

ARTFORUM

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Erika Rothenberg ZOLLA/LIEBERMAN GALLERY

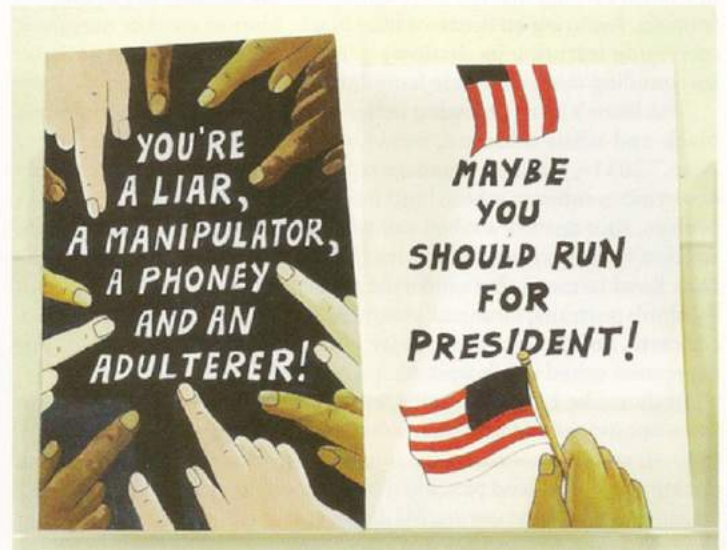
Since 1991, Erika Rothenberg has employed the form and generic sentimentality of the greeting card as a means of examining a vast range of social ills and political injustices. Rothenberg's cards, executed simply in gouache and watercolor, evidence the artist's active imagination and keen facility for satire, tackling themes (per the plaques that served to organize this exhibition) of "religion," "crime," "arts and culture," "sexual abuse," "abortion," "civil rights," "health," and "education"—in sharp contrast to the congratulations and well wishes one might expect. The resulting compositions of text and image, created over the course of twenty-five years, are a veritable anthology of poignant political truisms that delineate the persistent cultural discord that has long plagued the American social landscape. First exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1992 and recently offered up in an expanded compendium at Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, "House of Cards" affirmed the power of irony as an effective and vital instrument for cultural critique.

The paper cards were, for the most part, arranged on clear Plexiglass ledges that circumnavigated the gallery's walls. Unlike the tiered arrangement in a typical Hallmark display, in which cards are organized by theme in aisle-spanning blocks, the linear configuration of Rothenberg's cards suggested a perverse run-on sentence. The blue-and-white wall plaques mounted above the colorful string of witticisms, puns, and mocking sentiments gave a loose order to Rothenberg's topics of debate, while their self-consciously branded typeface introduced another layer of irony to the exhibition. On the entrance wall of the gallery hung a large graphic from 1992, which takes the generic shape of a house. This contour contains the work's title: *House of Cards*. The *H* in *House* is also capped with a rooflike motif, essentially creating a logo that was carried throughout the exhibition's didactics within the first letter of a word in each plaque. While all of Rothenberg's cards are provocative, they vary in design and visual complexity. Paint handling, color, and pictorial activation are ornately seductive in a velvety black card citing the fact that "blacks who kill whites are twenty-two times more likely to get the death penalty as whites who kill blacks." An accurately rendered gavel and pink flowers encircle the text, while the adjacent panel depicts a prison window that lets in a sliver of blue sky above a note card that reads SORRY.

In the cards that were on view, Rothenberg is especially disparaging of religion. For example, one composition sports a brown barren land-

scape snaked with a road and a tiny yellow car. A giant blob-like head floats in the sky above. Hurling from the figure's mouth are the words A MESSAGE FROM GOD. The next composition reveals the yellow car plummeting off a cliff with the head continuing, YOUR PRAYERS CANNOT BE ANSWERED RIGHT NOW . . . PLEASE TRY AGAIN! An adjacent card pokes fun at television ministry. And yet another depicts a close-up rendering of a priest's collar with the script DEAR FATHER followed by an imageless sheet of paper disclosing in small text, STOP TOUCHING ME. Rothenberg's ironic appropriation and detouring of vernacular signage and the commercial greeting-card industry has been relentless. She is a harsh social critic with a facility for imagemaking, language, and design. Far from its comfortable home on Comedy Central or in *The Onion*, irony in Rothenberg's hands is a barbed political weapon, and she wields it to underscore the very real injustices she observes in daily life.

—Michelle Grabner



Erika Rothenberg. *House of Cards* (detail), 1992/2015.