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Museum series depicts future states Exhibit plays on U.S. foreign policy measures

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While politics is fresh on the minds of many Americans, Knoxvilleians are being presented with an interesting opportunity to explore U.S. foreign policy through art.

Pennsylvania mixed-media artist Dan Mills has used his drawing skills to explore the issues of American imperialism and globalization through a series called "Future States Atlas," which opened at the University of Tennessee's Downtown Gallery on Friday and shows through Oct. 8.

"The exhibit is like a really sophisticated game of Risk," said Downtown Gallery Manager Mike C. Berry.

The project started out in early 2003 as an investigation into the ways U.S. leaders were negotiating and interacting with the world at the time, particularly the country's policy of military pre-emption.

"It became apparent upon further examination that, if you just take those ideas and pushed them a little further, you can justify about anything," Mills said.

The result is a series that humorously depicts 35 maps, which are complete with detailed explanations of a range of motives and rationales for the U.S. taking over any number of countries. Motives include everything from natural resources to "payback."

Mills describes the work as humor as a form of critique, a description that held up well for many who attended the show's opening on Friday.

"There is a very funny side to it," said Lindsey Scott, a native of Edinburgh, Scotland, who attended the opening. "But there is a scary undercurrent at work. Underlying that humorous side are some serious issues."

Though Mills has been showing portions of the series since early 2004, Friday's opening marks the first time the exhibit has been shown in its entirety all in one room.

Though criticism of the Bush doctrine of pre-emption is apparent in the tone of the accompanying text, the work is more sophisticated than surly, said Mills.

"The country is certainly quite interested in the political and economic climate," Mills said. "But I think that, as a body of work, the series is provocative but not in a provoking way. There's no finger wagging."