

The Battles Go On!

A Conversation
With
Joyce Kozloff &
Barbara Pollack



DC MOORE GALLERY

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Published at the occasion of the exhibition:

Joyce Kozloff: Uncivil Wars

DC Moore Gallery

June 24 – August 13, 2021

COVER:

Battle of Vicksburg, 2020. (opposite, detail)

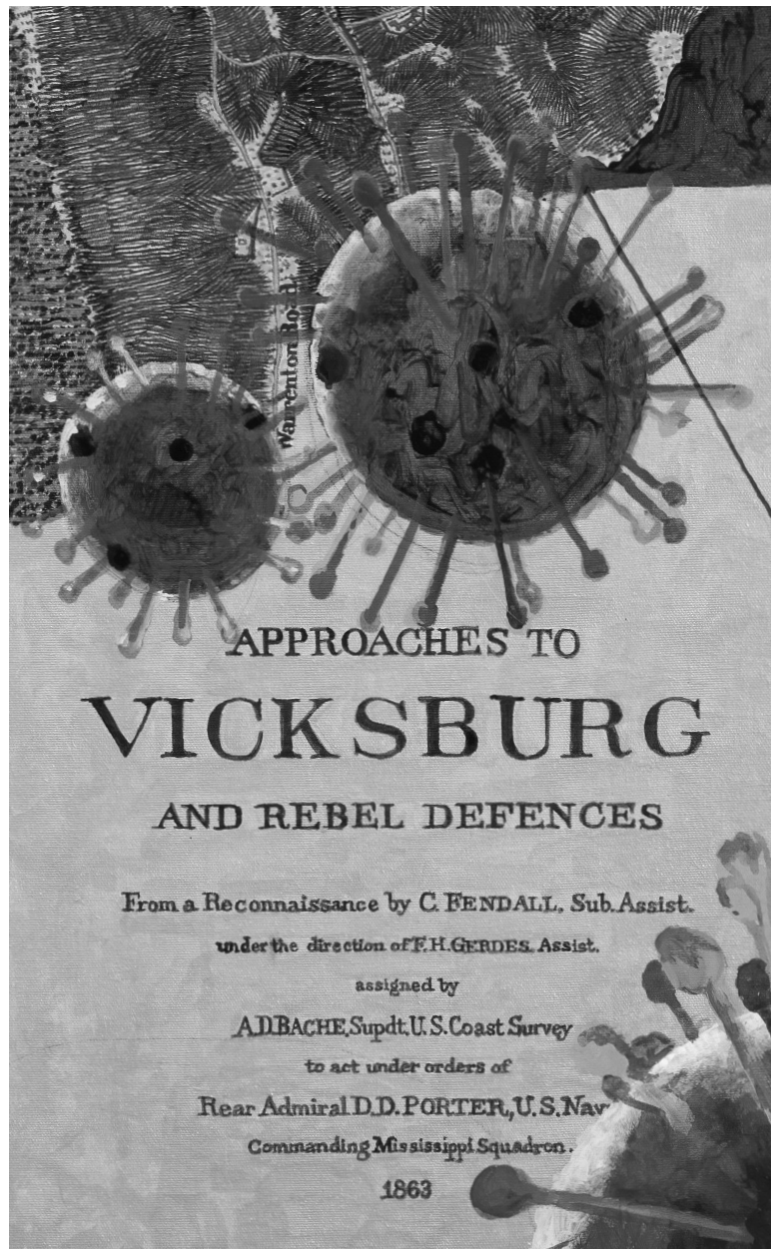
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40¼ inches

BACK COVER:

Battle of Chancellorsville, 2021

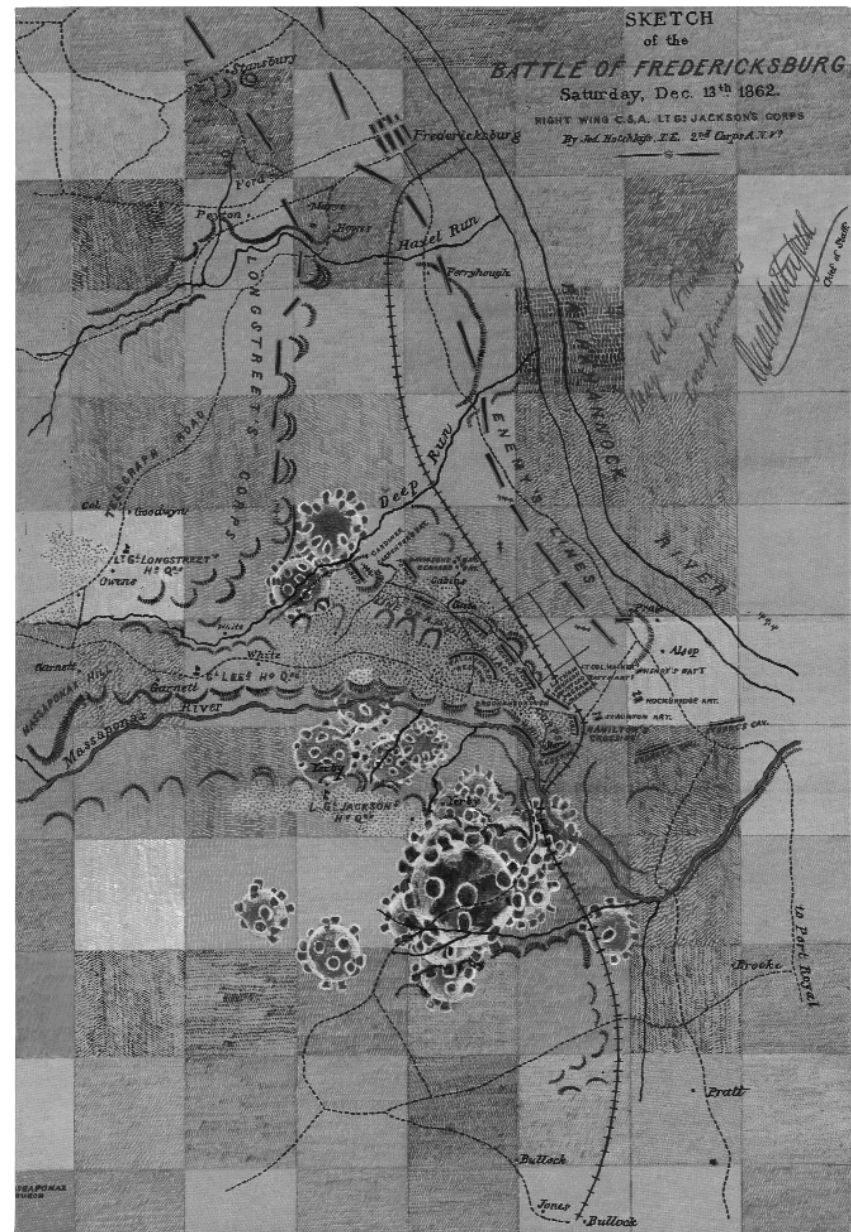
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 65 inches

BARBARA POLLACK is the co-founder of *Art at a Time Like This*, an organization that serves artists and curators at times of crisis. A leading authority on contemporary art, she has written for the *New York Times*, *Art in America*, and many publications since 1994, and has published two books on Chinese contemporary art. She also has curated shows in museums in the U.S. and China. Her next major exhibition, *Mirror Image: A Change in Chinese Identity*, will open at Asia Society Museum in New York in September 2022.



IN MARCH 2020, the pandemic hit New York and while many left the city, Joyce Kozloff and I remained put—for a number of reasons. Joyce survived a bout of the disease while I suffered from “cancellation blues” as most of my projects were postponed permanently. Instead of succumbing to the impact, both of us got busy, very busy. Joyce created a new body of work, *Uncivil Wars*, and made progress on a major public art project, *Memory and Time*, to be installed in the federal courthouse in Greenville, South Carolina, this summer. Throughout it all, we stayed in touch, taking long walks and meeting for coffee in outdoor cafes. This conversation took place on June 6, 2021.

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Battle of Fredericksburg, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 56 x 38 inches

BP Your series *Uncivil Wars* now includes maps of 13 battlefields, such as Shiloh, Gettysburg, Chancellorsville, Chattanooga. You have a knack for picking maps that are historical but coincide with contemporary issues, like the work you did around the Iraq war. Also you don't often talk about your work as autobiographical, but this year, you made work more of a reflection of what was going in your brain than on previous occasions. Do you feel that way?

JK I did feel that they were visceral and emotional in a way that my work isn't always. People sometimes think I'm placing the images of viruses where there were actual viral outbreaks but they're not. It's a metaphor for an underlying national disorder which goes back to the Civil War, and earlier. It's our American history and I'm an American artist, trying to contend with it.

BP Also, I don't know if you know it but about 620,000 soldiers died in the U.S. Civil War over five years, almost the same as U.S. deaths from Covid in the last year. So I think these are uncannily relevant.

JK These maps were made by soldiers during that war, they were used in battle and there are dates on them—1860, 1862. Some were made by Southerners and some were made by Northerners. Some are more elaborate and some of the military men who made them were actual surveyors or cartographers, but some were made by soldiers who just had to have maps to move through these territories. They didn't have the kind of tools we have today.

BP No GPS.

JK And some of these maps were wrong and they caused the armies to lose battles. I read that those maps were like war booty. If you killed a soldier and he had a map in his pocket and you took it, that was a great thing. These were maps soldiers carried. Some had blood stains on them. They reflect the history of the people who made them.

BP What prompted you to work with Civil War maps?

JK Three years ago, I first went down to Greenville, South Carolina for my GSA project. I was in a hotel right in the middle of town. I got up early to walk around and across the street is an enormous cemetery with graves from the 1600s to the 21st century. At the entrance, there are Civil War memorials—a statue and an obelisk and a cannon. Next, I saw a field of small gravestones, about a hundred of them, each with a small confederate flag, obviously fresh, so I knew that someone was changing them. These were the dead Confederate soldiers from the area. You would expect that, but I didn't anticipate all the flags that residents were perpetuating. That experience brought it home to me that for some people, this war is still going on. That was in September 2018.

Right afterwards, I went to Italy to work with a mosaicist on the New York City subway project and I had dinner with a friend of mine in Florence, Timothy App. He's a painter and a Civil War buff, the only person I know who



Battle of Fredericksburg, 2020. (detail) Acrylic on canvas, 56 x 38 inches

participates in reenactments. He said, “Joyce, you should look at Civil War battle maps. I think you will find them very interesting.” And that is when I started looking at many images of the battlefield maps, but I didn’t do anything with them until last March 2020.

BP It’s so fascinating that you got started just as the pandemic hit New York. In some ways, these maps in *Uncivil Wars* remind me of your body of work, Boys’ Art, [several of which are in this exhibition], where you literally used your son’s childhood drawings, and images of warriors through centuries of art history to address war, of major battle sites across the globe and across centuries. It’s this method of appropriating visual material and adapting a male point of view to a 21st century woman’s perspective..

JK I am always fascinated by how the male mind works. I mean why anyone thinks that going to war is a good way to solve problems, I don’t understand. Why there is not a more civilized way to work out these problems, I don’t know.

BP How did your process change this year under quarantine?

JK A map is a drawing and I made them into paintings. Materially, physically, chromatically. But I did not create the image, it was created by these men in the 19th century. All my life I made a grid out of the map and copied it square by square. But recently I have been transferring the initial image onto the canvas digitally and then painting over the entire surface. Only the first two paintings,

Fredericksburg and *Hampton Roads* (where the battle of the first ironclads, the Monitor and the Merrimack, took place) retain the grid.

BP And did that change the way you depicted them?

JK I don't think so. Knowing that Shiloh was a very bloody battle, I went back into it and made it more visceral. I showed you the map of Appomattox, where they signed the armistice at the end of the war. The end of the war was a terribly sad time, but it was also a happy time, as it was over. So, I painted these viruses to evoke fireworks going off. The viruses in *Fredericksburg* and *Vicksburg* look like mines and grenades, and they did have mines and grenades during the Civil War, which I didn't know until I looked it up.

BP This was a year where technology really supplemented everything we were doing.

JK And mapping. Every day the *New York Times* had a map in it. For me, it's sort of ironic as an amateur cartographer, that I find them hard to decipher, those *New York Times* maps, but they are constantly charting the virus.

BP How does the screen affect you as a visual artist?

JK Probably not as much in these works. On the public art projects, a lot more. For the last two public projects, I used Google Earth. I was able to keep changing the focus of my aerial landscapes and then layer textile patterns

over them for Greenville. It was a combination of hand and digital, which I like.

BP Well, you used to like cutting it all out and pasting directly on to the canvas.

JK A lot of people say to me that they assume these paintings are collage. There is no collage in them. But it's not that I wouldn't cut things up and paste them on again.

BP Do you think of yourself as a political artist?

JK I think of myself as a political person, and a political artist. And this has been a problem for me because I am thought of as a decorative artist, which was political initially. I don't think it is viewed that way now, but Pattern and Decoration was a very political movement in its early days. It's like telling a young person about the Dark Ages. During that time formalism reigned and we weren't buying into it, we were looking at other things. We were looking at nonwestern sources and "low art" sources and we were trying to break down the art historical hierarchies. It pissed off a lot of people, it was provocative. I thought it came about because of feminism but then I met men who were exploring decoration, who came to it from other routes. Through being part of the counterculture, or living in other parts of the world, or their family histories. I came to it through feminism, but feminism wasn't all it was about for me either.

If you cover my trajectory as an artist, first I was a feminist artist, then I was a decorative artist, then I was a public artist, then I was a cartographic artist and then I was a political artist, but maybe I was always a political artist.

Over the course of my life, I am not an artist who has one thing that I fine-tune and finesse. I respect that but I am a lot more restless. I finish an idea and I am ready for the next one—there has been work about political issues and other work about other things. Whatever's been on my mind at the time. I am not consistently making paintings about politics but when I do, I have to find my own way to express it. My visual language is not like Diego Rivera's (whom I admire)! I am not always telling a story that is easily accessible. So there have been times when my work is more clearly political than other times, and this is one of those times.

If you cover my trajectory as an artist, first I was a feminist artist, then I was a decorative artist, then I was a public artist, then I was a cartographic artist, and then I was a political artist, but maybe I was always a political artist.

- BP** I have to say I have known you for more than 33 years and you have always been concerned with political issues.
- JK** Yes, but at different times of my life, different things came forward. I never let go of anything. I am making these pieces which are battle maps with viruses and they look decorative. That's my sensibility.
- BP** But I do have to point out that you use the term decorative not as a pejorative.
- JK** Of course. I'm shocked that people still use it as a pejorative. It was completely pejorative when we started.



Battle of Gettysburg, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 49¾ x 40 inches

Sometimes people are talking to me and they say (about decoration), correcting themselves, “in the bad sense of the word,” because they suddenly realize they might be offending me.

BP What are the older pieces that are going to be in the exhibition?

JK They are from my series, *Manifest Destiny*. They are grim, based on copies of World War I trench maps I bought at the gift shop of the Imperial War Museum in London, where they have recreated a trench that you can walk through, to imagine what life was like for soldiers who lived there for years. Because I saw that, I made this series in 2008. The four works have the same text over and over again, which was on a wall of the museum: “In World War I, 9 out of 10 deaths were soldiers. In today’s wars, 1 out of 10 is a soldier.” It’s all civilians because everything is done remotely. Trevor Paglen and other artists have made great work about that. My piece, *Targets*, 2000, is all about aerial warfare. And the cradle, which I made at the time of the invasion of Iraq, maps allied forces as they encircled Baghdad. War has been part of my work for a long time.

BP How long have you been doing maps?

JK My first map was in *Patterns of Desire*, 1987. It’s an Albrecht Dürer cosmological chart of the heavens. It wasn’t like I said to myself, “I am becoming a mapping artist.” It was one of many motifs I used in that book.

But I really started using maps when I had a residency in Bellagio, Italy in 1992, a break from working on public art. When you started a project in those days, you would get floor plans, diagrams and blueprints from the architect. I would begin with them as an underlying structure, to build an idea. I later realized that they were like maps, and I could take this device into my private work. It was like a scaffold upon which I would create ornament, or I would embed content. So, right after working on a large, aborted public art project for a year — Riverside South — I went to this residency and decided to appropriate maps of cities where I had lived or spent time. There was an atlas in the library, and I took it into my studio and copied them.

BP I remember when you came back and showed them to me and I thought this person is insane because they were so detailed.

JK You learn a lot when you copy details!

So, I had these maps in a drawer, hadn't done any transformation to them. Then a year after that residency, I had the idea of combining the cities, interspersing and transforming them. The first piece was called *Los Angeles Becoming Mexico City Becoming Los Angeles*. And it is four watercolors cut up and spliced together so that it becomes a place that doesn't exist. I brought in the histories and cultures of these two cities. I had also been working in Los Angeles on four public art projects during the late



Battle of Gettysburg, 2020. (detail) Acrylic on canvas, 49¾ x 40 inches

... it is about power and control. I mean, who makes the map? Who names the places? Every time a country is conquered, they rename the streets, they remap it and that's how they exercise control.

80s. For 30 years, I have made cartographic work. I keep thinking I'm done with it, but then I get a new idea, which inevitably involves mapping. I've used different kinds of maps for different purposes.

- BP** I was in a car yesterday, we were using the GPS and I realized I have this deep-seated hatred of maps because I am usually the person in the passenger's seat who is handed the map. GPS has liberated me.
- JK** What I want to say about mapping, what interests me and other artists, is that it is about power and control. I mean, who makes the map? Who names the places? Every time a country is conquered, they rename the streets, they remap it and that's how they exercise control. The term "mapping" has even more power today than when I first started exploring it.
- BP** In fact, everything from facial recognition to Google Earth is considered mapping today.
- JK** I have a drawer full of maps from road trips we have taken but I never want my work to be about travel.
- BP** You almost think it trivializes it.
- JK** I do think it trivializes the concept. It's about mental travel, metaphorical travel, it's about making leaps, even surreal leaps.



*Prepared in the Spring of 1863
at my office Wash D.C.
M.W.*

MAP OF
FIELD OF OCCUPATION
ARMY OF THE POTOMAC
AND ADJACENT COUNTRY.
Scale of one inch per mile.
Prepared by order of the War Department
under the direction of Major G. B. Meade,
Col. D. D. McHugh and others.

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