

# MINIATURE THE SCULPTURES OF DAVID OPDYKE MONUMENTS

David Opdyke (born in 1969 in Schenectady, right around the time that upstate New York manufacturing township began precipitously downsizing its industrial base) first studied industrial design at the University of Cincinnati, but soon gave that up ("Too dry, too much like algebra") for painting, which, so he says, he subsequently gave up as well because, "Painting was too open-ended, you could tunnel into a canvas and never come out." Wood and nail and hammer, he avers, are "more grounded, there are only so many ways you can put things together." Though to watch him *do* so, across a masterful series of recent shows at Roebing Hall and the BravinLee gallery in New York's Chelsea district, one begins to wonder whether here, too, the young Brooklyn-based artist isn't still facing a certain pronounced tunneling-in-and-never-coming-out peril. For the gallery-goer, on the other hand, the attendant sense of vertigo, simultaneously harrowing and delicious, has been well-nigh revelatory.

To sit in Opdyke's fourth-floor walk-up studio loft, shared with his architect wife and their two-year-old son (it's across the street from America's premier fortune cookie factory!), and hear him tell it, the trenchant political focus of his current work was slow in coming. Before 2000, he suggests, as was the case with many of

his young contemporaries, "It was all about the Internet and virtuality and people making money, and the jerk next door lucking into that dot-com fortune." But starting with the 2000 presidential elections ("That whole mess in Florida!"), and then the dot-com crash and the more literal crashes of 9/11, and all their scarily bourgeoning progeny in the months thereafter, the world itself, the actual world, came hurtling back into his purview, with a vengeance, and—with wood and hammer and Styrofoam and nails and glue—he began trying to fashion a response, or even just to gain some purchase on an understanding. Nowadays he describes himself as an NPR junkie, and indeed the upwelling news seems to inform and intubate, sluicing and congealing through almost all of his current production.

Take *Projecting Power*, from 2003, a material cloud, an asteroid swarm, or, no—looked at more closely (and Opdyke's works do draw us in)—a bevy of miniature antennas (fashioned out of sliced Ping-Pong balls) hovering there in midspace, eerily surveillant, keeping everything firmly under control (which is to say in thrall to an impervious imperial shadow). Or, more recently, 2006's ink drawing of *The One*, a 46 x 35 inch blowup of George Washington's iconic face, fresh from a dollar bill, only, on second glance, not that at all: in fact, looked at more closely, stern Mr. Washington dissolves into a virtual hurricane of consumer culture (talk about the eye of the storm), from sofas to barbecues to vacuum cleaners to TVs to leaf blowers to lawn mowers. ("Those were the weeks when you'd be likely to hear my kid cry out, 'Where's my bike? Where's my wagon?' and he'd be directed back to my workspace, where I'd commandeered all his things for models.")

Or, arguably most telling of all, 2006's astonishing bas-relief *Greenback*, the massively rendered corner of a dollar bill, hanging there, blandly, blankly ridiculous, 82 x 64 inches (and 5 inches thick), over on that distant wall—yeah, so what, no big deal—that is, until you got closer, and closer still, and realized that the whole thing had been painstakingly fashioned out of hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of infinitesimal toy soldiers and tanks and troop carriers and jeeps and cannons and hospital tents and sandbags and ammo dumps: the desert bivouac to end all desert bivouacs, the mother of all imperial bases. Damn thing took him a full year to assemble, Christmas to Christmas, limb by limb, soldier by soldier (courtesy of a truly bizarre German mail-order catalog). "At first," he says, "they were individuals, and then I began to think of them as little groupings, miniature monumental sculptures, but eventually they became more like just so many pipes and fittings." Much the same progression, one imagines, as has largely been the case with Rumsfeld himself.

"Crazy," he acknowledges. "Insane." He pauses, takes a breath, surveys his domain. "But in the end," he continues, "I just hope the craziness gets channeled into the work, precisely so that it doesn't seep out everywhere else."

—Lawrence Weschler











