

# The Bright Side of the End of the World

By John E. Mitchell



NORTH ADAMS -- Every cloud has a silver lining, so the story goes -- but does every earthquake, typhoon or financial meltdown?

Artist Chris Doyle thinks so, despite the horror and misfortune wrought from any of those scenarios. Doyle's animated installation at Mass MoCA, "Apocalypse Management" (telling about being one being living), addresses the nature of disaster in the behavior of human beings. His work is part of "These Days: Elegies For Modern Times," which opens at the museum on Saturday, April 4.

Doyle's work is a sprawling tapestry portraying the end of the world. Projected onto a large screen, his vision splits the doom into two frames, each sliding along to reveal a vista not only of horror, but also of humankind fighting to overcome that which threatens to destroy them. Referencing painters like Hieronymus Bosch -- thus pulling from our collective memory of what an apocalypse looks like -- Doyle updates the parade of marauding cockroaches and beasties to an urban setting that we can all identify.

For Doyle, the whole thing began on Sept. 11, 2001. "It's hard for me not to trace it back to the experience of sitting on a couch as if it were theater and watching the towers fall," he said. "The scale of that disaster and the scale of the rubble was just not something that I was ever eyewitness to."

Not only did the grim spectacle outside his window change his view of the space around him, it also altered the way he reacted to similar misfortune around the globe. The experience made the world seem smaller via disaster. "That experience changed my approach," Doyle said. "It feels less hands-off and more real to me, so when I see images of an earthquake in China, there's a visceral quality to it that probably wouldn't have been the same pre 9-11."

The collapse of the towers brought about a form of artistic post traumatic stress syndrome in which Doyle began -- along with the rest of the country -- processing the visuals he had taken in over an extended period of time. This brain function manifests itself in different forms -- in Doyle's case, his artwork -- and also brings to mind connections with other media that create a perception that danger is everywhere.

"After September 11, I was much more sensitive to the disasters which, in combination with the Internet, made it seem for a while like they were relentless," he said. "When you add the number of wars that have been popping up globally to the number of natural disasters that have been popping up, the news cycle tightens, and there's no space between. We move from our experience in the media from one disaster to the next to the next. I had this sense of them being a kind of panorama. If you think of the news cycle as being spread out spatially, they start to panorama from all around us."

In this way, the saturation of information systems -- especially online and other news media -- affect our perception of the world. As our psychological space changes, so does our physical space, and perception itself creates a false momentum in stress, moving any situation further along at a faster rate.

"Information can create a heightened sense of emergency that people are not feeling yet and bring it closer and faster," Doyle said. "I was getting my hair cut the other day, and the person cutting my hair said, 'I don't think the economy is as bad as they say right now, from my own personal experience, but I definitely feel scared because everyone is telling me that I should be.' I thought that maybe it just speeds up the cycle, that maybe we're just in the first year or two of something longer, and it feels like it's right on us."

Doyle is fascinated by the way technology creates our physical space by commandeering our psychological one and creating our perspective, particularly regarding the Internet. He points to the Iraq War as a perfect example -- Europe had a more open flow of negative war imagery from the conflict than the United States did. This visual information -- and the immediacy with which it was available to Europeans who knew it was out there online -- helped create the line in the sand in regard to worldwide perception of the war.

This was part of the realization that sent Doyle on the creative journey that has culminated in the work at Mass MoCA. He initially began looking at Flickr to see this kind of outlaw photojournalism.

"That changed the space around me. It's like the weather," he said. "You forget that your experience in life is this bubble that you're walking around in, shaped by what you let in. The idea of being on a vacation where the media doesn't get to you, it feels like a bit of a release because the bubble changes. It's a horizon that you create for yourself because everything looks different."

Doyle began searching Flickr for photos of disasters, which he began to use as backdrops for his animations. Using actors, he began filming -- and, then, transferring to animation through a rotoscoping process -- the actions of humans fighting to survive in the disaster portrayed. With these video loops, he replicates what he terms "Sisyphus-like quality to the characters" -- and of humankind itself, as it builds and rebuilds in a cycle of destruction.

"It's this entropy, this constant return to this state of chaos," he said. "We build it back up and it gets knocked down. It's horrifying what happens in all these things, but the cycle is somehow reassuring. It's not always easy to take something positive out of all of this stuff, but I am reminded of being connected to larger cycles where this stuff happens. It has this natural flow between entropy and order."

For Doyle, it seems that chaos actually offers some surety, and entropy creates a situation for humankind to persevere with-in. Amidst his images of the apocalypse, this is a great positive to him, an assurance that it's not all just a scattered mess chaotically tumbling to the earth. In Doyle's view, humans aren't just shell-shocked victims but actually relentless fighters -- and earth-shattering disasters may actually be natural organizers and even community-builders.

"For me, it comes from the idea that these buildings fall down all the time, and the clean-up, the level of order required, is constantly shifting between order and entropy, complete chaos," he said. "There's this funny human thing about starting with chaos and sifting through it and putting it in order -- this management brain -- yet some of the people who feel so orderly have this other part of their personality where they embrace the wildly religious. I'm always attracted to that duality."

The buzzword for the last election was "hope" -- according to Doyle, that may well be the mantra of human survival and togetherness, a reason to overcome even the ugliest of events and the most media-manipulated fears. "There's a period when people feel very despairing and there isn't a lot of hope," he said. "I feel like all of that resilience comes from a change, a moment where people decide grief is not going to work, and suddenly they go into resilient mode and they start to clean up and do what they used to do, which is quite industrious."

"People have asked me if I saw something hopeful in all this. More than anything, there is this human persistence and perseverance, and in all of my projects, it's about this ambition and trying, trying, trying."

Chris Doyle can be found online at [chrisdoylestudio.com](http://chrisdoylestudio.com).