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ART REVIEW; Small Scale, Big Issues

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

PLEASE notice if your tongue is hanging out at David Opdyke's exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., and reel that baby back in. It's perfectly understandable, of course, for Mr. Opdyke's sculptures are entertaining, witty and crafty. That's a killer combination in the visual arts.

Mr. Opdyke, 35, is the winner of the 2004 Aldrich Emerging Artist Award. Winners receive \$3,000 and the opportunity to stage an exhibition at the museum. It doesn't sound like much, right? It isn't, which is why it's thrilling to see what this Brooklyn-based artist has done with the chance. He has turned a modest award show into a megaphone for his talent.

I am not in the habit of covering award exhibitions or art prizes, believing that scholarly endeavors and more focused displays of artwork by living artists deserve priority. But this exhibition is an exception, for the Aldrich Emerging Artist Award is like a miniature, early-career retrospective.

Mr. Opdyke's exhibition contains almost a dozen works, all produced in the last two years. Most are small-scale sculptures that look like engineering and architectural models, with the exception of some drawings and a new two-channel video projected onto a screen at one end of the gallery. The video is not as enticing as the sculptures, which generally elicit gasps of admiration from viewers.

How is Mr. Opdyke different from the many young sculptors who make models or deal with hyperrealism? His works also deliver quick-witted social critiques and biting political commentary. In his sights are current United States domestic and foreign policies, as well as consumerism and globalization.

"Unity (puzzle)" (2004) cuts right to the chase with an innocent-looking wall sculpture that looks almost like a jigsaw puzzle; it has the world's land masses squeezed into the shape of the United States. It is a satire of American cultural and political domination; to complete the puzzle, and make world unity, Mr. Opdyke is rather jokingly saying, other nations just need to "fit in."

For Mr. Opdyke, apparently, no subject is too sensitive. "Oil Empire" (2003), for instance, is a tangled mess of pipes in the shape of the United States; viewed from the side it also looks like a warship. It is an obvious theme for a political artist, maybe too obvious, but handled in such a way that even once you get the message of an empire of subterranean pipes feeding all edges of the country, you can still marvel at its ingenuity.

"All in the Same Boat" (2004) displays a greater density of thought. This clever, oddly mysterious sculpture consists of an engineering model of the sewerage system of a luxury cruise ship, complete with 900 little white toilets. Here the artist makes visible the ship's hidden infrastructure, pushing us to think about clandestine networks and systems of transmission.

We don't like to talk about human waste, let alone see it, or where it goes, which is probably why this sculpture is also a little unnerving. What are these floating pleasure palaces really pumping into the ocean? A ship this size would evidently contain more than 1,200 toilets, and so here political commentary gives way to environmental critique.

Ships are a popular metaphor in Mr. Opdyke's work. Perhaps his most important sculpture, not in the show, is

a model of an aircraft carrier decked out as a suburban mall. The piece, "USS Mall" (2003), is an arch, brainy satire of the domestic consumer economy as a kind of global war machine. And he's right, in a way, for political, cultural and military power tend to flow from economic might.

The museum hoped to include "USS Mall" in the exhibition, but was unable to borrow it from the owner, which is too bad.

Mr. Opdyke's one drawback as an artist is that there is often something a tad too obvious or direct about the political and social connections his works make. This can make them seem moralizing, or repetitive. But it's hard not to be charmed by his bold, even foolhardy willingness to sail into all kinds of choppy waters without the least fear of capsizing.

"David Opdyke: 2004 Aldrich Emerging Artist Award Exhibition" is at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, Conn., through Jan. 5. Information: (203).438-4519.