

CRISTIN TIERNEY

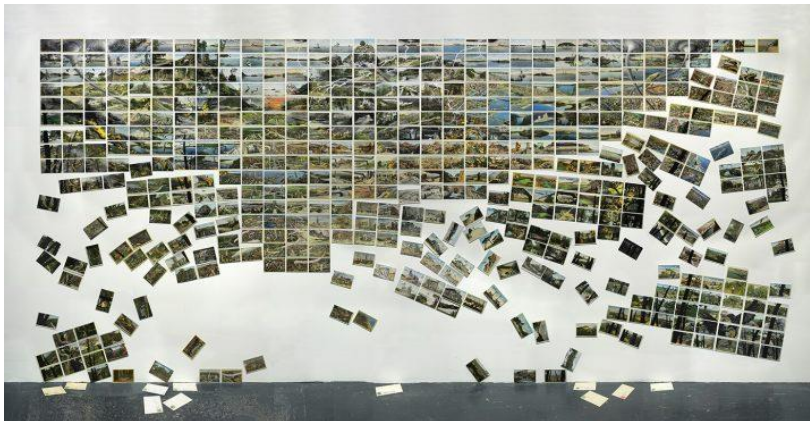
HYPERALLERGIC

Seeking Beauty as the World Falls Apart

David Opdyke appears to understand why they say the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Sarah Rose Sharp

February 22, 2019



ANN ARBOR, Mich.—Nothing serves to complicate a person’s halcyon view of life in America like watching their hometown dissolve at the core from corporate disinvestment. This was the case for Schenectady, NY — abandoned as General Electric relocated to the neighboring Niskayuna, and ALCO exited entirely — and witnessing the impact was a foundational experience that informs much intermedia artist David Opdyke’s work.

Paved With Good Intentions is a wall-sized installation that made its debut last month at University of Michigan Institute for the Humanities Gallery, and it, too, reconfigures the landscape of nostalgic America, with the most prominent piece, “This Land,” assembling and deftly intervening in 528 vintage postcards of US landmarks with scene of environmental disaster, plague, and foreboding.

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“This Land” is tremendously impressive, with each postcard operating effectively as a microcosm of a world falling into chaos. Roughly two-thirds of the postcards conform to a grid which, view from afar, indicate a kind of impressionistic mountainscape, punctuated by lakes and wildlife. But the grid immediately begins to fracture, sloughing off chunks of postcards or individuals that seem to fall away into the whitespace beneath the tableau, with a handful scattered out onto the floor below.

Not only does this arrangement communicate a strong sense of panic and dissolution in direct visual terms, the resulting shape intuitively mimics a rough map of the US (though the

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locations depicted in the postcards do not reflect their placement relative to an imagined map of the country).

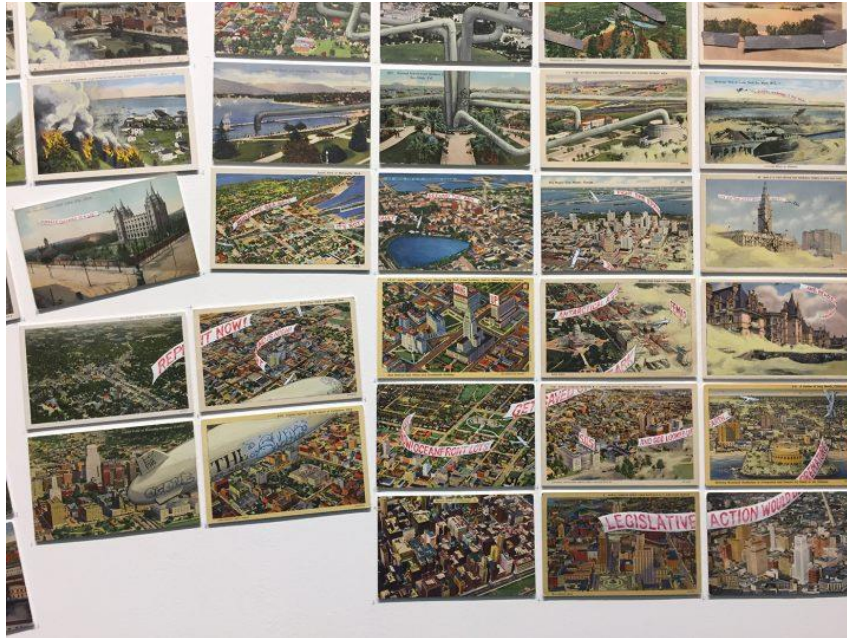
Pipelines bisect national parks, and historic buildings are reclaimed by giant, sprawling root systems. Tornadoes whirl and touch down above the Northwest and Northeast corners of the composition. A confused cloud of migrating monarch butterflies navigates a massive lighting storm over the heartland. Locusts leap across Texas and frogs rain from the sky above New England. What might be Florida has broken away in one huge chunk and upon closer viewing, is populated by a murder of crows. Thus far the center holds, but the wasteland is in the cards.



Opdyke's piece is a triumph of aesthetics; one can see his miniaturist eye for detail at work in each postcard, with gouache overlay so precise that sometimes the alterations are hard

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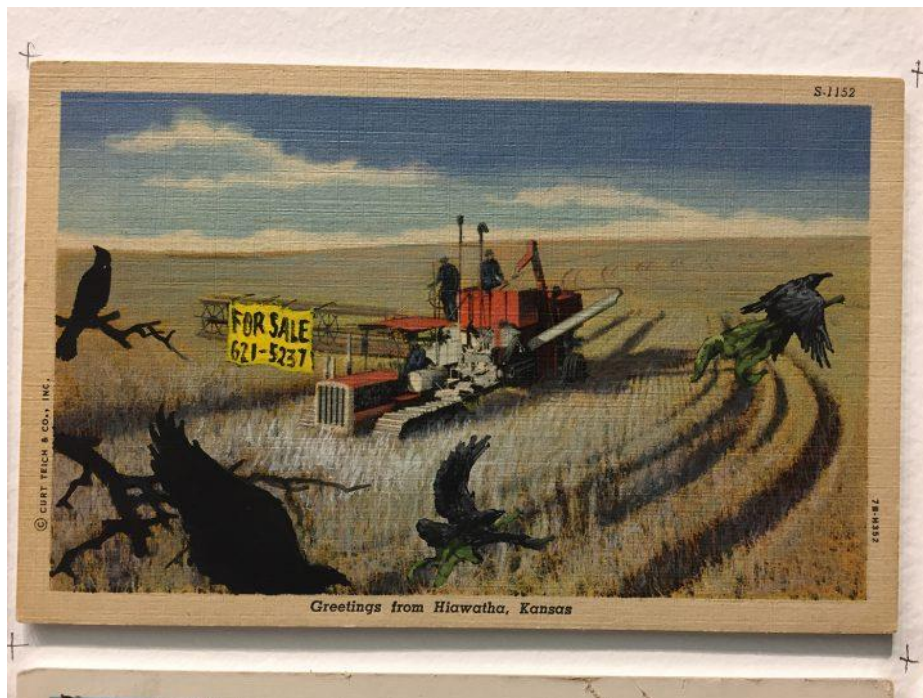
to find. This extends on the macro level to the overall arrangement of the cards, which forms an utterly cohesive picture, even as it splinters and falls to the floor. The feeling is that of a Boschian landscape, with hundreds of little scenes of rapture and destruction playing out within a wider image.



The question remains, does art do anything to combat the social conditions that fuel Opdyke's disaster menagerie? This was the central issue at the opening panel discussion,

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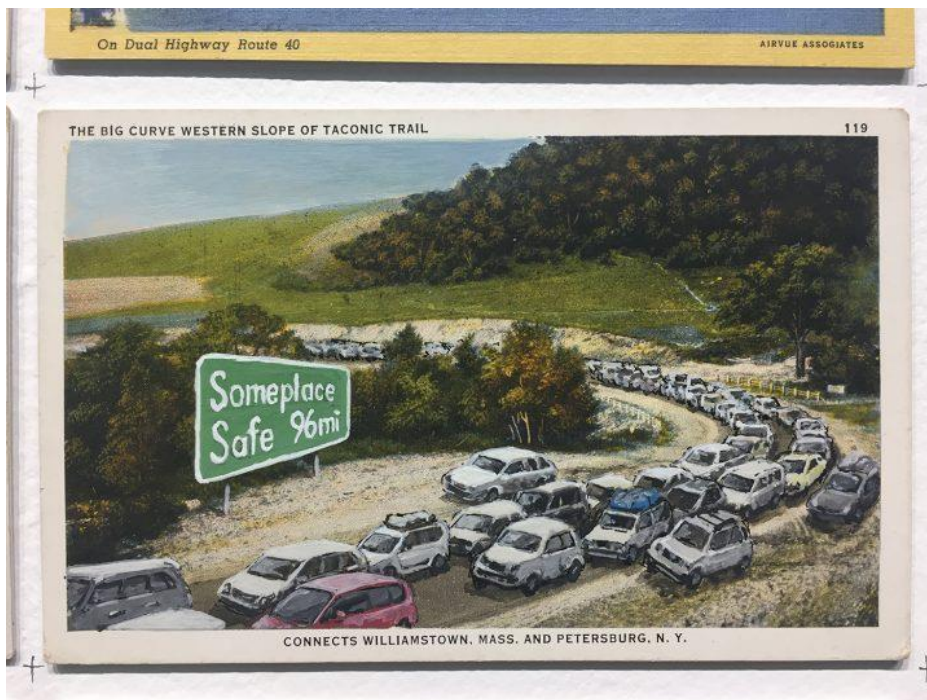
featuring the artist, journalist Lauren Sandler, art historian Tara Ward, and arts curator Amanda Krugliak, who is director of the UMIH Gallery. The talk, titled, “Good Intentions: Is Art an Effective Means of Activism?” actively examined notions of art as intervention. In addition to “This Land,” the installation features a handful of video works, one of which presents quotes from opposing politicians on a pair of video screens, in a debate-style rhetoric battles that feels exceedingly empty in the face of the crumbling vision of America on the opposing wall. Many an artist feels compelled these days to tackle social issues, but sometimes these efforts seem more about using societal calamity for market traction or personal vainglory. Opdyke’s work feels exceedingly personal, a kind of vision board for environmental anxiety, and the biblical nature of the plagues he illustrates are only slightly hyperbolic when one considers the lasting environmental damage to which our current course commits the entire world. Opdyke’s work is sufficiently powerful to instigate panic when I view or think about it, but I also drove an hour and half round trip to do so, dropping one more straw on the back of the proverbial camel.



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Still, the state of the world is not David Opdyke's fault or responsibility, and there is something to be said for disrupting nostalgia — especially with the rise of scary backward-looking political realities — and wresting beauty out of urgent catastrophe. Perhaps Opdyke's ability to present environmentalism in such visceral terms holds some power to inch us collectively toward change. Or perhaps these 528 postcards will stand as missives from the void, when the civilization we have built so precariously collapses into fire and ash. I suppose at that point, as we bump along the road to hell, it will be small consolation that our intentions were good.



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Paved With Good Intentions continues on display at the University of Michigan Institute for the Humanities Gallery through February 26.