ALL OVER THE MAP

Working with ink pens on paper maps, **Ed Fairburn** reveals the geography of the human face within the geography of the earth. By Doreen Manning

Think of a map. Not a map supplied by Google or Apple or Waze. Not the map delivered by your car's navigation system, but rather a printed-on-paper map. The kind you used to unfold on the table when exploring a new city, or a pocket map you might have tucked into your backpack when tackling an unfamiliar trail.

Have you ever thought about the marks on that paper map? The lines that designate borders and elevation, and delineate cities and towns? Have you ever thought of these as a blueprint for art? That's exactly how British artist Ed Fairburn's mind works when he looks at a map, and this has filtered into his approach to art. "I describe my process as *topopointillism*, a combination of topography and pointillism," Fairburn explains. Working with traditional art materials, such as India ink, pen and pencil, the artist makes gradual changes to the contours, roads and other patterns found on a paper map—printed road maps, topographical maps, even astrological maps—to create the features of a human face.

Matching the language of the map is where the real work begins. Fairburn's intricate crosshatching melds into the lines of the map, bouncing off boundaries and shapes, eventually developing into the faces of his subject. "The patterns allow me to tease out the human form through a series of crosshatching, resulting in a comfortable coexistence of figure and landscape," he says.



Edgware (matte India ink over a pocket-size street map of Edgware, Hendon and Mill Hill, London, approximately 16x18)


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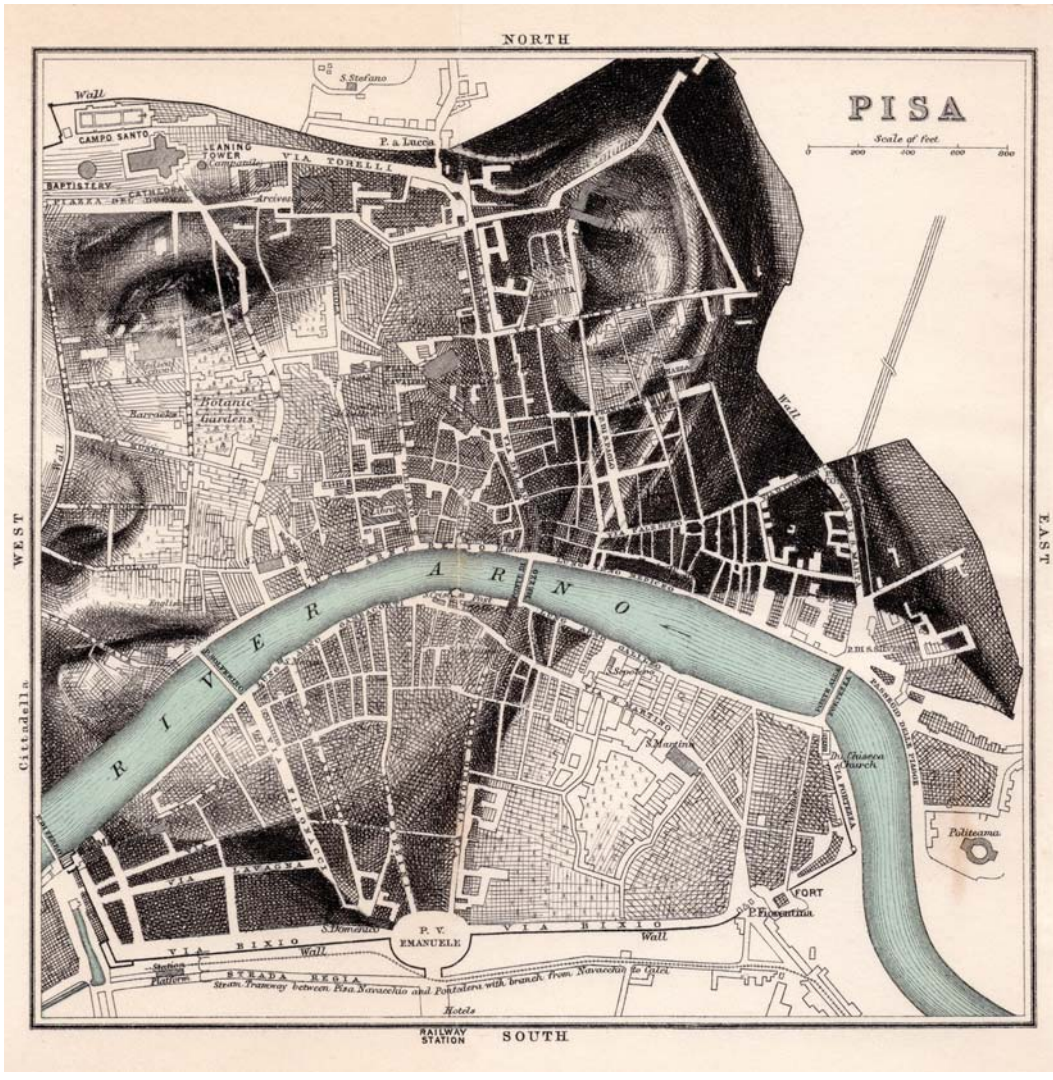


MAPPING A NEW DIRECTION

Fairburn, based in Southampton, England, recalls his fascination for portraiture piquing in his final year of university, at The Cardiff School of Art & Design, in Wales. As he began to survey the detailed patterns found within the textures of the skin, his work began to shift, becoming more stylized. "I was working on portraits," he says, "but I was, at the same time, working with unusual surfaces or unusual contexts for my work."

The artist has never shied away from creative exploration and investigation. "I've never been someone who has been happy to simply work with plain paper," he says. "I just think, 'Why do I have to?' There are so many interesting surfaces and situations into which to place your work. It felt like quite a pioneering time, discovering different things."

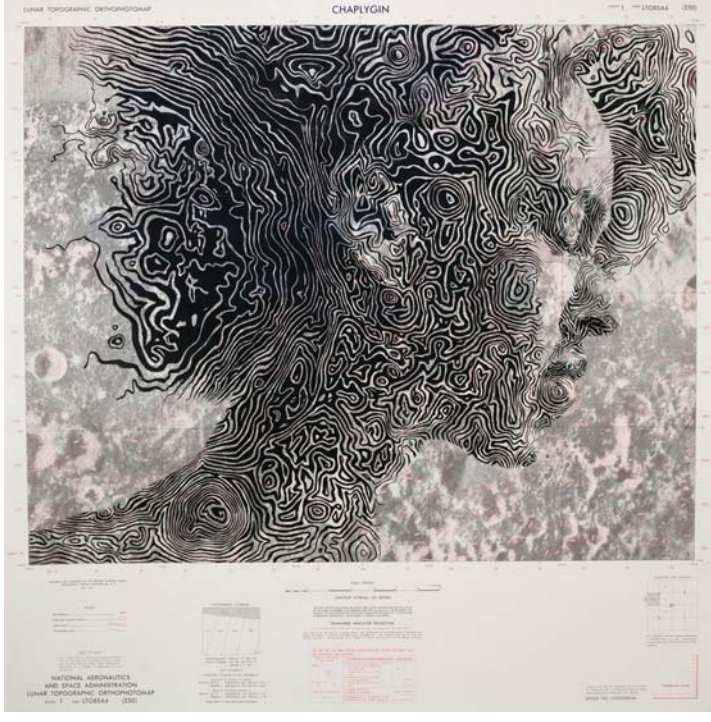
One day, not long after graduation, Fairburn found himself at a local charity shop near his studio, where a map caught his eye. Noticing the patterns of marks, he realized he could work within those patterns, treating them as a drawing discipline—a set of rules he could work with and around. "When I began drawing a portrait on the map, I realized it was very striking, and I immediately liked the concept," he recalls.



OPPOSITE
Plymouth
(ink over an antique pocket-size map of Plymouth, U.K.)

LEFT
Pisa
(ink over an original atlas map of Pisa, Italy)

BELOW
Chaplygin Crater, the Moon
(matte India ink over a first edition NASA orthophotomap of the Moon, specifically the Chaplygin crater, located on the Moon's far side)

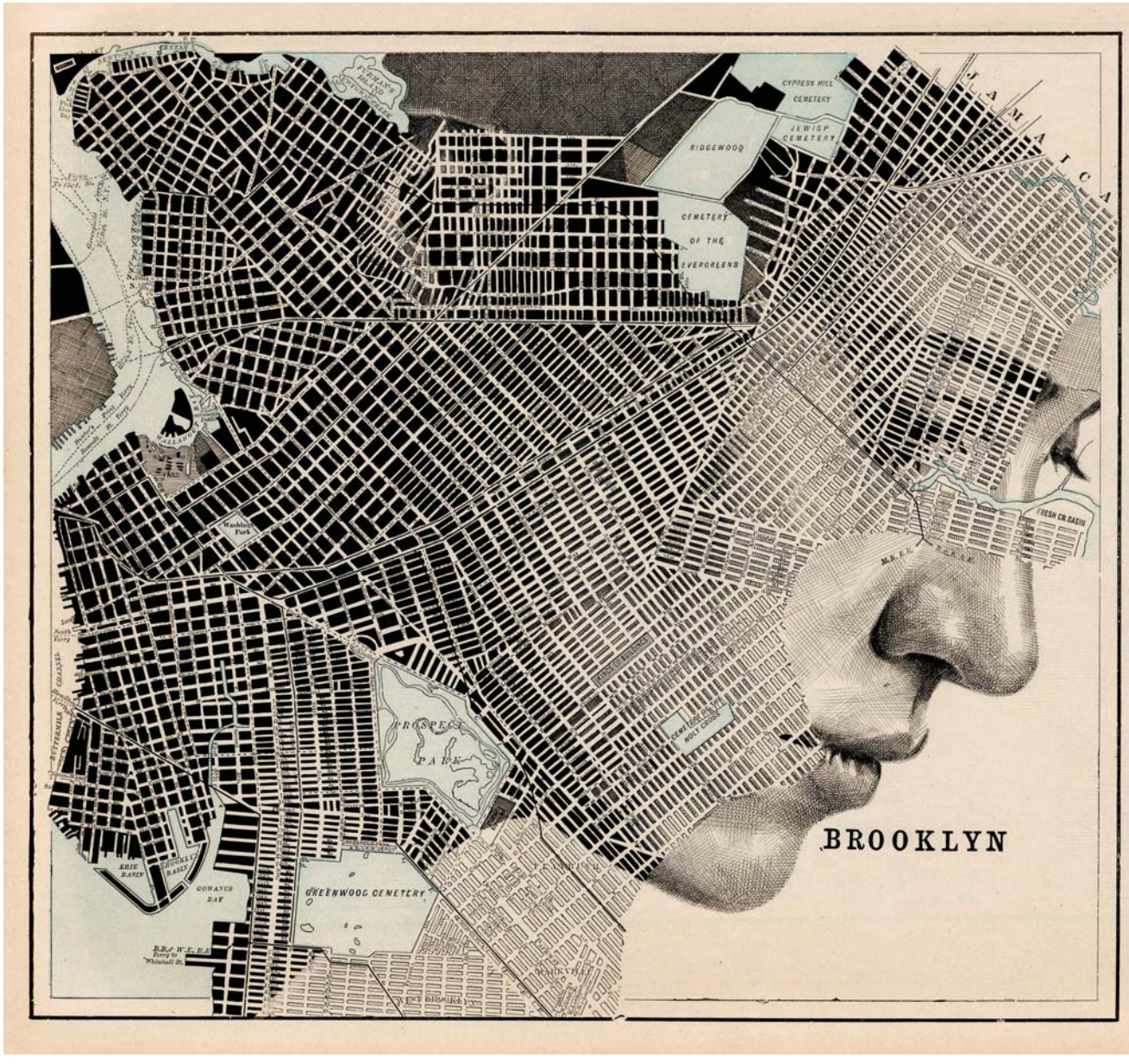


FINDING AN AUDIENCE

Fairburn's striking work found an audience quickly—something he credits to a bit of good old-fashioned luck. "There's always an element of luck with marketing arts and getting your work out there," he says. In his case, it began in 2012, when social media wasn't the monster marketer it is now; blogs were just emerging as vehicles to achieve high visibility. It was within this new frontier that Fairburn submitted his work to a design blog. "It was one of the first things I did, and overnight it went viral on Tumblr, which was very new to me. My work got a lot of eyes on it very quickly." People wanted prints, and he also began to get asked about commissions. The business side of his art-making, Fairburn says, seemed to unfold almost overnight.

One of his first commissions was a portrait series for the National Library of Scotland. "The work was of the Bartholomew family, whose family lineage of cartographers goes back hundreds of years," Fairburn says. "I worked with their branded maps, and it was all really exciting."

Since then, Fairburn has shown his work



Brooklyn II (ink over an original 1897 atlas page)

in galleries and has participated in exhibitions around the world. He has worked with publishers, such as Penguin Random House, to produce book cover art. He has created poster art for the John Wick film franchise. Most recently, he was commissioned by the Lennon Estate to create a dual portrait of John Lennon (within a map of Liverpool) and Yoko Ono (on a map of Tokyo) for the "Mind Games" super deluxe box set. "The John Lennon map took a very, very long time because it was so big," explains Fairburn. "It was made up of nine maps put together. The level of detail in it … well, it's one of those portraits that I felt could go on forever."

POWERED BY THE PEN

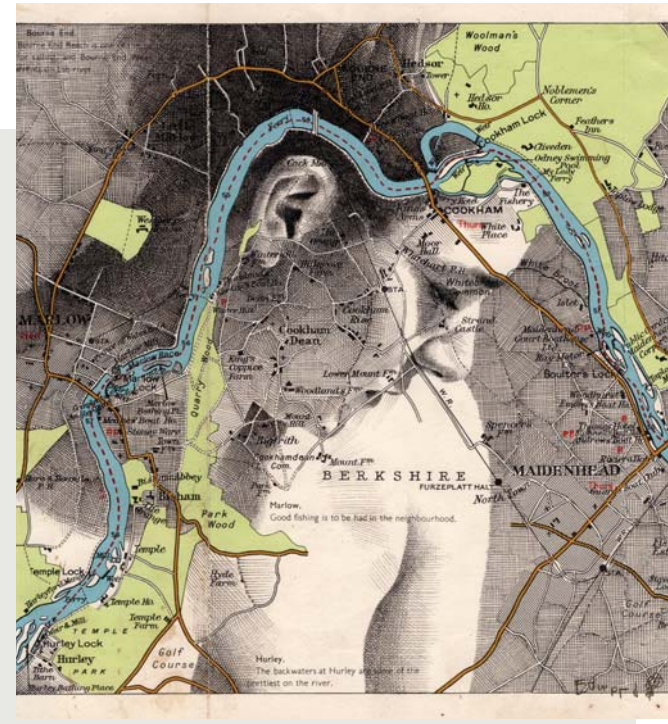
In terms of drawing tools, the artist's kit is quite simple: a pen. Well, hundreds of pens, actually. He may use fountain pens and very occasionally dip pens, but mostly, he's using a Uni Pin pigment liner, in black, typically 0.03, the smallest size. He keeps hundreds on hand. He even wears them down on purpose or leaves them uncapped intentionally. "I like when the pens lightly dry out; then I can use them to make a fainter line," he explains. For this reason, the artist says he rarely throws a pen away. The dried-out pen can work almost like a stylus. "I'm just marking the paper," he says, "but it's amazing for the most delicate tones—the tiniest details."

Also fundamental to his process is the paper itself. "I love the paper side of it," Fairburn says. "With digital work, which I do sometimes but not as often, there's obviously the work on screen—but I'm not working with the physical paper, and I feel something is missing."

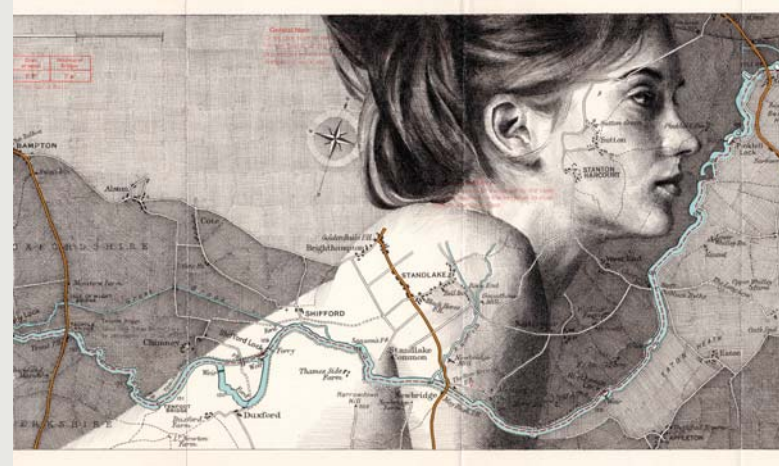
The nature of the paper's surface is part of what makes a piece unique. "I really enjoy all the different types of paper I encounter with each map," he says. "It's as if every map is a completely different surface. Sometimes I'm working on a map and the paper is just perfect to draw on, and then I'll never run into that type of paper ever again."

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Ed Fairburn has created a series of work based on maps of the River Thames, created by Stanford, an English mapmaker established in 1853. "Each Thames map is a small section cropped from a much larger map, one of the largest in my collection," he says. The full map measures roughly 8 inches in height but unfolds concertina-style to a width of nearly 10 feet. "As with so many of the maps in my collection," he says, "it's easy to get out, but not so easy to put away." The Thames map is one of Fairburn's favorites. "It has everything a map should have: roads, greenery, twisting waterways in a soft blue hue and some beautiful compass and key details," he says. The artist owns several copies of it, all dating to the early 20th century.



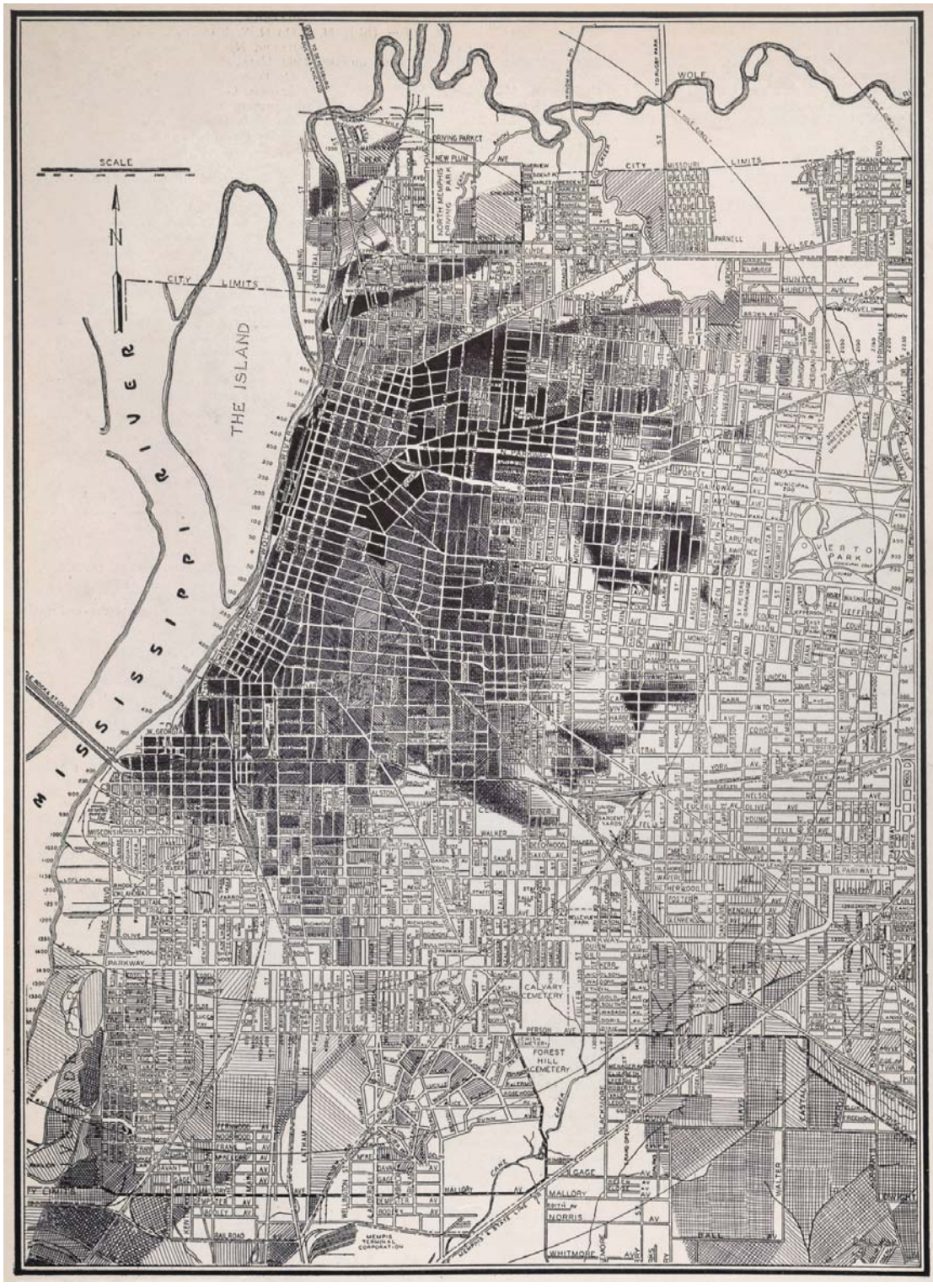




TOP TO BOTTOM
River Thames; Marlow to Maidenhead (ink over a Stanford's map of the Thames)

River Thames; Staines to Richmond (ink over a Stanford's map of the Thames)

River Thames; Bampton to Eynsham (ink over a Stanford's map of the Thames)



LEFT
Memphis TN
(ink over a map of Memphis, Tenn., taken from Collier's World Atlas 1937 and 1939 editions, part of Fairburn's "U.S. Cities" series)

OPPOSITE
Manhattan
(ink over a 1910 miniature atlas map of Midtown and Lower Manhattan, taken from Collier's World Atlas 1937 and 1939 editions, part of Fairburn's "U.S. Cities" series)

A BIT OF CHOREOGRAPHY

Beyond the found paper and simple black pen is the artist's fundamental love of drawing. Fairburn says he has always considered himself more of a draftsman than a painter. "I've always felt that paint is harder to control. It's just never really been my bag," he says. "I love drawing. I love the accuracy of it. I love the precision of it."

One of the particular challenges to his way of working is that it's quite a physical process. "I stand most of the time and put my whole body into the drawing," Fairburn says. "I spin the paper a lot. I have to be very comfortable to get all the lines in just the right places, and I really like that aspect of it. It's very meditative."

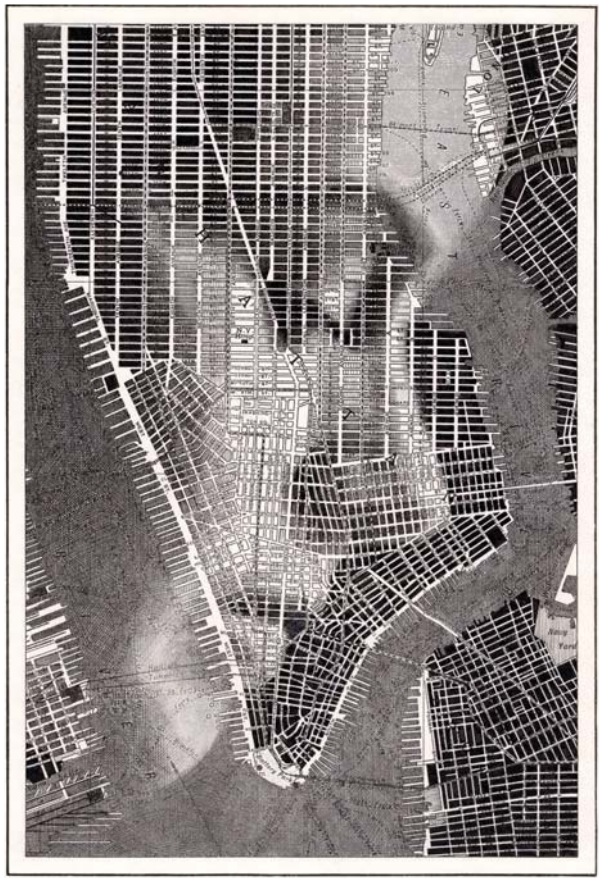
An excitement for portraiture—for drawing the human face—keeps the artist inspired and challenged. From the technical aspects of the

IN THE FRAME

Although framing isn't something he does often, Fairburn and his partner, Viola, have found ways to experiment with framing approaches that complement the underlying maps in his work.



In **Grenay** (ink over map of Grenay, France, mounted on plywood, 8x8), the map extends into the mount.



human eye, with its glassiness, shadows and highlights, to the way a human face offers no straight lines, the subject can be demanding. "When you recreate that on paper, it all has to be just right," Fairburn says. "If something's just a bit off, it simply doesn't look right."

A word the artist uses to describe his process is *choreography*. Each map he works on has distinct features. Some areas might be congested with tension; other parts might be loose and open. "It's these patterns that make a kind of dance on the paper," he says. "For me, it's not that I see faces on maps, but that I see potential for coexistence. I see shapes that can fit alongside what is already there and resolve a tension or complement something in some way."

It's this masterful choreography that Fairburn executes upon his found "canvases," crosshatching his way across maps of urban landscapes and ocean floors, and transforming tiny marks into portraits of powerful beauty.

*Massachusetts-based writer Doreen Manning is a regular contributor to **Artists Magazine** and other Artists Network publications and content.*



MEET THE ARTIST

Ed Fairburn (b. 1989) is an English artist, based in Southampton, who combines cartography and drawing to create unique portrait art. The artist has worked on a number of high-profile commissions in a range of commercial settings, including award-winning work for album covers, film posters and book covers. His work has been shown in galleries and exhibitions around the world. His artwork has also been featured in a variety of international media spaces, including print publications as well as websites, television and radio.

LEARN MORE AT EDFAIRBURN.COM.