

Going Postal: Nostalgia and Indignation in the Art of David Krueger
—Rachel Hooper

To enter David Krueger's room at CUE, you walk through the door of an old-fashioned post office. It was built from memory to replicate the building in the small town of Encinal, TX, where his grandmother served as postmaster. Krueger, born in 1953, vividly recalls traveling into town as a teenager. He would drive past the ranches of southwest Texas to pass the time watching his grandmother sort her neighbors' mail. Thus, the artist invites the viewer to step into his childhood and his nostalgia for a simpler, more innocent time. You can even faintly smell his grandmother's lavender perfume with which he has infused the cardboard he used to construct the installation.

But the devil's in the details of this reminiscence. Once inside, posters and stamps show graphic pictures of anthrax, children shot by assault rifles, the earth scorched by global warming, a denouncement of Fox News and George W. Bush crowned as an idiot king. The shock of stumbling on these disturbing emblems mirrors the artist's own sense that there is a "disconnect between the past 'ideal' and the loss of trust, privacy, and human rights that I see today."

Much like the artists Ed Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, Krueger's first installations were room-size tableaux, which viewers could peer into and see a psychologically charged scene laid out before them. He manipulates all of the senses in his installations, sometimes incorporating fans and scents to fully envelop the viewer in his world. His skillful multisensory illusionism and impact-driven image-making are the result of studying fine arts and painting as well as building installations as a preparator at Rice University Gallery in Houston, TX. An early work was *Bedtime Stories*, shown at the University of Houston in 1998. In this piece, viewers could look through blowing curtains into a bedroom window to see a figure hiding behind the furniture while the yelling and loud banging of a domestic dispute could be heard upstairs. It was what critic Claire Bishop calls a "dream scene," an installation where the viewers' senses are heightened, their experience intensified and their imaginations sent spinning by subconscious symbolism.

A turning point in the artist's work came in 2001 when he participated in a group show, *Street Wars*, that opened on September 15 at the ArtCar Museum in Houston. Although the exhibition was planned months before September 11, the political critiques it contained had an especially powerful sting after the traumatic events of that day. David Krueger was finishing his M.F.A. in painting at the University of Houston at the time, and his installation, *Shadow of Attrition*, focused on family secrets and the interpersonal, domestic wars between parents and their children. He built a 1950s-era sitting room with a table in front of a couch where lay a copy of his grandmother's memoirs in which she describes her father hitting her brother in the head so hard it killed him. Next to the book were letters that Krueger's mother and father had written to each other throughout their passionate and tumultuous relationship, during which they divorced and remarried each other three times.

During the run of the show, the FBI and Secret Service came to the University of Houston and interrogated the art department at length about the meaning and appropriateness of Krueger's work.

Having government agents question his artistic intentions made the artist feel censored and heightened his ire toward the ignorance and arrogance he saw in powerful people. He then expanded the examination of violent destruction in his artwork beyond meditations on domestic issues into more of an explicitly political social sculpture. In 2005, he was part of an exhibition at Commerce Street Artists Warehouse, an artist-run space in Houston. There, he presented gifts to the public wrapped in brightly colored paper with interlocking designs. Only upon closer inspection did one notice that the patterns on the paper were digitally constructed from overlapping photos that the artist found on the Internet of soldiers pointing guns at Iraqis, the corpses of civilian casualties of the Iraq war and the fire of exploding bombs. The effect was alarming.

Like his presents, the artist's post office also has a gut-wrenching message. But here, the interactive aspects of the art are taken even further. Like the 1960s Fluxus innovator Robert Watts, Krueger uses stamp machines to disseminate his ideas efficiently in the form of non-mailable stamps. One of his stamps can be purchased from a stamp machine for a dollar. The disturbing images on the stamps are thus a form of culture jamming, using the machinery of the government against its own policies. As the stamps are distributed, so is their message. The artist has said: "What can one person do to make a difference? My answer is, 'Speak up. Communicate in whatever way works best for you, one by one, like these little stamps slowly spreading their message.'"

The images of war, famine, pestilence and death on his postage traumatically sear themselves on our mind and, like the four horsemen of the apocalypse, seem to be harbingers of disaster. Yet Krueger remains hopeful. "I think everyone tries to forget or avoid aspects of life that upset or disturb them and most are more comfortable dealing with things that concern others and not themselves," he explains. "The truth is, however, that those things never go away unless they are addressed. We try to hide what is painful and stressful. I think by trying to break down that barrier, confronting one with a situation that they can identify with on a personal level has the potential to create positive change. It may not be apparent through my work, but at heart I am an optimist. The thing is you have to know the problem to change the problem."

David Krueger unflinchingly exposes us to truths we would rather not see, policies we would rather not acknowledge and wars we would rather not hear about. But it is not all doom and gloom. He involves people in the problems he sees around us as a first step toward creating a more inclusive, more just society. At a time when detached cynicism is the norm, he fearlessly makes art that genuinely seeks to change the outlook of those who see it and perhaps even the world, one person at a time.

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New Worlds (2007) and *Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes* (2008). In addition to writing essays for *SPOT* magazine, Hooper is currently acting as curator for an exhibition of Andy Warhol's photographs (August 2008) and an exhibition and fully-illustrated catalogue with the Center for Land Use Interpretation (January 2009), both at Blaffer Gallery.