had been struck the previous year at the Zeppelin Field in Nuremberg when he created the "Cathedral of Light," a Valhalla architecture of spotlights that is, along with the sky-tilted beams of Hollywood premiers and used-car lots, an evident if unwelcome antecedent for *Tribute in Light*. Could LaVerdiere be as incompletely informed about Speer as he expects his audience to be, or did he deem a fallen young genius to be as dramatically necessary as a doomed ship for the success of *First Attempted Trans-Atlantic Telegraph Cable Crossing Memorial*? More important, what really is the common ground between a 19th-century communications entrepreneur and a 20th-century architect serving the propaganda interests of a vile regime?

For all its impeccable technical virtuosity and sincere embrace of the past as a font of serious themes, LaVerdiere's art is tinged with the casual cynicism of second-generation postmodernism, for which the mutability of history is a given. It would be unfair to hold LaVerdiere to the radical standards of full-throttle political art. But to a significant degree it is that consciousness-raising heritage, albeit tailored to the present-day sensibility, with which he has associated his efforts. In the aftermath of Sept. 11, it was said of a great many works of art that they had "acquired new meaning." Perhaps it can also be said that history-based art with political implications has acquired new responsibilities. Or maybe it has simply reacquired the old ones. This is not the much-trumpeted death of irony: it's

the death of glib. And it raised the stakes for LaVerdiere's recent gallery exhibition, his first with Lehmann Maupin, in New York

The show opened in the aftermath of the conflict in Iraq, a time of fierce discussion of American militarism, of the future of the U.N. and of the déjà vu experienced as effigies of Saddam Hussein toppled like those of Stalin before them. Appropriately, LaVerdiere's works had more to do with images of power than with ghosts of technology, and the presentation relied on direct visual impact rather than on the embroidering of background narratives. Included were three (red, white and violet) versions of *Imperial Dragster: Napoleon Rebuilt* and two sculptural pieces (both 2003) that cite the Beaux-Arts Neo-Classicism of McKim, Mead and White, the premier architects of the so-called American Renaissance.

Lantern Shuttlecock (the subject was anticipated in the 2001 Diazo print *D.I.O.G.E.N.E.S.*) is an 8-foot realization of an ornamental facade lamp, suspended sideways, like a battering ram. An intricate and exotic architectural perspective fashioned with mirrors is visible within. The second and more sensational work, *Lost Cornerstone*, presents a styrene and urethane recreation of a Roman-looking eagle (cousin to the one which glared from atop Speer's pavilion and to those that can be seen on any number of U.S. federal buildings) from the old Pennsylvania Station. Penned behind a black rope fence that traversed the gallery, the imperious bird dangled from the end of a crane arm and "flew" in circles around the space. The thwarted action was reminiscent of an amusement-park ride, though the setup was based on a photo of the equipment used to salvage the facade sculptures during the railway hall's demolition in 1963. Built for the ages in 1910 and inspired by the Baths of Caracalla and the Basilica of Constantine, Penn Station is one potent signifier of the transience of all empires, of the hubris of monumental architecture and of our tendency, in the name of progress, to forget our history. With themes of such consequence and a fertile theatrical imagination with which to give them shape, the choice now for LaVerdiere is how much, and how well, his art will help us to remember.

"Time Trial" was on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami [Dec. 4, 2002-Feb. 23, 2003]. *"Goliath Concussed,"* a show of new works, was at Lehmann Maupin in New York [Apr. 26-May 24]. FIRMAMENT: Upon Which Time Has No Mark by Definition is being shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland [May 30-Aug. 17] with works by Ingrid Calame and Mark Lombardi in a series of three solo exhibitions called *"The Global Arena: Money, Power and Politics."* *"A proposal to show FIRMAMENT at U.N. headquarters in New York is currently under review by that organization."*