

Micah Lexier

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Crossovers

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Gallery DODO may be one of the smallest, grungiest, most hidden galleries in the UK. You'll need to climb three flights of stairs in the backside of Brighton studio complex Phoenix; it is locked most of the time. Access is gained by sending a DM to the directors and one of them will open it up for you. The space, limited to a two-metre-squared box, is cold, stark, with exposed breeze blocks, and features a badly cracked window.

This is the setting for "The Postcard Show," an exhibition for which more than two dozen artists were asked to simply respond with a postcard. In their hands, the premise of an anachronistic travel souvenir has resulted in a gallery full of artworks that have travelled without the help of courier, handler or insurer. The small-scale canvas has provided a spur to critical thinking and artistic expression.

In the centre of the near-clandestine gallery is a work by Micah Lexier. Before now, many of this artist's materials and displays have been salubrious and more visible. He is a familiar sight in Toronto, where he has produced public works with laser-cut stainless steel, glazed bricks, handmade ceramics, custom-printed tiles and water-jet cut aluminum. In Paris, he has worked in virtually modelled forms; and in Calgary he has employed aluminum tiles coated in bronze. Perhaps his most opulent work to date is a series of eight custom-made light boxes for the Louis Vuitton Maison, also in Toronto.



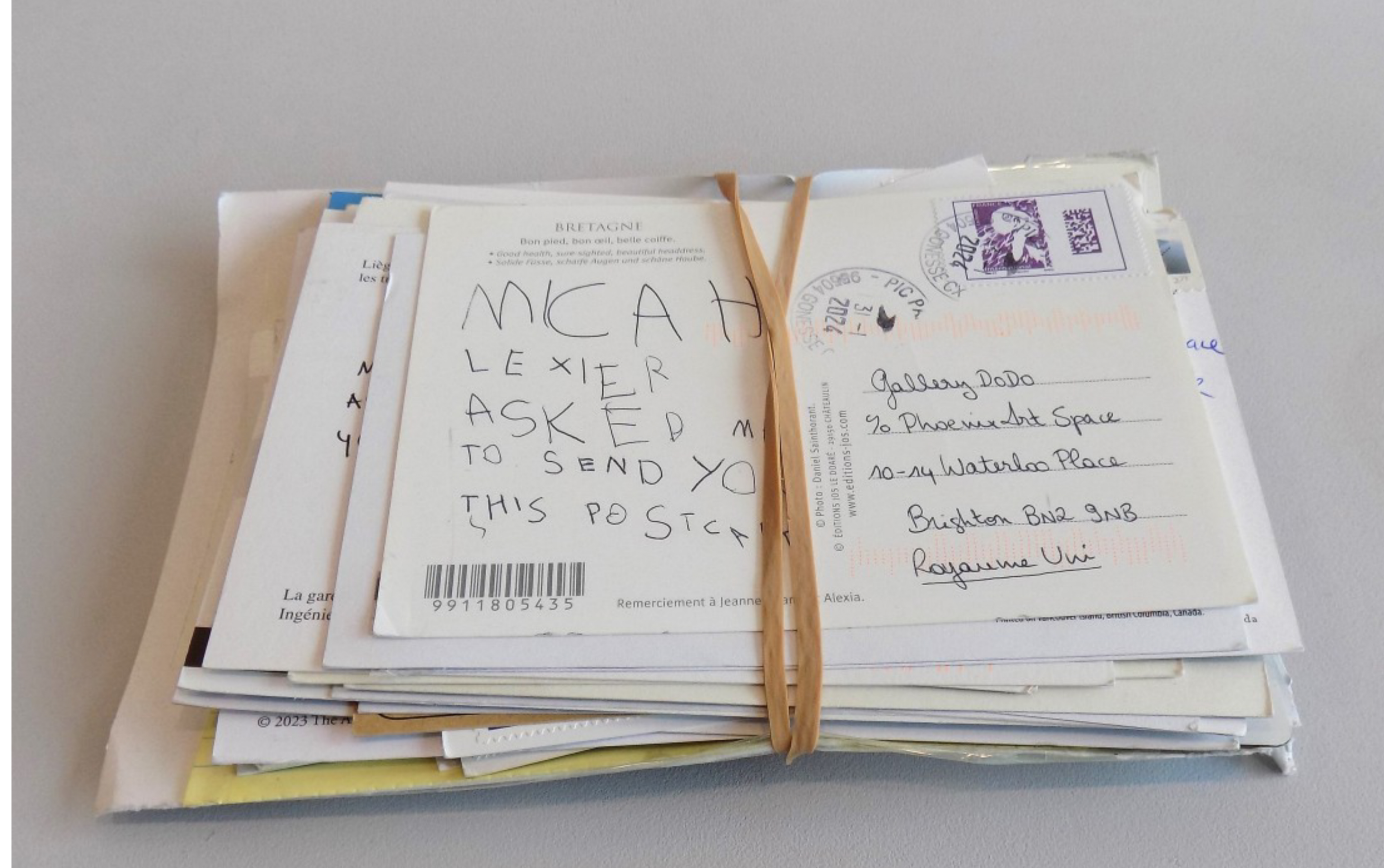
Micah Lexier, installation view, "The Postcard Show," 2024, Phoenix Art Space, Brighton, England. Courtesy the artist.

Such settings and installations are a world away from the unadorned plinth in the middle of a back room where his current work is stacking up without fabricators, technicians, funders, clients or city authorities. But the project at DODO is not without third-party stakeholders—far from it. It is entirely comprised of materials and activities supplied by Lexier's social media circle. The work boils down to a written appeal issued on Instagram; but it is manifest in more than 350 picture postcards, in an overwhelming supplement to those already sent in by invited artists. By bringing his social media circle into the show, he has blurred the line between artist and civilian in a satisfying way.

They have been multiplying day by day as the show proceeds, via a process as involved as anything Lexier has done in a civic space. This is the work of a small army: each participant has chosen a view, found a stamp, copied the address of the gallery and made it to a postbox. The greeting on each reverse side, stipulated by the artist, is merely: "Micah Lexier asked me to send you this postcard."

Co-director/curator/invigilator Jon Carritt shows me into the space, leaving me alone in the bare cell to contemplate the outcome of Lexier's call to action. My first impression is that 300 postcards are quite voluminous, and in order to take a closer look I have to handle the artwork. A pair of white gloves would be out of place in this abject space, but I can't help but feel some reverence. Despite the constraints of the rule and the wording he has imposed, there is still a sense of breached intimacy. This is reading someone else's mail.

There are at present four stacks, comprised of some dozen bundles contained in brown elastic bands issued by the post office. And given that the work has between 300 and 400 elements, the sight is daunting for an art writer. The missives are reverse-face up. On the left-hand panel of each is the text. On the right is the gallery address and, usually, a stamp. Because postcards are both familiar and surprising objects, one never knows what to expect from the photographic side. Lexier has requested local tourist attractions. But there are also photos of artworks, of famous personages and dated scenes of bygone life around the world. The collection features the occasional lenticular image, the occasional homemade artwork, or the occasional collage.



Micah Lexier, installation view, "The Postcard Show," 2024, Phoenix Art Space, Brighton, England. Courtesy the artist.

More than two dozen artists have posted their work to Phoenix. They include, along with Lexier, big names like Jonathan Monk, Ryan Gander and Fiona Banner. Given the value, cultural and financial, of the items sent in, the project is fraught with risk. The Canadian artist has spread his bets, but his risks were still plenty. Perhaps no one would respond to his call-out. Perhaps the product would look underwhelming. Perhaps his instructions would be rejected or contravened.

There's an anecdote about the rock band Mothers of Invention. When just 10 audience members turned up for a gig at the Garrick Theater in New York, Frank Zappa simply gave them the instruments and put them on stage, and the band took their place in the stalls. (I found this tale in *Conceptual Art* by Tony Godfrey, a useful tome for thinking about Lexier.)

The generosity with which this visual artist has invited his audience onto the stage, or the plinth, was matched by the effort, thought, creativity and delivery of his allies on Instagram. So many have clearly enjoyed the chance to co-curate: choosing imaginative, apt postcards, interesting stamps, careful, contrived lettering and sometimes making their very own postcards from scratch. The parameter—"Micah Lexier asked me ..."—proved a great spur to action. The paradox, that he asked me to send "this" postcard—as in, *this very postcard*, which he could not possibly have anticipated—is a delicious irony.

Sifting through these at the sorting office, or on his or her rounds, the great British postal worker would have twigged that something artistic was afoot. I spoke to artist and former Brighton postie Nick Davies about likely attitudes to this mail art and he said of his typical former colleagues on Royal Mail: "If they're getting 20 or 30 postcards a day for Phoenix, they would definitely have a conversation. The table at the depot would be banter central... I think Micah's work is brilliant for the quirkiness of what it does to the postal service."

While most of the cards do show tourist attractions, some are sepia, some are dated. And while every postcard is anonymous, another trope that emerges from Lexier's project is that influential but not necessarily household-name artists are often referenced. There are images of work by Wayne Thiebaud, Glenn Ligon and Joseph Cornell. There are stamps to commemorate Frida Kahlo, Roy Lichtenstein and Joseph Beuys. The most fitting card "on display" refers the viewer to the ultimate found object, Marcel Duchamp's bottle rack.

Conceptual art, in which the idea is above everything, seems always to get rematerialized in the form of a prized letter, index card, drawing, or *objet trouvé*. The material trace of this post-conceptual artwork in Brighton, with its effusion of goodwill and creativity, is an entire archive. With its origins in the digital realm, this evolving work has entered the so-called real world in a big way, offering a survey of some of the planet's most notable sights, and then dematerialized again; many of the participants also posted photos of themselves posting their cards, online.

Lexier's project is therefore both a performance piece and a kinetic sculpture, in that it is changing (still!) over time. In a "me!" world, where merely signing a petition to protest against another A&E closure can seem like much too much futile effort, here is proof that given a clear positive aim, People Power is the real thing. This work, a monument to collective action, can inspire wonder as surely as the hundreds of starlings that flock en masse over the waters before roosting on the pier here in Brighton. They, too, appear on postcards. If you spot one, you'll know where and how to send it. ■

"The Postcard Show" was exhibited at Gallery DODO, Phoenix Art Space, Brighton, from February 10, 2024, to March 24, 2024.

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