

Chris Doyle

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San Jose museum explores underbelly in 'City Limits, City Life'

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A scene from Chris Doyle's video installation "Apocalypse Management"

In one of the most arresting pairings in the San Jose Museum of Art's new show, "City Limits, City Life," David Maisel's 2004 photograph "Oblivion, 15n"— an eerily serene aerial view of a highway-bisected metropolis, with an ominous black skyline — hangs next to Lordy Rodriguez's 2009 drawing "Internet 2.0"— a bright map of Silicon Valley with features renamed "GOOGLE RIDGE" and "JAVA PLATEAU."

"It's an interesting juxtaposition of urban sprawl," says Marja van der Loo, who makes her curatorial debut at the museum with this exhibition of 24 artworks drawn almost exclusively from its permanent collection. "In the Rodriguez, the topography has been reappropriated. It's imaginative, post-apocalyptic almost, but whimsical, too. And Maisel's photo is the literal truth of the landscape. We're more familiar with crop circles, fields, pictures of the Grand Canyon. But now you can go up in the air and see nothing but city as far as the eye reaches."

"City Limits, City Life" reaches wide across time and geography, presenting Robert A. Isaacs' 1968 view of Lego-like construction, "Ticky Tacky Houses in Daly City," alongside Jesse Kalisher's 1998 image of bustling legs, "Daily Commute in Rangoon, Burma."

There's Jack Fulton's sunny painting "Oakland, California," from 1977, and Louis Lozowick's cartoonish hand-colored Kodak Rapid print depicting a sleeping New York homeless man and an industrious squirrel, "In the Park, No Job!," from 1929. But the theme of the show, van der Loo says, is carefully focused: "Cities are cultural hubs, and arts and culture and businesses thrive there, and people strive to live in the city. But that all comes with an underbelly."

This theme hit hard in Chris Doyle's video installation "Apocalypse Management (Telling About Being One Being Living)," on loan from the Catharine Clark Gallery. In Doyle's projected digital drawings, "the view starts with a white field, and slowly a man appears, looking like he's sleeping," van der Loo says. "He's making a sound, maybe moaning, and then slowly we see the destruction of the city around him and he's being crushed by the city. Other people are being crushed by debris, there's a man impaled on a pole, a woman being buried in rubble. The animated panels move and the individuals struggle to no avail."

"It could be a natural disaster or a human-created catastrophe," she says. "I think a lot of people will relate to it, with choosing to stay in the city despite the inherent dangers." There is a charming side to the show, represented in Godfrey Frankel's photograph of New York kids cooling off in a fire hydrant's blast, and Walker Evans' surreptitiously shot image of two nuns on the subway from 1938, which van der Loo finds interesting given the ubiquitousness of phone cameras today.

But her favorite inclusions stir mixed feelings, as with Robert Schwartz's gouache on paper, "In the New Year," in which a gutted building spews rubble onto the streets. "The three people in the foreground are working, maybe the woman is lamenting," van der Loo says. "But if you look carefully, the man is watering flowers. It's this idea of hope. You don't feel the man is gullible, necessarily. It's more about persistence."