

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Merijan, Ara H., "Critics Pick: Alighiero e Boetti," artforum.com, December 11, 2009

ARTFORUM

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530 West 21 Street

November 7–January 23



Alighiero e Boetti, *Mappa*, 1990, embroidery on cotton, 48 x 86 1/4".

When critic and curator Germano Celant chose “nomadism” as a conceptual linchpin that united the sensibilities of disparate *Arte Povera* figures, he must have had Alighiero e Boetti’s maps in mind. For in addition to rendering the world at large for many decades, the maps—handmade by Afghan craftswomen—hail from a world far beyond the galleries of Milan or Turin. In creating the first retrospective dedicated exclusively to Boetti’s maps, Gladstone Gallery reunites a great number of the works for which the artist is best known.

That reputation is based not on Boetti’s own manual execution, but rather on the conceptual and material framework under which the works were executed. Beginning in 1971, the artist commissioned women in Afghanistan to embroider the works according to his specifications. His relationship with the women developed over decades, even when these individuals became refugees in Pakistan after 1979. The maps, which range in size but not scale, render each country with its respective flag cropped into the shape of its topographical boundaries, thereby playing with signifying systems through a traditional medium. Some of the characteristics that obliquely inform *Arte Povera* and its related practices—process, seriality, and a use of unlikely materials, for example—appear in the grouping of the maps, extended over time.

Considering the consistent serial nature of the cartographies, subtle variations emerge only after sustained scrutiny and comparisons. A larger, more recent map reveals not the Soviet hammer and sickle but the tricolor of the Russian flag. Aside from the varying shades of their oceans—from light blues to navy, purple, and pink—the most patent differences among the maps are their respective border texts, which alternate between Italian and Dari script. The border of each map contains not only Boetti’s enigmatic aphorisms but also local men’s decrees about jihad and the status of Afghan refugees. What in all probability seemed to the artist a far-flung project in an unlikely setting has proved a timely, if oblique, prism for geopolitics—first, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (which shifted the maps’ production to Pakistan) and, more recently, in light of the military activities that continue to choke the region.

— Ara H. Merjian