

Oil's Coils and Mad Doilies

by BLAKE GOPNIK

On the continuum between form and content, some artists head entirely toward form. That's where modernist abstraction lives. Others go for the content end of things. Today's politically inspired photo-art lives there. Many leading artists have tended to sit somewhere in the middle, with the look of their work and its subject matter in careful balance: In a Rembrandt, it's hard to imagine changing either style or subject without completely losing what the work's about.

And then there's "American Paradigms: David Opdyke and Lane Twitchell," an exhibition of two promising young New York artists organized by Stacey Schmidt, associate curator of contemporary art at the Corcoran.

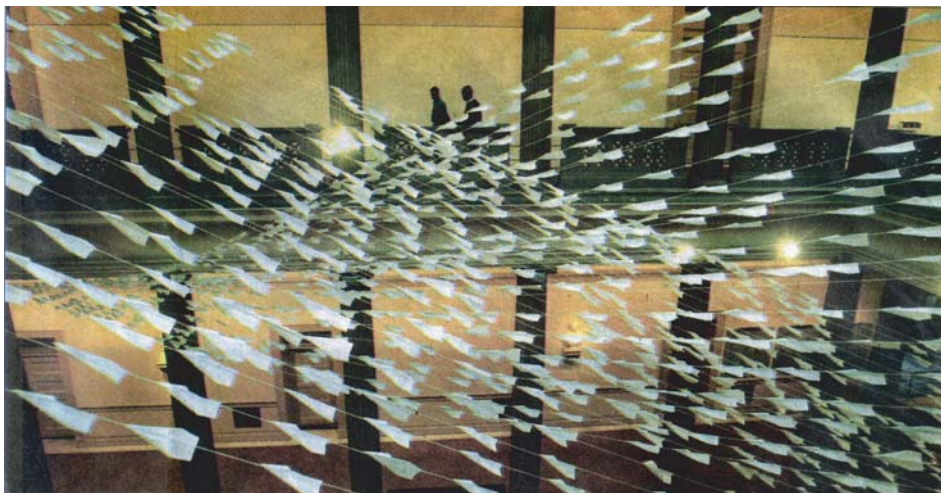
The works of Opdyke and Twitchell, though on the surface very different, have both good looks and potent messages. They inhabit both ends of the spectrum at the same time, rather than settling for a place at a single extreme or somewhere in the middle.

Opdyke conveys a simple political message using the complex forms of fiendishly elaborate sculptures. Twitchell makes amazingly complex paper cutouts that, after long looking, reveal a political message.

Opdyke's piece called "Oil Empire" consists of a tabletop-size board, painted white and cut in the shape of the United States. Crisscrossing every inch of it is a bewilderingly busy network of industrial piping—the kind that you'd see at an oil refinery, only rendered herein miniature plastic part— that Opdyke could have borrowed from a model train display or architect's model. Opdyke's mazelike piping sticks up eight or 10 inches where the oil industry has big operations—in Texas, Southern California and the Northeast—while everywhere else its tangle hugs the map. The piece seems to be graphing the impact of petroleum on the state of the nation, with the implication that there's not an inch of the United States that's not held tight in the coils of the oil industry.

In "Taste Test 2000," Opdyke gives us another strong dose of politics. The piece has been borrowed from the Washington Convention Center's new art collection, where it is one of the most daring things on show. (Though last time I looked it had been tucked away in a dark corner where its provocation was unlikely to be felt.) The piece is another tabletop map of the United States, but this time the country's been divided up by state, then colored in according to the outcome of the most recent presidential election. The states that went Republican are covered in miniature suburban houses painted red and pink and white. When seen from a distance, they come together to form the red-and-white logo of Coca-Cola. The suburban houses covering the Democratic states are in white and shades of blue, and trace a Pepsi sign. Again, a straightforward, plausible message: There are only minor differences of taste between the mainstream parties, and both are busy selling a uniformly corporate message to our suburban selves.

In both these works, the content is as direct as any photo of a starving refugee. And there's impressive form that communicates it. Opdyke, by day a professional modelmaker, stuns us with his glorious skill as a miniaturist. It's hard to take your eyes away



"Aerial Assumptions," 2004, by David Opdyke, is constructed of pages from an Arabic-English dictionary folded into two fleets of paper airplanes



Lane Twitchell's "Bloody Red Sun of Fantastic L.A."

Oil's Coils and Mad Doilies (con't)

from his bravura work. But there's an inevitable sense that Opdyke's complex form maybe nothing more than virtuosic craft. Or at least that his model-builder's form merely acts as clever illustration for a message that's not dependent on the medium that carries it. There's a suspicion, that is, that he could have got his point across in any other form—in a rough drawing, a Photoshop collage, even a computer animation—that showed a nation hidden under oil pipelines. It's easy to see Opdyke's work as functioning like an extravagantly crafted editorial cartoon.

Only a few of Opdyke's works are so subtle that they raise questions, rather than providing answers. One, a magical piece called "Aviation Agglomeration," consists of a tangle of miniature plastic suitcases, each one about the size of a dime, wired into a hanging mobile. The whole thing looks like the mess of luggage that might spew out from a midair explosion. And thanks to the shadow cast by a nearby spotlight, that apparently random muddle of suitcases traces the ghostly silhouette of a jetliner on the floor. The piece is a poignant, though also quietly mordant, view of the before and after of a catastrophe—but with the before (the plane) kept strangely vague, and the exploded chaos of the aftermath (the baggage) looking curiously precise.

Lane Twitchell's work reverses the tendencies we see in Opdyke: In Twitchell, it's the form, rather than the content, that tends to read as central to his art. If in Opdyke we get the punch line and then marvel at the work the artist did to get us to it, in Twitchell we're so caught up in the delivery that we may not notice that it's heading anywhere.

Twitchell folds and cuts sheets of colored paper into huge framed works that are like the apotheosis of the kindergarten doily. Who knew that the crude techniques kids use to make a cheery snowflake or a pretty valentine could be harnessed to make impressive art? Twitchell's fiendish craft begins with the kaleidoscopic regularities and symmetries that make doilies so entrancing to a kid. It then throws in such interesting syncopations and hesitations and complex asymmetries too. Imagine a cut-paper coaster turned into something as rich and eye-teasing as a Persian carpet, and you'll get an idea of Twitchell's art. Twitchell takes skilled handiwork to such an extreme that it becomes almost a parody of itself. It's America's Puritan work ethic spinning out of control. "However did he do it?" is the first thought that springs to mind—and also the second and the third. It's only after that "gee whiz" at last wears off that you notice the significant subject matter hidden in the cuts and folds of Twitchell's work.

The cut-paper shapes you see in a piece called "Lonestar," from 2003, turn out to be a mad agglomeration of stars, pipelines, cars, falling bombs, Shriners' scimitars, street signs, gun-toting sheriffs (borrowed from a still movie of Ronald Reagan, apparently) and a million other tiny details shown in silhouette.

A piece called "Bloody Red Sun of Fantastic L.A.," also made last year, plays the same trick on the classic icons of the Los Angeles cityscape, unleashing such a proliferation of imagery that it becomes almost psychedelic.

Twitchell's doilies clearly mean to paint a picture of the nation: His imagery conveys a nightmarish version of a 1950s vision of the future, with development sprawling so out of control that it becomes a tangled nest of poison ivy. But Twitchell's art is made up of so many tiny, separate bits that it can take a while for such a picture to emerge from them. We're so busy asking where Waldo is that we barely register the world that he is lost inside of.

A generous reading of Twitchell's art, and maybe of Opdyke's as well, could argue that the complex forms they use closely mirror the content they've chosen to convey. It's possible to see an essence of America revealed in both that could only be conveyed in the media they've chosen.

Just as our eyes get lost in the maze—like details of Twitchell's art—so we all lost in the conspicuous consumption of the America he depicts. You could argue that kaleidoscopic doily art is exactly what it takes to conjure up the neverending superficialities of our consumerist society.

In Opdyke's case, you could argue that his toylike fine detail is precisely what is needed to carry his political messages, which are all about a world ran by overgrown boys. Our leaders start life playing with model jets and Tonka trucks and G.I. Joes, and by the time they come to power they're collecting real industries and live battalions. How better to poke at an America under the sway of macho generals and swaggering industrialists than with an extravagant deployment of die-cut plastic and model airplane glue?

But much as I would like to buy into such a generous reading, I'm not sure I can. I'm not quite convinced these two artists have managed such a complex linking of form and content. There's a risk that viewers may spend too much time marveling at Twitchell's scissor skills, or chuckling at Opdyke's simple messages, to ever get the necessity of Twitchell's cut-out messages or Opdyke's modelmaker's skill. When form and content are kept so far apart, it may be too much to imagine that an audience will always connect the dots between them.

American Paradigms: David Opdyke and Lane Twitchell, *at the Corcoran Museum of Art, 500 17th St. NW, through April 5. Call 202-639-1700 or visit www.corcoran.org. For other Gopnik art reviews, in print and on video, visit www.washingtonpost.com/gopnik*