

HALES LONDON NEW YORK

ADAM DANT

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BODY MAPS

Adam Dant is a cartographer with a difference. Inspired by his own trompe-l'oeil *Library of Dr London*, the artist's latest work redraws Paris as a boneyard and Tokyo's metro system as a tangle of wrestlers. Charlotte Edwards charts his path. Photography: Sean Myers ▷

Left: Adam with Edwin the Lakeland terrier in front of the illusionistic *Library of Dr London*. Above: a selection of Adam's pamphlets, maps and drawings. The *Guild of Neologists* dictionary is his selection of 1,000 new words for the business community

ANY BOOKWORM eating its way through the *Library of Dr London* will require a strong stomach and a good sense of direction. In an 'exercise in corpo-geography', the library's volumes are titled and arranged to draw a parallel between passage through the human body and a journey through London, with the vital organs corresponding to its various districts and institutions. Dr London may or may not be a medical man, but he clearly has an eye for satire and wordplay, too, with titles such as *Spleen of Fitzrovia*, *Cittie Gut at Bank*, *Naval Fluff at Greenwich*, *Bleeding Offices* and *The Duke of York's Erection* crowding his shelves.

A trompe-l'oeil set of book-lined cases – painted on canvas, mounted on folding wooden frames and overlaid with chicken wire – the library is the creation of East End artist, printmaker and pamphleteer Adam Dant. Conceived for a 2010 group show, *Hypercomics*, at the Pump House Gallery in Battersea Park, south London, it has since been stowed away in Adam's Shoreditch studio. For his solo exhibition at Hales Gallery, however, he has revisited the idea, imagining the library expanding to embrace all kinds of topographical fantasies. In his large-scale ink drawings, heavy tomes lie open at meticulously illustrated spreads. As well as a new diagram of London as digestive tract – with the greedy gullet at Whitehall and the rear end at Whitechapel – the oversize pages show us Paris as an ossuary; attenuated Manhattan as a flayed body; the Tokyo subway as a tangle of Kuniyoshi-esque wrestlers; and a selenograph, or map of the Moon, made up of the entwined figures of great lovers, from Odysseus and Penelope to Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara.

Recalling the satirical maps of James Gillray and Robert Dighton in the 18th century and Fred W. Rose in the 19th, the drawings are capricious rather than diagrams, charting a terrain somewhere between mythology and history. But Adam argues that, in their way, they make just as much sense of the places they depict as an A to Z. 'The cities are transformed to form figures that are significant to the people who live there,' he explains. 'I've changed things about how the information is codified, turned it into a fictional representation of the real. That's what most people do in the cities they live in, anyway – impose their own fictional order on them. I wanted to represent the cities according to the >



Top: the Library runs from left to right, roughly corresponding to the order of the digestive tract and from head to toe. Above: by the light of the large window, Adam works at drawing boards propped against the wall or on an easel. The work in progress is one of a series of 'drawings of drawings of individuals inspecting monumental drawings', a multi-layered visual puzzle typical of his work. The Spitalfields weaver's stool is, like most of Adam's furniture, a relic of the nearby rag trade

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way people see them, rather than the way they are used by the people that govern them to create an environment of consensus and control.'

Whether he's mapping his beloved Shoreditch and Spitalfields or the art world's grandest institutions (his *Anecdotal Plan of Tate Britain* secured the Jerwood Drawing Prize in 2002), Adam enjoys subverting cartographic conventions. Commissioned in 2010 to produce an aerial plan of the route through the Great Glen to Outlandia – an artist-run treehouse at the foot of Ben Nevis – he presented the landscape as if seen from beneath. Endlessly inventive, bordered with vignettes and annotated with handwritten notes, his foldout maps are painstakingly researched but 'take a lot of licence, play fast and loose with the facts'. While his enormous sepia-ink drawings are much sought after, these little maps are printed in large editions; some are available for just a few pounds. Indeed, from 1995 to 2000 he gave his work away for nothing – in the form of *Donald Parsnips Daily Journal*, a miniature newspaper by his eponymous alter ego that he wrote, illustrated, photocopied and handed out to passers-by every day. (Sample headline: 'Many Predict End of Speculation'.) 'I studied graphic design as an undergraduate, and that's what you do; it's communication,' shrugs Adam. 'I thought it would be interesting if I applied that to the work of a fine artist.'

He has been based at this tiny studio for some 18 years, during which time the area has changed almost beyond recognition. You'd expect him to mind, but he doesn't. 'The more building that goes on here, the more the past is uprooted as well,' he enthuses, talking animatedly about the mass burial site unearthed by the Crossrail project at Liverpool Street and the recent excavation of Shakespeare's Curtain Theatre. His interest in uncovering past lives extends to his own studio, which to his knowledge has had at least four previous incarnations. 'It was a minicab office when I moved in,' he says. 'They had to leave because they put up a radio mast on the roof and it was interfering with everyone's TV signals. I had about eight or nine phone lines at first.' Before that, he says, it was a grocer's, and before that a sweet shop; Kelly's Directory – the Victorian Yellow Pages – lists it as a rabbit shop. Adam lived here in his bachelor days, staging occasional exhibitions on the ground floor and installing basic >

Top: this work was inspired by George Cruikshank's print *The British Bee Hive*, published in 1867, the front cover for a pamphlet analysing the strata of society. Adam's version, made with the assistance of Bill Cash MP, depicts British political life as an upturned hornets' nest. Above: Adam painted the ceiling – copied from the Palazzo Altieri in Rome – on a rainy bank holiday weekend. Peter Harris's painting of David Bowie as Andy Warhol hangs over a desk and machinist's swivelling chair

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bathroom and cooking facilities upstairs. A cage housing a pair of particularly vocal lovebirds once hung on a nail in the window, but one absconded after Adam moved them to the house he now shares with his wife and daughter up the road. 'It flew out of the window,' he says. 'I saw it above Brick Lane and went round the market with a stick, but I couldn't get it. Then the other one died.' He doesn't seem to have much luck with animals; Edwin the Lakeland terrier, whose portrait graces the opening pages, has since proved too boisterous for Shoreditch life, and has been rehomed in the countryside.

Although Adam admits to a growing reliance on Google images, he can't part with his books – real ones, as well as painted ones – which are stacked on every surface. Otherwise, the dusty, 18th-century atmosphere of the studio is 'completely fake': from the wooden floors (downstairs, reclaimed pitch-pine, installed by Adam for an exhibition of acoustic artworks; upstairs, broad oak boards salvaged from an old bank on Bond Street before it became a fashion emporium) to the faux coffered ceiling he painted one rainy bank holiday weekend. During a scholarship year at the British School in Rome, he adorned his whitewashed room with yellow and green frescoed panels and a quadratura ceiling. 'It was the first time I tried painting on the wall in a decorative fashion,' he says. 'I used to go out in Rome and draw architectural details and try them out when I got back. It was a way of cataloguing all the stuff that I'd seen during the day – rather than in a book, it was on the wall.'

Indeed, although he is so bound up with drawing and the popular-print tradition, Adam has made several forays into architectural space. A three-year commission to create wall and ceiling paintings for Upton Cressett, an Elizabethan manor house in Shropshire, was – comparatively speaking – a model of historical decorum, with Adam mixing paints appropriate to the period and basing the visual schemes on fragments of Tudor panelling original to the house. The Scottish Enlightenment library he created for the interior of the Outlandia treehouse was perhaps more characteristic. 'I painted it all here, rolled it up and carried it up the mountain' ■

'From the Library of Dr London' runs at Hales Gallery, Tea Building, 7 Bethnal Green Rd, London E1 (020 7033 1938; halesgallery.com), 7 Sept-6 Oct

Top: this corner upstairs serves as a kitchen. A bathroom lies beyond the red door, which is decorated with an enlargement of a page from *Donald Parsnips Daily Journal*.

Above: the drawing board upstairs belonged to Adam's father – Adam hand-colours his prints here: 'I always have one on the go so I can stop to add a bit more colour each time I pass it.' The cider-bottle lamp, a drawing of the Duchess of Cambridge emblazoned on its shade, was made for a royal-themed show at the Hayward Gallery