

David Opdyke

19 Sept-2 Jan
The Aldrich, Ridgefield, CT
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Review by Steven Vincent

The interconnections between power, violence and certain evacuative functions inform David Opdyke's view of the US – as evidenced, at least, by his show at The Aldrich. Winner of the museum's eighth annual Emerging Artist Award, the Brooklyn-based sculptor has combined superb model-making abilities with a streak of postmodern cynicism to create a series of sculptures that commented wryly, if predictably, on the American Empire.

The centrepiece of the exhibition – which consisted of six sculptures, four drawings and a video projection – was *All in the Same Boat* (2004), a five-and-a-half-foot-long wood, metal and plastic model of a cruise ship fashioned out of twisting, rusty-looking miniature plastic pipes connected to some 900 tiny toilets. (A former architectural model-maker,

Opdyke hand-crafts all the elements of his sculptures.) Eliciting an instant laugh, the piece also evoked the intricate and ever more entangling systems we construct to support our luxurious lifestyles – systems we then take pains to hide from sight and mind. Associated with this theme was *Unity* (2004), a huge wall-mounted plywood puzzle of the United States that fit Mercator-projected outlines of every other nation inside American borders. No wonder the SS American Empire needs so many toilets, Opdyke seems to say: we have ingested the world.

Turning from producing waste to consuming it, *Oil Empire* (2003) was a plastic and steel map of the US consisting of intertwining pipelines and tiny gas pumps, clusters of cracking towers and storage tanks indicating oil refinery centres in Houston, Los Angeles and New Jersey. A reminder of American appetites for fossil fuel, the piece also presented an unsettling image of the vulnerability of the nation's energy infrastructure – a kind of terrorist's-eye view of America. And where oil and

terrorism are, can security be far behind? In *Defense Development* (2004), Opdyke presented a wall-mounted urethane foam sculpture depicting a housing complex formed into a four-foot-square image of the Pentagon: the very picture of middle America drawing its suburban wagons into a defensive posture uncomfortably resembling a tightening sphincter.

Basic Freud will tell you that power complexes and anal fixations are linked to obsessions with violence and death, and Opdyke's neurotic America exhibits these as well. *Freedom Ride* (2003) offered a military recruiter's dream of an amusement park, complete with roller coaster tracks, a bomb-laden Ferris wheel and rocketry models referencing Washington's Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. With allusions to the 'Right Stuff' of astronauts and war heroes, the piece conjured those insidious TV advertisements that represent military duty as a cross between a weekend adventure safari and a video game. Upping the thematic ante was the terrifically titled *Pre-Emptive Product*

Placement (2003), a deceptively simple sculpture depicting a tail-finned aerial bomb covered with camouflaged panels, each panel laser-etched with a corporate logo. As a metaphor for the explosive power of globalisation, the piece was worth entire volumes of Noam Chomsky.

Yet that, in the end, may be the main weakness with Opdyke's otherwise fine show. While not exactly tendentious, his sculptural metaphors formulate a rather familiar polemic against the Mephistophelean evils of America. Waste, anally retentive security paranoia and the ecstasy of death is terrain that authors like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo have mined for decades, and one wonders how Opdyke, or any visual artist for that matter, can advance the topic. After all, the most memorable warning about the intertwining influence of corporations and the Pentagon came from that old hipster Dwight D Eisenhower, who back in 1961 cautioned the public against the 'disastrous rise of misplaced power' of America's military-industrial complex'.

Right: David Opdyke,
All in the Same Boat,
2004, painted wood,
plastic and metal,
167.6 x 30.5 x 45.7cm

