Madden, Jack. *Double Take: Nancy Graves's Plate VI Maskelyne Da Region of the Moon*. 2024, RISD Manual Issue 19, Many Moons

In the years around 1970, the US Geological Survey (USGS) released a set of maps describing the geology and topography of the most boring areas of the moon. Chosen for their flatness, these areas mostly contain desolate fields of volcanic ash and fine impact ejecta with a sparse sprinkling of craters. It turns out that smooth and featureless are just what you want for your first moon landing. In these maps, cartographers, geologists, and astronomers at NASA compiled as much information as possible about the potential sites for Apollo 11. The maps that were released showed a rainbow of colors representing geologic units helpful for planning scientific exploration and determining where to land.

At a time when the moon was on everyone's mind, such a colorful map would have been striking. More reminiscent of the saturated 15th-century celestial cartography of Andreas Cellarius than the gray shades seen with the naked eye, but this time coming from government agencies and leading scientists. We see something vibrant, inspiring, and treacherous, a geologist's playground and a Cold War battle map.

USGS map of Maskelyne DA Region, 1970
(reflected to match Graves print)

Nancy Graves explored this complex messaging, keeping the names of the USGS originals and refashioning them in her style. Though you wouldn't want to use Graves's maps to find parking on the moon, she preserved the shapes and palette while amplifying the sense that our image of the moon has radically shifted.

Born from satellite data and color legends, Graves's work shows an awareness of the connection between scientific knowledge beyond our perception and emotive abstraction in art. Choosing colors for graphs is one of the few purely aesthetic choices a scientist needs to make regularly, and as seen in this work, it can be a jumping-off point for art and science to, quite literally, find common ground. The labels, grid lines, and letters are stripped away to focus on the relation between layering and uncovering in art and science, in printmaking and geologic stratification. Where a scientist's subjectivity might lead them to a more evident composition, an artist like Graves can run with that freedom and help us connect with the discoveries and paradigm shifts that science exposes us to.

In Graves's lunar map series, I sense her responding to a future archeology of the moon. Based on her other works, she would have been fascinated by the talk of footprints preserved in lunar regolith for millions of years; she knew she was witnessing an assuredly historic moment. Our relationship with the moon changed so radically in 1969 that the moon itself might as well have changed color. No visible change could be detected on Earth, but the moon never looked the same after the landings. Graves fossilized an impression of the moon's expeditious reframing with an otherwise clerical and scientific set of maps. Her prints show the new moon as territory and wonderland at the same time.

Nancy Graves, Maskelyne DA Region of the Moon, 1972

Related resources

RISD Museum Manual Issue 19 *Many Moons*
https://risdmuseum.org/node/1179371

RISD Museum Collection, Nancy Graves *Plate VI Maskelyne Da Region of the Moon*
https://risdmuseum.org/art-design/collection/plate-vi-maskeyne-da-region-moon-73107

USGS map of Maskelyne DA region published October 1970
https://astrogeology.usgs.gov/search/map/Moon/Geology/year-1970/Moon-Geologic-Map-of-the-Maskelyne-DA-Region