

STUDIO VISIT David Opdyke

December 17, 2012 | by Yevgeniya Traps



David Opdyke's studio is, at the moment, mostly emptied of his intricate, deceptively beautiful sculptures, though it is filled with neatly organized boxes, helpfully labeled with the names of the particular bit of flotsam ("Sand," "Seaweed") each contains. The artworks are on display at Bryce Walkowitz Gallery in Chelsea, where Opdyke's PVC-pipes-cum-cherry-blossom-trees (the petals are tiny pink toilets!) bloom in the gallery's picture window. The piece is part of Opdyke's first solo show at the gallery, which is entitled Accumulated Afterthoughts.

I met Opdyke at the gallery on a May afternoon, so he could describe the making of his intricate pieces, painstakingly assembled in a process at once "zen" and "after a point, frustrating." Later that afternoon, I visited his studio. Part of the loft where he currently lives with his wife and two children, it is located right by the Williamsburg Bridge. (When I asked whether the noise of bridge traffic ever bothers him, Opdyke observed that the late-night drunken cell-phone conversations of nearby restaurant patrons are the far greater menace.)



MAGNANMETZ GALLERY



For many years, I have been interested in man-made systems, like roads and maps and oil pipelines. Those man-made systems have some organic, self-determining ways of being put together, but they're within the confines of man-made superstructures. I've just always been interested in man-made systems as being complex and intricate and delicate and maybe not really leading to the right end, as being sort of beautiful but sort

of inappropriate in terms of the final outcome. And I was interested in finding a way for such systems to become literally an organic form, like a tree or a bush, but still to invoke notions of infrastructure. The little branches—if you follow from the real PVC piping, you could imagine these as apartment buildings, in terms of the real infrastructure required for actual housing. Or, if you go the other way around, you could think of them as cherry blossoms, and then you realize they actually are toilets, and then it goes in a whole other direction. But either way, there's a fusing of the organic and the man-made ways of putting things together. The rules of the branches are sort of the rules of the pipes.

The pipes, that's all Home Depot stuff. Once you get to the smaller things, there is this whole world of train-set, model-making stuff, which is this whole other universe of materials and structures. There is that whole nineteenth-century trackside stuff—coal-fired power plants, steel mills—that people like to build to go along with their old-school train sets.

I'm also interested in the way natural forms and man-made forms come together in a new ecosystem. It's not good or bad, just an indication of the way things are. I remember thinking about how they take old New York City subway cars and sink them into the ocean off the shore of Carolina to provide new homes for coral, and how this structure gives an opportunity for the sea life to have



MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

a new place to live. It's a renewal thing via traction, via discarded bits of infrastructure.



We were in Miami with my son, who was then about a year old, and we were looking at the skyline of Miami Beach, and there were so many condos going up, with this very uniform, sort of pockmarked texture that I just had this vision of them so closely packed together that they formed a landmass. And eventually, three thousand years later, they would be their own island with accumulated dirt and dust and places for plants to grow and become these sort of hybrid sea cliffs-towers in the landscape. I worked as

an architectural model-maker for ten years. And one of the things about architectural model-making is that idea of the trophy and the physical representation of your plans. In a way, it's shrinking the world down to a manageable size, and you can control what happens. In a way, it's sort of like playing god. You can eliminate a building that you don't want to see from the scope of your plan. And this kind of dovetailed with this notion of—I hate to use these kinds of words, but—the hubris of building, and building, and building, and trying to take control of things, and there are unintended consequences—things fall apart, they are abandoned. My means of presentation in terms of scale ties in with that idea of a god's-eye view of incredibly elaborate, overburdened systems in a reasonably sized package. So you can take a larger view and present it, but also just the notion of compressing a large portion of the world into your vision is kind of that whole egotistically controlling thing I was talking about. So the means of presentation fit in with the idea, in a way.

For a couple of years, I was doing fairly specifically political kinds of work, in the early 2000s, and I think it was successful work—I'm not knocking it—but after a while, I started to feel a little bit tired of always yelling at the Evil Empire, of sort screaming from the bottom of the arch gates at the arch castle with the baron, the king. I just got a little bit tired, and so I'm trying to think of things a little bit more ... I don't know how I'm thinking of things these days, but I'm trying to stay away from the overt political stuff.



MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

What happens is, when I finish one of these gigantic things, and I find myself over-wrestling with large objects, it's very nice to switch gears, and either start doing some drawings or maybe work on some smaller, more intuitively assembled, faster works. It's just good for my mental health. And I really enjoy it. It allows me to take ideas in a less planned out way. So then I end up making lots of small sculptures. I'm just sort of finding little—I'm going to use some pretentious words—poetic resonances between objects, the little bits and pieces of failed projects that never went anywhere. I found lots of materials that I thought would turn into something, but didn't, or the little leftover pieces from another sculpture in another box, and when I'm in between projects, I just sort of spread it all out over a table and see what goes together, what I stumble in to. And a lot of times it works really well, and I produce a self-sustaining object. And then sometimes they don't quite work and they are not enough to stand on their own. So I felt like I had a whole bunch of those, and in spite of the fact that I didn't find them to be a hundred percent successful on their own, I thought it would be interesting to turn them into monuments, monuments to failed ideas on my part or failed ideas in the world. And so they end up just being this whole collection of these monuments to failure.

I can feel when a piece begins turning into something, but I'm not sure what it is, and so this something compels me to keep going, working within some parameters, coming up with variations that are interesting, and then those interesting variations occur to me as I'm making more of them, either constraining them, or maybe opening them up, until, eventually, there is a purpose that reveals itself. At first, I don't know what I'm doing it for. And that happens a lot, I have all these bits and pieces, and eventually, they find their way into a form. And when you're surprised by that, it's really great, I love to be surprised like that. Because I did have a few projects, over the years, where I knew exactly what I was making, and it was just a matter of putting the pieces together, putting things in place. And they are not unsuccessful, but they just don't have that kind of payoff for me in terms being surprised by what happens, because I really do enjoy that. Even though a lot of the work is very meticulous and looks really, really well—thought out, there is a lot of intuitive decision-making and turning things upside down and completely redoing the configuration of the objects. That happens to make it more exciting and more interesting and, hopefully, surprising for the viewer as well.

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY



I was a painter originally. But for me, it was just too open ended. You could just keep going and reworking and there was an infinite number of possibilities for how you could treat the picture plane. It was just hard to figure out why you would stop at any point or not, and I just kept on tunneling and tunneling into the canvas. It's my personality. So I stayed away from two-dimensional stuff for many years, maybe ten years. And everything was kind of sculptural. Because I felt like, when you are dealing with sculpture, at least from my standpoint, you take a piece of wood and some nails, and you have rules for how to put them together in an acceptable, standard way, and you could break the rules, you could bend the rules. And so there is an implied sort of utility kind of aspect to using recognizable materials, and then there is the frustrating of that utility by bending the rules. But then I felt it was time to let myself back into the drawing. It was strictly white paper, and I started doing all these map pieces. It was just houses and railroads and that's it. And I just sort of gradually found my way back into it. And I don't know that I have any rules anymore, but it was just my way of finding my way back into working two dimensionally, to get me away from my own mental blocks. Because I really do love drawing. It's a really nice feeling, especially after wrestling with the gigantic sculpture kind of stuff, the really messy glues and solvents.

When it comes to the titles of particular pieces, I always try to introduce some mystery. If a piece has some clarity in terms of what it's trying to say, I try to break that up with the title. And if a piece is very elusive, I try and give a hint in the title, but I try, as much as possible, to stay away from telling people what is going on. It's more interesting, more open ended. In terms of the show's title, an "afterthought" can be sort of like, "We had this plan for this wonderful system we were going to make, and it didn't work out, so we patched it together and made it work in a different way." So that you could be thinking in terms of all the comments I'm sort of getting at about how people are living in the world and building and building and not really paying attention to the consequences. An afterthought could be that kind of idea.

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

But it also takes this work in a kind of tongue-in-cheek way. It sort of says, “Well, here is a pile of stuff I’ve been working on, and this is what’s arrived in the gallery.” I’m trying not to take myself too seriously, I guess. And it has a nice alliterative feel to it.