



CHARLES COHAN
WASHINGTON

moves away. Standing between the images, we are given a number of choices: we can watch the story as it plays out before us, or we can assume either role—victim or vampire.

This engagement of audience is one of the greatest strengths of McDonald's work. In addition to its use of humor and physical involvement of the viewer, the work also enlists interactive platforms that reach beyond the confines of the artworld, such as the Internet. In this way, McDonald's work builds a community of fans—people united by their shared experience and interest in her art.

—Virginia B. Spivey

The risks and challenges of air travel frequently grace news headlines. As such, an exhibition delving into the realm of airports can be expected to provoke apprehension, even dismay. But in *Airfield*, Charles Cohan turns the tables on such assumptions [Curator's Office; February 23—April 5, 2008]. His two thought-provoking series of prints focus on the structure of these facilities in a manner that not only re-instills our sense of wonder in the subject, but also bypasses the endemic drudgery of flying in today's security-conscious world.

Terminals, 2004-ongoing, a large-scale installation, dominates the exhibition. It features the plan views of the terminal buildings of several dozen international airports, reduced to a codified arrangement of dense black shapes, forms that recall the work of Myron Stout. Freed from diagrammatic information affirming their real purpose, these contours hover between abstraction and figuration. Their blunt two-dimensionality helps us forget that they represent buildings. More than anything, the shapes suggest mechanical structures, as if the artist had delineated gearboxes and levers, implements for clamping or reinforcement, a cutting apparatus, parts for children's action figures or rotating structures. Some go a step further. Twisting or turning, they appear to occupy space or move through it. They also evoke a language, pictographic in form. The ink, a thick layer with subtly frayed edges, possesses a tactile quality that, like the Braille on elevator control panels, just asks to be touched.

Filling one wall and occupying a large portion of a second one, *Terminals'* sense of presence is nothing short of monumental. Large and unframed, the square sheets of paper, in a handful of muted tones randomly arranged in a grid, suggest blocks of stone. This quality, together with the hieroglyphic character of the images, reminds us of a temple wall. In wrapping around a corner of the gallery, the work envelops and holds us.

Though Cohan's flattened structures reference many non-architectural forms, the color, scale, and volumetric character of the installation restate the work's architectural focus.

Runway Diagrams, 2008, presents an entirely different take on the subject. Here, near geometric clusters of black linear webs—skeletal delineations intimating mechanical apparati and earthworks—emerge out of spontaneous mottled grounds. They speak of the evolution of the earth's surface and of a network of runways most of us know about, but never see in its totality. Compared with the immersiveness of *Terminals*, which calls on our bodies and minds, *Runway Diagrams* keeps us at a distance. Limitations—the representation of a mere dozen domestic airports, the reduced scale of the images, and their encapsulation in frames—constrict the work and undermine its potential impact. In the intimate setting of this gallery, this composition can easily be overlooked.

Airfield does a lot more than extend our understanding of airports. By abstracting terminals and runways, their two principal components, leaving them unlabelled, and grouping them in non-linear sequence, Cohan presents a game that lets us compare and contrast, conjecture or envision scenarios as to their particular contexts, location or use. Cohan's studies transcend the identification of a particular structure, cultural traits or architect's signature, letting us revel in the varied responses to the airport's basic function of funnelling passengers to and from planes, which takes on an air of ritual. Like shopping malls and amusement parks, airports mix business with pleasure. This exhibition does an excellent job of conveying their vitality and ambiguity.

—John Gayer

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Charles Cohan, detail of *Manila*, 2008, carborundum collagraph print, 22 x 22 inches, ed. 1/2; *Frankfurt*, from *Terminal* series, 2006, carborundum collagraph print, 22 x 22 inches, ed. 1/2 (courtesy of the artist and Curator's Office, Washington)