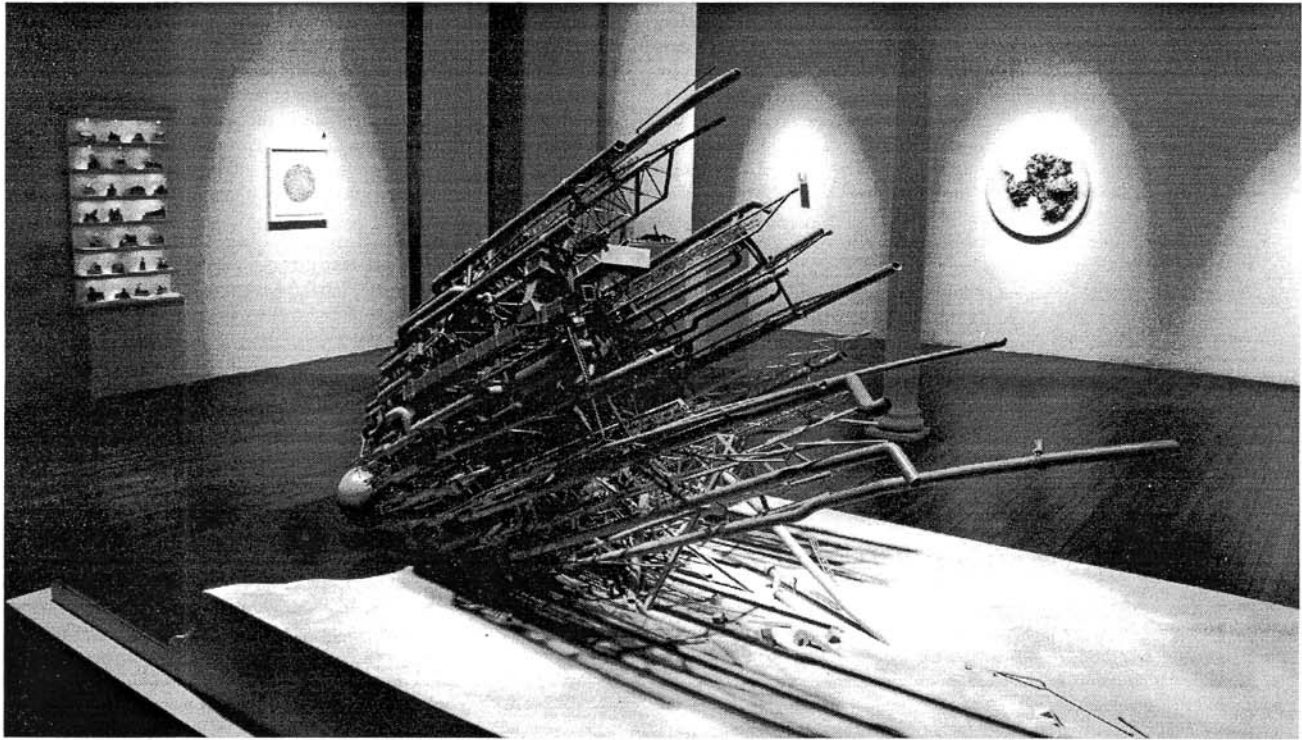


**IN CONVERSATION** David Opdyke WITH PHONG BUI

On the occasion of the sculptor's first one-person exhibit *Manifest Destination* at Ronald Feldman Gallery, which will be on view till October 11, 2008, David Opdyke paid a visit to the *Rail's* headquarters to talk with Publisher Phong Bui about his life and work.



View of the installation, *Manifest Destination* at Ronald Feldman Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery.

**Phong Bui:** I know that you are an NPR junkie, but is there a connection between your radio addiction and WGY-AM, one of the first commercial radio stations in the U.S., which was founded by GE (General Electric) in 1892, five years after Thomas Edison moved his Edison Machines Works to your hometown of Schenectady?

**David Opdyke:** Cool, I never thought of that connection, but yeah, WGY-AM still exists in Schenectady. My dad listens to it, but I'm more of a WNYC person.

**Rail:** Schenectady was also known as "the city that lights and hauls the world," which makes a dual reference to GE and ALCO (American Locomotive Company). It's the latter that I'm wondering about: if one is not aware of your background in painting and sculpture, one would think that, because of the kinetic and mechanically well-made nature of your works, you might have been trained in engineering or industrial design.

**Opdyke:** That's fairly accurate: I did intend to be an industrial designer, more out of the fear of poverty than anything else really. After the first year, I changed my interest to painting which I soon discovered as essentially limitless, totally opposite to the dry, rational confinement of industrial design. I mean you could just paint your way into the canvas and never come out, which was exciting, but I needed something to work against. A simple way to describe it is that if you have a piece of wood and some nails, there are ways you can put them together and ways you can't. You can invent other rules as you go along, and eventually you try to impose a set of rules on yourself—a very useful thing for me, otherwise I just go on forever.

**Rail:** So the three-dimensional works seemed to be more fitting, rather than the flatness of the canvases?

**Opdyke:** Well, lately I've been drawing quite a bit because I've gotten over my aversion to painting, though I approach it in the same way I do sculpture.

By that I mean they're made according to a limited set of rules. They're pretty much the opposite of automatic, lyrical, or any kind of drawing that embraces free associations, though recently I've found a bit of room for that stuff, too. In any case, I've learned to enjoy drawings for their own sake, as an indispensable activity.

**Rail:** Have you ever made drawings in preparation for a sculpture?

**Opdyke:** Not really, though there has once or twice been an idea generated by a drawing that fed right into a sculpture initially, but what and how it ends up in the end is always different. A sculpture requires a lot of planning and materials gathering and can take three or four months to make, but I could do a drawing in a few days to a week, depending on the complexity of the image, of course...

**Rail:** Such as the differences between the two drawings in the show, "Listening" and "Mini Storage"?

**Opdyke:** Exactly. With "Listening" it's more visceral and fluid because of the network of curved lines coming from around the viewer, the back and side, all three edges of the paper, all converging on these two points which look like some sort of outdated telephone switching devices or just simply mysterious objects. Those data banks and the chairs suggest a human presence that is either controlling or neglecting the whole abstract web. I was thinking about illegal wire-taps, Homeland Security, and how easy it is to be paranoid since September 11, 2001. "Mini Storage," on the other hand, is drawn in a non-perspectival space and on a grid-like structure. It's an accumulation of boxes, a study in building up forms from a small unit.

**Rail:** But tilted diagonally, the way the small piece "Diminishing Returns" is constructed.

**Opdyke:** Yeah. It's a way to activate that rectangular space. By putting the

row of trees with a small gap in the middle, it not only frustrates the viewer but also makes what is hidden behind more mysterious.

**Rail:** Let's go back to the beginning: I remember seeing your second one-person show in 2001 at Roebing Hall when it was in Williamsburg, which in some ways marked the beginning of your own visual semiotics of American democracy, accumulating various images and contexts that critique not only the dystopian view of suburbs or an urban environment of the U.S., but also the political power that dominates every aspect of the world. How did such subjects become a fascination for you?

**Opdyke:** After I graduated from the University of Cincinnati in 1992, I was trying to figure out a way to make art with materials I could afford, and by chance I stumbled upon Home Depot, which was a brand new thing. It stays open until 10 p.m. and had all sorts of cool materials that I could experiment with. I was so immersed in this new home-improvement commercial empire as it grew, and it got me thinking about notions of private property, the suburbs, everything that has to do with protecting your "utopian" home, especially mowing your lawn. A few years later, I moved to New York, which is a more naturally political environment: if you live here, you have to deal with other people. But it was the 2000 presidential election and the reports and commentaries on WNYC that made me a political person. I was fascinated with the red and blue map that supposedly divided the country into enemy territories. The election was really important, but it also seemed like the difference between your house being Republican and mine being Democrat was presented as just a choice of paint color or brand loyalty. And that was before purple had been invented. The absurdity of the whole thing led me to the piece "Taste Test 2000" (2001).

**Rail:** A recurrent motif in your work is an explicit overview of the suburbs, whether in the shape of the U.S. map as in "Taste Test 2000" or in the form of the carrier in "USS Mall" (2003). Could you describe your personal feeling on the suburb?

**Opdyke:** The other aspect of "Taste Test 2000" is the map of the country as an endless suburb riddled with looping cul-de-sacs, with the Red and Blue represented by Coca-Cola and Pepsi logos. For me the suburb fits into my fascination with big, over-extended ideas, in this case the American dream: the promise to give everybody their own house and make it easy for them to drive to the mall, which works to create an environment ideal only for shopping. To impose that ideology on the rest of the world is absurd. September 11<sup>th</sup> intensified my political awareness and increased the risks for those big ideas. I, like the rest of us, started to pay attention to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and world politics as a whole. We had been throwing our weight around for a long time, making a mess, and it was coming back at us.

**Rail:** It's frightening to think that there is an inevitable tie between suburban culture and consumer culture, just as in the relationship between consumer culture and political power. How do you perceive or allow that overlapping to occur in your work?

**Opdyke:** There's always a balancing act between using key events referring to a specific date and time, and the artistic liberty I can employ in my work. I try to stay on top of what's going on in the world, and I listen to the radio constantly. At the same time, I don't want my work to be tied to yesterday's headline. "Ownership Society," a drawing I made in 2005, is named after a Bush administration catch-phrase, which means that we want everyone to own their health care, their retirement, and their mortgage as individuals. Ownership society is wonderful, except that once you buy into it, if it doesn't work, it's your problem. We are not covering your ass for anything.

And it seems that whatever we do here domestically is connected with what we do abroad. What I was trying to do with this work is based on my own response and critique of the endless pretensions of the "Empire," the indispensable nationhood that has been thrown around for a very, very long time.

**Rail:** Since the Roman Empire, for sure. In any case I thought the piece "Pre-Emptive Product Placement" (2003) was demonstrative of a good marriage between corporate America and its investment in war. It leads to "Unity (puzzle)" (2004), a piece of jigsaw-puzzle-like configuration, which squeezes other countries into the shape of the U.S. map. It's clearly a total satire on American culture and political domination. Is this a fair reading?

**Opdyke:** Yeah. "Pre-Emptive Product Placement" (2003) started with an interview I heard where someone suggested that bombing Afghanistan "back into the Stone Age" presented an opportunity. We could create a new society for them so they, like us, would want suburbs, malls, and SUVs. "Unity" came about after my son was born and someone gave him a U.S. map puzzle. I remembered the headline in a French newspaper after September 11<sup>th</sup> that

read "We are all Americans." It's sort of extending that into the absurdity of saying, "Oh yeah, we are all unified. Everybody's adopted the same mission." So I wondered: what if all the countries of the world could be crammed into our vision of reality in the form of a map?

**Rail:** Considering your interest in American culture and politics, it makes sense that the subject of environmental waste is part of the equation. This is clearly revealed in "Landslide" (2004) and "All in the Same Boat" (2004). What was the initial impulse behind these two pieces?

**Opdyke:** "Landslide" was originally a response to the political waste of the 2004 election and the idea of "battleground states," which I thought of as the landscape of the country fractured and broken by a massive earthquake. People talked about the country being literally split into parts, that the Blue states had become another country or maybe should join Canada. The other piece, "All in the Same Boat," came out of the idea of putting as many people as possible on a cruise ship and sending them out to the sea for fun. It's a brilliant idea, cramming so many people and so much food on a boat, very efficient. On the surface it looks very seductive and appealing; hidden below are all those rusted pipes and all the waste dumped into the sea. It's quite frightening actually.

**Rail:** Last year at Miami/Basel, you did a huge installation of 800+ paper airplanes hanging on a network of strings spelling out the word "ONE" from the U.S. dollar, reminiscent of "Aerial Assumptions" (2004). Could you talk more about how this body of work came about, in terms of the materials being very ephemeral compared to your other work?

**Opdyke:** "Aerial Assumptions" arose out of the show *American Paradigms* I did with Lane Twitchell at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in which I was offered their 30' x 50' x 45' high atrium to do an installation. A few years ago, I had made some mechanical sculptures that generated random phrases from politically-loaded language. Thinking of that, I began by cutting pages out of an Arabic-English English-Arabic dictionary and made paper airplanes hanging on two sets of intersecting and colliding strings in the form of sky-writing. The viewer can't read the entire thing from any given angle, but has to go upstairs and around in order to decode the entire message. Text one reads "Terror Network Insurgency, Threatening World Freedom, Risk to National Security." Text two, "Illegal Occupation Forces, Neo-Colonialist Ambition, Oil Companies Seek Profit." The idea is to have the text read like bombastic newspaper headlines or declarative phrases of politicians about the so-called "clash of civilizations." As for the Miami piece, called "APR," my wife Kimberlae came up with the idea: what is the American dollar built on? Credit. We get it in the mail every day: credit card offers, student loan consolidation offers, mortgage refinancing deals, and other junk. Anyway, I began to collect them all, blacked out all the names, and turned them into this fleet, a physical manifestation of the "credit crunch."

**Rail:** I know you had worked for twelve years as an architectural model-maker. That experience must have trained you to think logically, especially to work with computer graphics?

**Opdyke:** Absolutely. I learned a lot. Materials and skills from my job found their way into the studio, especially the notion of model-making itself. I'd be doing a different kind of work otherwise. I think that part of being an artist is to adapt to your immediate experience and environment.

**Rail:** Yeah, like a Vietnamese proverb that says, "If you live in a long tube, be thin; if you live in a barrel, be round." Adaptability is always an artist's greatest gift. In any case I always thought of your work having some affinity with Mark Lombardi, not pictorially but in terms of content. I mean what Mark did in his legible two-dimensional works, you do the same in three-dimensional forms. Were you aware of his work in the late 1990s?

**Opdyke:** Yes. I first saw it in a show we were in together at Roebing Hall. I met him, but only a few months before his death. I admire his vision of assembling reality, taking down real facts on index cards and other resources and turning them into a constellation of visual fields. I'm flattered that you think we have affinities; I suppose the difference, as you said, is while he takes the concrete and makes it abstract, I take the abstract absurdities and make them concrete.

**Rail:** How about the works of Chris Burden?

**Opdyke:** Great. Everything from his "Medusa's Head" to the vast cloud of little warships that I first saw in a group show called *Mechanika*, curated by Jan Riley at Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center in 1991; it all really blew me away. I attended a lecture that he gave, and everyone was asking him about getting shot and danger in art and he was like, I'm working with erector sets and dropping I-beams from the sky. He was very polite about it. Basically,

in the beam drop piece, he was proposing that you take the leftover girders, essential building blocks of the shiny black tower that had just been built, and just drop them into a pad of concrete and see what you end up with. It was brilliant, the idea of instant public sculpture.

**Rail:** How do you see your current show being different from the past ones?

**Opdyke:** I'm trying to make the works more subtle and less overt in their political content.

**Rail:** I notice that your familiar iconic images of the U.S. flag, maps, and so on are hardly present in this new body of work.

**Opdyke:** Perhaps by making the work less overtly political, it becomes even more political.

**Rail:** I feel that way in "Zenith," which is a skeleton of the lower part of a structure, whereas "Nadir" resembles the upper part in a form of a dome that has fallen off. Were they meant as one piece initially?

**Opdyke:** Yes, they started out as one piece, a monstrous, towering, overbearing capitol building type of structure. A generic government building, with that standard dome, windows at the top, the whole thing penetrated by industrial systems like food storage and oil processing, telecommunication and cell phone towers, and so on. But as a form it was too rigid, so I took the top off of it, rammed it into the bank of a river and made it as a second piece. They work much better as separate pieces.

**Rail:** They look like what's left of the tower of Babel.

**Opdyke:** That makes perfect sense, because there's all the cacophony of different systems trying to force things out of mere ambition, but in the end all communication just breaks down and the whole structure falls apart.

**Rail:** I was also struck by the shifting of scale between the monumental form of "Zenith" and "Nadir," and the small fragments in "Curio Failures," in which you put them in various pedestal-like configurations, in a cabinet, treat them preciously, therefore memorializing them to some extent.

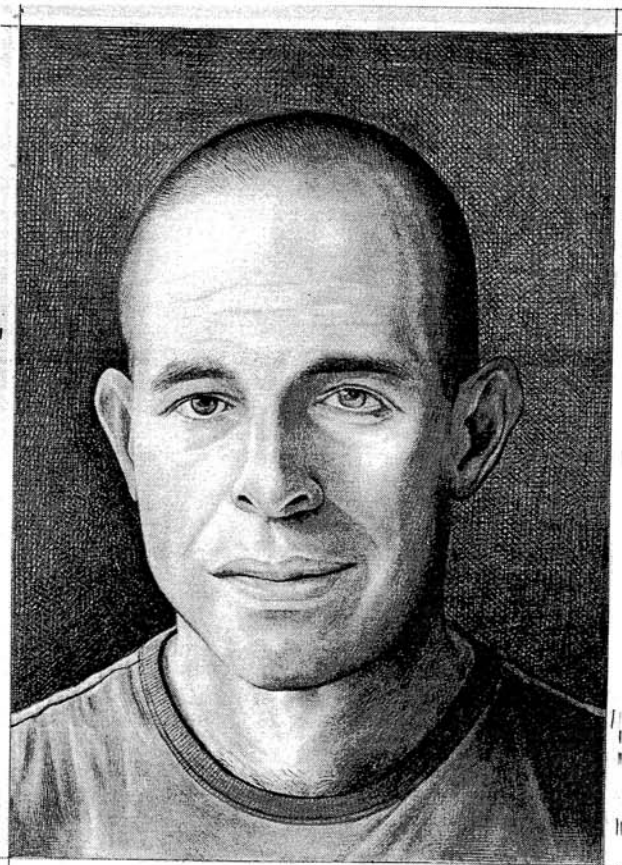
**Opdyke:** I had been doing some small wall-mounted works, which combine all kinds of objects and forms. For example, one has a businessman looking at an upside-down water tower with broken pipes, whatever. Some of the parts are actually from larger sculptures that didn't work out. I spread out all the leftovers on a big table and see what fits together. One day I thought that if I were to put them on pedestals they would be seen differently, it would give them an interesting sense of importance, like proposals for public sculptures. I painted them flat neutral gray, which allows them to be a unified group, like a family. They're all failures in a way, and they're all monumentalized, but then to turn the tables and stick them in a curio cabinet I thought was really playing with scale and seeing how you can alter the viewer's perception of what they're looking at. The cabinet shelves can represent floors of a neglected museum or it can just be a piece of furniture that you have in your home.

**Rail:** How about the genesis of "Dredge"?

**Opdyke:** It was commissioned by the Addison gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, Andover, which in its founding collection has twenty-four wooden ship models, from the Mayflower all the way up to contemporary ones, all placed in elegant glass and mahogany cases. Anyway, the emphasis of the show was that each artist was asked to make a work in response to the collection. What I decided to do was to take the historical context and tweak it to make it relevant in a contemporary sense somehow. But of course, the subtext is all about wreck and ruin, about the sea floor and all these wonderful works of naval engineering sort of crumbling underneath. The Mayflower, the U.S.S. Ronald Reagan, the Missouri are all in there. The two cases are identical, the forms inside look very similar but they're not, like flawed mirror images. It was very intuitive, I just sort of played around with the idea of a terrarium or fake rocks in an aquarium: is this all submerged, is it a dried-up seabed, shouldn't the cases be filled with water? A lot of contradictory impulses bouncing around in my head. It was one of the first times in a while that I sort of broke out and just made a sculpture for its own sake, for its own forms, for its own internal organizational possibilities.

**Rail:** "Ebb and Flow" is painted with actual objects directly on the wall. Is this the first time you ever conceived in such a painterly and site-specific mode?

**Opdyke:** Yeah, and I'm glad it worked out. I always wanted to create an installation environment for the rest of the sculptures, and the far wall of the



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

first room was the right place for it. For me it was a way to get back to the map formations that I dealt with in my early work. But once I decided not to use the U.S. or any other maps as a perimeter, it then became a free form, self-generating chain of fragments that make up a sweeping gesture. The water actually started out as a backdrop like the way you see those beautiful contours of various shades of blue in a map. As far as the overall imagery is concerned, I'm trying to play around with the border between natural and industrial forms. In this case it is carved foam rocks and crashed cruise ship models blending to make islands.

**Rail:** One can say that they are smaller versions of "Dredge."

**Opdyke:** You can think of them in that way. Sure.

**Rail:** Unlike your previous works, which often have pronounced appearances of monolithic forms, be it a submarine, a carrier, or any other military references, which can be quite fierce in their presentation, this body of new work seems to me to suggest more of an aftermath!

**Opdyke:** Maybe I'm a bit self-conscious of the idea of the work having a very limited shelf life. I feel like some of the earlier work had a much simpler reading, whether it's a bomb shape with corporate logos, including innocuous ones like Kleenex and the Gap, or things like that. Sometimes those pieces seemed too specific in terms of time and space. I wanted to open up to new ways of making forms, which creates more possibilities for the work to have more resonances, different kinds of ways of reading it. Perhaps people would read more intuitively and have more questions about what was going on than with work that is too explicitly spelled out. Perhaps by implying the destruction instead of being declarative, the rest has to be imagined, and that can be very frightening. So you're right. As much as we're fearful of the aftermath, we've seen it in the past. But I don't think we've learned from it.

**Rail:** It's what Oswald Spengler referred to as being Faustian in his two-volume *The Decline of the West*, a modern Westerner who is a proud but tragic figure. According to his theory, we're now living in the wintertime of the Faustian civilization, though eighty-five years after the books were written, nothing has changed much.

**Opdyke:** Certainly not with imperial power. BR