BOMB

David Opdyke by Louis Bury

Murals created with postcards highlight climate change.

Nov 15, 2023

David Opdyke, *Someday, all this*, 2021, gouache on 400 postcards. Photo by David Opdyke. Courtesy of the artist.

David Opdyke's murals composed of hand-painted vintage postcards play with scale in smart, seductive ways. Using the postcards as though they were mosaic tiles, each loosely gridded mural presents an inventive bird's-eye vantage of varied terrain—from mountainous landscapes, to dense urban developments, to blue expanses of ocean. These sweeping vistas would appear charming if it weren't for their discordant details: tornadoes and wildfires that menace the land- and cityscapes or bungee cords that

stretch across the ocean as if trying to hold the earth together against climate change. The murals' larger shapes, which sometimes break from the grid format, likewise suggest dissolution. Opdyke achieves these compositional effects not only through clever juxtapositions of the postcards' imagery but also through painting surrealist scenes upon that imagery. With dark humor and engrossing minutiae, his murals provide perspective on a planetwide crisis that, in its pervasiveness, can make it hard for us humans to see the forest for the trees and vice versa.
—Louis Bury

Louis Bury
How did you start working with vintage postcards?

David Opdyke
I was having an artistic crisis. Usually, when starting a new project, I'd get my sketchbook and start brainstorming. But I suddenly felt that the well was running dry. All my work was coming from internal processes and ideas; blank paper felt exhausting. I needed something to riff on or work against.

LB
Why postcards specifically?

DO
I saw an artist, I forget who, doing interesting work on top of old oil paintings. But oil paintings aren't cheap or easily available. That led me to the idea of using old postcards. I ordered a bunch from eBay and took them to an artist residency. In my last couple days there, I tried painting on them. I hadn't worked with paint, except on sculptures, in decades.

LB
You originally trained as a painter?

DO
Yes, but I took just as many sculpture classes because at the time painting felt like a dead end. Playing around with the postcards' imagery and the stories embedded in them was freeing, even inspiring, and it reopened painting for me. Initially, I worked on individual cards, but sometimes I combined them, such as in a triptych of Washington, DC, government buildings.

LB
It sounds like each step down this artistic path was intuitive and exploratory.

DO

For sure. Two circumstances led me to the large, painted-postcard murals. First, I had the postcards spread out across every horizontal surface in my studio, which suggested the idea of arranging them in clusters and combinations. Second, I was applying for a grant and needed to pitch a big project. My proposal was a fifteen-by-fifteen-foot postcard grid of scenes from all over the United States. The idea was to pivot away from postcards of landmarks and toward ones featuring ordinary places in order to deliver the message that global warming is happening in everyone's backyard. I didn't get the grant, but, after feeling sorry for myself, I thought, Wait, this is a good idea; I should make it.

David Opdyke, *Someday, all this*, 2021, gouache on 400 postcards. Photo by David Opdyke. Courtesy of the artist.

LB
What design challenges does the mural form present?

DO
Each postcard has its own pictorial space, so I have to arrange them to fit together visually. The horizons of postcards fit together easily, but it's harder to make vertical connections. Luckily the human brain wants to make things fit together. So it's a matter of finding enough visual continuity between cards to override the things that don't connect. I'm currently creating my fourth large, postcard work. Each one is an improvisation, taking shape as those connections are made.

LB
How does the paint you apply to the postcards factor into the composition?

DO
I want to make it hard to distinguish between the postcards' original imagery and my painted interventions. I found that gouache paint on vintage postcards worked best because gouache lies flat and takes on the texture of the painted surface. Postcards from the early to mid-twentieth century are more like illustrations or printmaking than photographs, so what I add looks believable. I work with older postcards for that reason and only stumbled onto the conceptual aspects of their contents later.

LB
The postcards' unaltered imagery has a nostalgic, almost innocent feel.

DO
They also convey a sense of pride in Manifest Destiny–style development. A surprising number of cards feature highways leading out of cities and into pristine wilderness. That wilderness is easier to experience because other parts of what used to be wilderness were paved over. The postcards embody a naive optimism about progress and the attitude that the US contains an infinite supply of land that can be exploited without consequence.

LB
How have audiences responded to your use of this medium?

DO
The postcards don't read like art. People find them accessible and get sucked in. The scale of the mural can be intimidating, but the individual postcards have an intimate scale and invite closer looking. They feel nostalgic and familiar, which creates a welcoming entry point for viewers. Then what I do is sneak in the climate content through the back door. The artwork is not yelling at the audience or declaring any one thing. It's more like an orchestra, corralling all the disagreements and chaos of how we feel about climate change.

LB
Your work in other media, much of it made before you started working with postcards, also addresses climate change. Your sculptures, for example, present intricate scale models of ruined infrastructure, often with a surreal twist.

DO
I used to work as an architectural model-maker, so my sculptures incorporated some of those techniques and aesthetics, particularly the god's-eye view of a miniaturized scene. For example, I sculpted an aircraft carrier whose hull looks like it was ripped from the earth and whose deck contains a shopping mall and parking lot. In hindsight, I was presenting

viewers with scary, singular situations. It made them go, Wow, but sometimes that was as far as it went.

David Opdyke, *Someday, all this*, 2021, gouache on 400 postcards. Photo by David Opdyke. Courtesy of the artist.

LB
You feel the postcard murals are a more effective medium for conveying the intended message?

DO
I think some of my sculptures risked becoming disaster porn. The aesthetics grab you, and you're momentarily horrified, but that's it. The murals, on the other hand, really hold people's attention. Each postcard is a fragment, whether serious, contrary, absurd, or frightening. People spend time wandering from card to card, stitching together their own version of the artwork.

LB
When the Climate Museum exhibited your mural, *Someday, all this* (2022), they offered visitors free, postage-paid postcards to mail to their political representatives.

DO
Yes, those cards were copied from the mural. The Climate Museum organizes pop-up installations and programming that use the arts as a catalyst for advocacy and education.

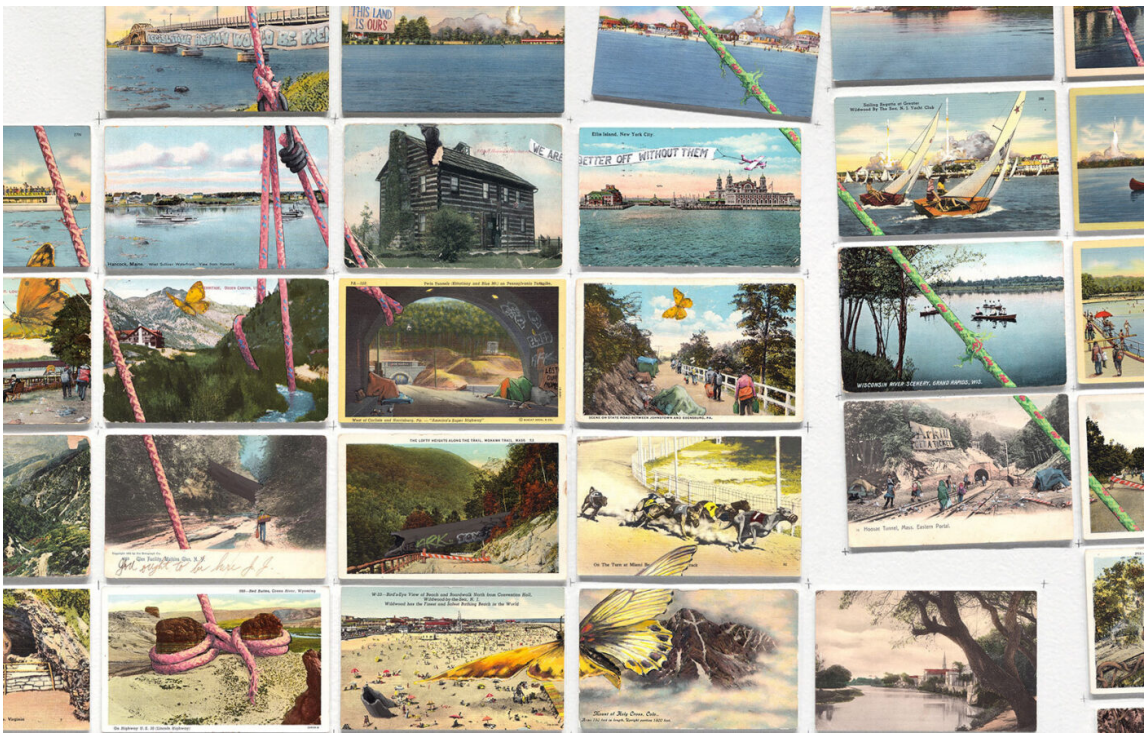
They don't push climate statistics and graphs, instead focusing on the emotional resonances of art, community-building, and cross-disciplinary connections.

LB
My background is in literature, and one thing that got me into writing about visual art was that it felt, by comparison, less abstract, more tangible.

DO
I think pure information played an important role in climate discourse five or ten years ago. Now we need to move beyond scaring people and figure out how to help them take action. I've become increasingly comfortable with letting my work be instrumentalized for that purpose.

LB
What might that look like for you going forward?

DO
I don't know what other forms this might take, but I appreciated how wide-ranging the Climate Museum's programming was. They brought in a NASA employee to lead a workshop for teenagers on scientific careers, as well as speakers from Shinnecock Nation to discuss long-term environmental racism. They trained high school docents to guide visitors. There were poetry workshops, a climate comedy night, and conversations about displacement and reparations. It was amazing.



David Opdyke, *Someday, all this*, 2021, gouache on 400 postcards. Photo by David Opdyke. Courtesy of the artist.

LB
One potential frustration is that the scale and speed of activist change needed, and art's role in that, can feel incommensurate with the nature of the crisis.

DO
I just try to remind myself that I'm doing what I can with my skill set. If I had different skills, I might run for local office. Art as activism can be tricky because you don't know how, or even if, the work will impact people down the line. It might help give someone permission to do a sit-in at a bank, or to get involved in politics, or it might have no effect at all.

LB
Your postcard murals do an excellent job providing viewers with a sweeping picture of climate complexity, leavened with humor.

DO
When I made the first one, the artist Ethan Turpin called it a "hyperobject," referring to eco-philosopher Timothy Morton's term for an all-pervasive but elusive object, like global warming itself. A tremendous compliment. It's also a helpful analogy because my work presents the climate crisis at two different scales. From a distance, it's a giant, amorphous problem, too big to comprehend or deal with. But up close, it's an accumulation of familiar, everyday things we experience. Connecting those fragments leads to an understanding of the big picture.

David Opdyke's work can be seen in the exhibition Art on Paper 2023: The 47th Exhibition *at the Weatherspoon Art Museum at Greensboro, North Carolina, until April 6.*

Louis Bury is an art critic, author of The Way Things Go *(punctum books, 2023) and* Exercises in Criticism *(Dalkey Archive Press, 2015), and Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY.*