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## Los Angeles Times

**Review** What to see in L.A. galleries: Hot-button greeting cards, mesmerizing photograms  
By Leah Ollman

Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush were vying for the presidency in summer 1992 when Erika Rothenberg's satirical greeting cards were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. You're bound to do a double-take at that date when you step into the Charlie James Gallery in L.A.'s Chinatown, where the MoMA exhibition "House of Cards" has been reprised. The cover of the first card on the rack that wraps around the room shows hands of assorted colors pointing to the words "You're a Liar, a Manipulator, a Phoney and an Adulterer!" Inside, American flags flutter around the follow-up: "Maybe you should run for president!"



Erika Rothenberg's "Hey Boss" (detail), gouache and ink on paper, 1992. (Erika Rothenberg / Charlie James Gallery)

The relevance of these works today is good news and bad news, a testament to Rothenberg's astuteness. Rothenberg addresses aspects of sexual and racial discrimination, poverty, abuse, ignorance and intolerance that are specific to the moment of the works' creation — and turn out to be disarmingly timeless. None of the 80 or so searingly funny greeting cards requires historical context to be decoded 25 years later. Those same hot buttons remain as hot as ever.

As in a greeting card store, these small paintings in ink and gouache are arranged by category, though most of the headings read more like debate topics (the economy, abortion, civil rights). "Sympathy" is perhaps the only familiar category, but Rothenberg uses it for condolences of a different order. "Sorry about the unusually high rate of cancer in your neighborhood," reads a

card illustrated with a cloud of grimy factory exhaust that repeats over silhouetted houses. Other cards tender apologies for the disproportionate rate of death sentences handed to black people, and for swastikas painted on synagogues.

Based in L.A. and long ago an art director for an advertising agency, Rothenberg knows how to boil down a message to its essence, verbally and visually. Her words are concise and her graphics relatively simple, emblematic. Both serve the darkly absurd and sardonic. "People in poor countries are so lucky!" she writes, in a pseudo-primitive script, next to an image of emaciated, brown-skinned women. "They don't have to go on diets!" In another card, a woman in a skirt suit climbs a ladder beneath the words, "Hey Boss, it's ADVANCEMENT I'm after ..." And in the

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second frame, a man a few rungs below her gropes her rear, and the message concludes, "not ADVANCES!"

Rothenberg has made a practice of appropriating ordinary tools of communication and persuasion, inverting and subverting the content that passes through them. Prior to creating greeting cards, she developed a marketing campaign for Morally Superior Products (1980-90). Her ongoing re-creations of church signboards are brilliantly pithy, listing nightly meetings for the addicted, abused, traumatized, jobless, homeless and hungry, directly above the title of the week's sermon, invariably proclaiming America's greatness.

Rothenberg belongs to a long line of social satirists spearing the status quo. Among her closer relatives are Barbara Kruger and the Guerrilla Girls, cartoonist Roz Chast (herself a master of the barbed greeting card) and Stephen Colbert. Her work induces cringes, queasy laughter and sighs of every stripe — pain, shame, outrage. These are greeting cards that will never be sent, but they demand to be seen, and their messages received.