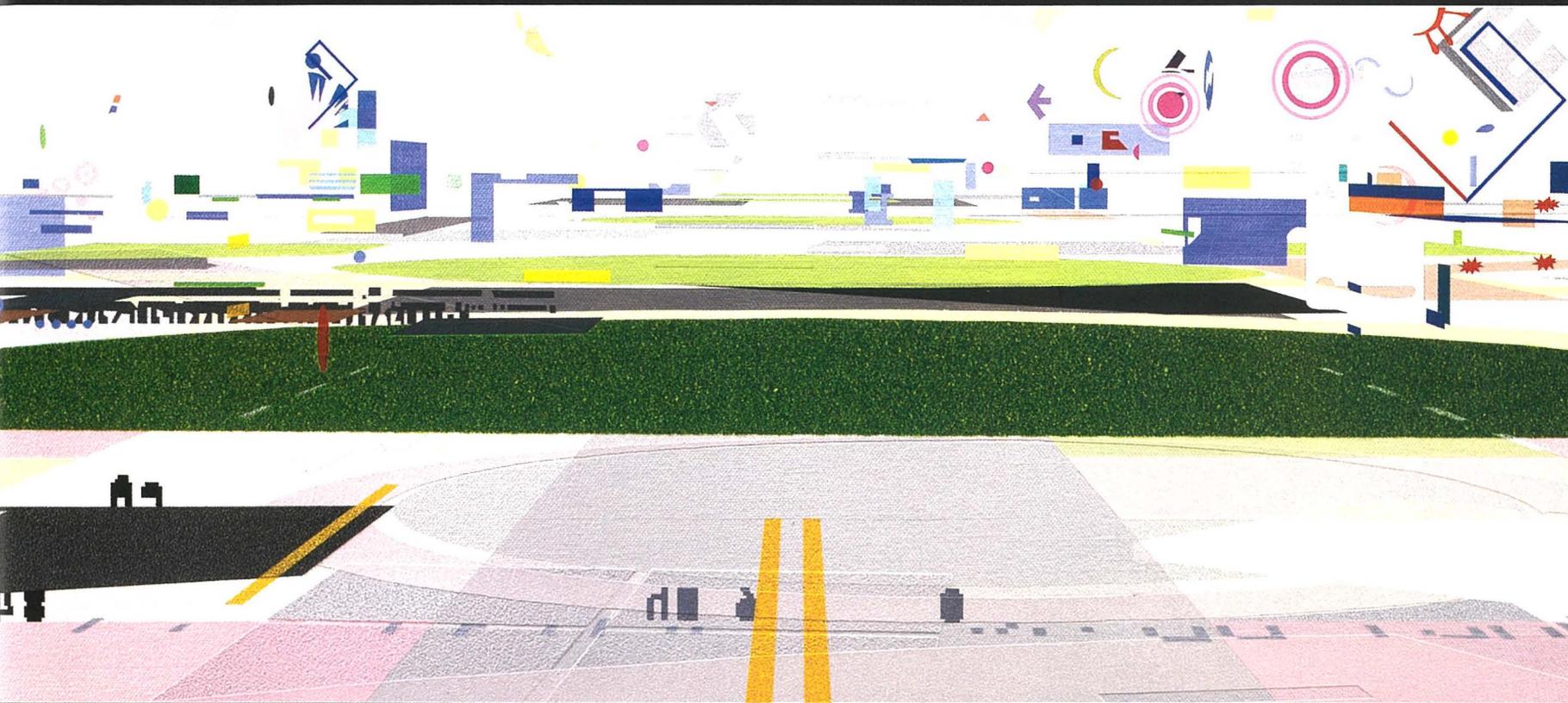


CUL-DE-SAC



ART FROM A SUBURBAN NATION

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Martin Gallery

September 14 – October 17, 2006

RADFORD UNIVERSITY
art 
museum

CUL-DE-SAC: ART FROM A SUBURBAN NATION

Suburbia has a long history in America. Beginning in the 1850s, wealthy people chose to move out of New York, Cincinnati, or Chicago where their fortunes were made, to newly laid out enclaves of large homes, each surrounded by an acre or two of land but with easy access to the city. Successive waves of suburban living have sought some ideal balance between the urban and the rural, as though American dreams for a better life could not be wholly contained in either.

Suburbia is to our day what the frontier was for historian Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s. Turner believed that pressures and conflicts in American society found an escape valve in the frontier, which was by definition always beyond the last development, and thus dynamic. As long as people could move further into virgin territory, they could avoid dealing with intractable problems and hope for a new start. Turner identified the frontier as a central feature of American society at the very moment he declared it at an end. Even if there was no frontier left by the 1890s, American mobility would continue to be remarked upon by foreign visitors for decades to come, and today people “upgrade” to ever larger houses in more expensive subdivisions. We’ve circled back to the enclaves of large houses on an acre of land of 150 years ago – although easy access to the city is no longer assured, or even necessary, as employment opportunities have followed people into the suburbs.

Suburbia was a middle-class phenomenon for only a relatively

brief period of time, peaking in the years immediately following the Second World War. At that time, the introduction of VA loans to returning soldiers and federal loan guarantees to home builders allowed developers to construct tens of thousands of affordable houses outside large cities. The Levittowns of Long Island and Pennsylvania are the most famous examples. Developers like the Levitts built only houses – it was up to the residents to build churches and schools, while highways and social services were dumped on local government (developers discouraged residents from incorporating as municipalities). These “bedroom communities” became the image that most Americans have of suburbia today. The all-white, middle-class, “Leave it to Beaver” suburbia didn’t last long, but it became an icon against which many people measured their own social standing. Michael Pollan has written: “In the ‘burbs you’ve got the house and the car and the lawn all working overtime to tell the world who you are.” The power of these surrogates is evidenced in the number of artworks here that depict no human presence.⁽¹⁾

Today, the lines increasingly blur between *urbs* and suburbs: If suburbia began as a retreat for the wealthy, today many working-class people live there. In the Washington, D.C. area, newly-arrived immigrants head straight for the suburbs, bypassing the nineteenth-century pattern of urban living by first-generation emigrés. Small towns see their working class population replaced by white collar professionals as America moves from an industrial to a service economy.

Population densities drop and automobile usage increases as long-established small towns evolve into bedroom communities for big cities. Simultaneously, suburban areas grow into independent commercial and employment centers. Tyson's Corner in northern Virginia is one of the most famous of these "Edge Cities."

The postwar boom in subdivisions coincided with the early years of television. Many TV shows in the 1960s and '70s were set in subdivisions, and both celebrated and helped to define what the suburbs should be. As one commentator has noted, your own family might be dysfunctional, but you assumed the family next door was enjoying a Dick Van Dyke life.

Some of the artists presented here were born to returning GI's in the 1950s. For the younger artists, the televised promise of suburbia seems mythic, to be treated with irony and humor. For them, the comfort of tradition – the image of fresh baked goods cooling on the window sill – is paired with a recognition of the irretrievable loss of bygone days (Lori Lorusso, *Still Missing*).

Represented here by Pete Baldes' *Driver*, Benjamin Edwards' *Approach and Immerse (South)*, and Kota Ezawa's *House*, the virtual space of the computer has multiple points of contact with suburbia. Both begin with a leveling of the ground, a return to the conceptual void of the Cartesian grid (Armin Mühsam, *Foundation 6*), then proceed to create utopias – ideal places that don't exist on one level or another.

There has been much discussion lately about the rise of social networks on the internet. Time spent in these "online communities" is time not spent interacting with the community in which one lives. The commonality among the online participants – shared enthusiasms for ever-narrower areas of interest – replaces true community with isolated individuals sitting at their computer screens.

Several of our artists betray a profound distrust of the contemporary urban / suburban scene. Wary of advertising, consumer culture, and corporate influence on mass media, these artists see big box retailers as the vanguard of barbarism (Edwards' *Hypothetical Strategy*), and our fixation with perfect lawns (Blue McRight, *Girl with Hose*) as an unwelcome diversion from addressing urgent environmental problems.

The artists presented here offer a variety of strategies for constructing a sense of place. Terri Bright and Mike Mergen aestheticize the banal by paying close attention to it. Richard Garrison and Steven Millar use land-use research and analysis to discern underlying patterns of development. Others emphasize memory (Patrick King), abstraction (Heather Deyling, Ezawa), and even subversion (Baldes). They are all attentive to how we choose to live out our lives in twenty-first century America. We do, after all, build these places.

Preston Thayer
Director
RU Art Museum

⁽¹⁾ Michael Pollan, "The Triumph of Burbopolis," *New York Times* (4/9/2000): SM51

Geoffrey Aronson

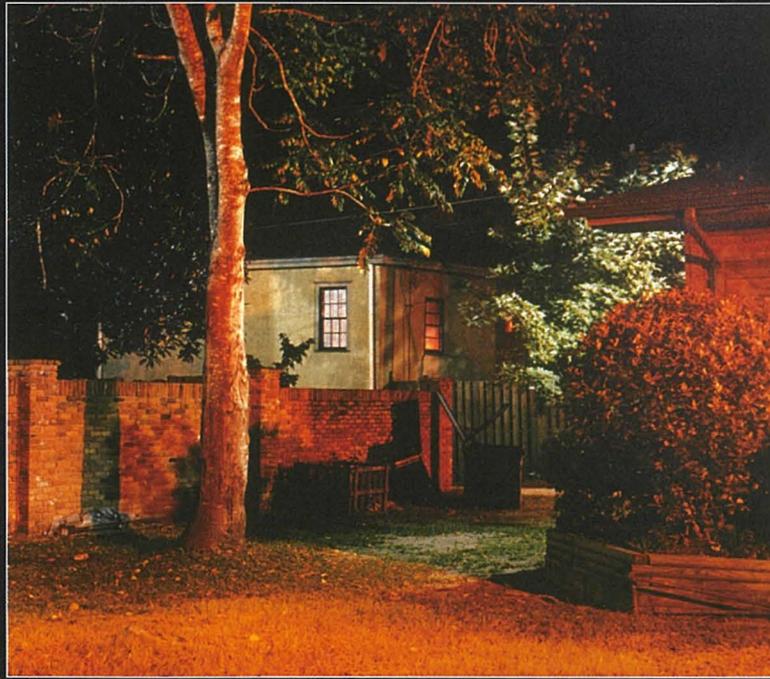
Merida, Mexico

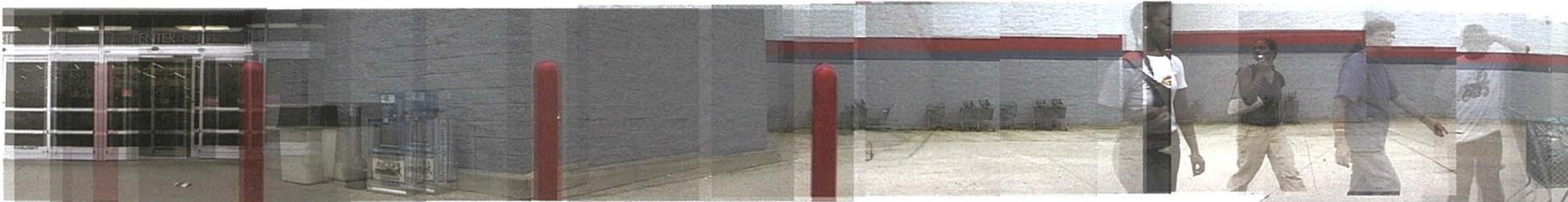
The surrealistic quality of color caused by long exposure of tungsten film and mixed lighting sources of unequal color temperature is the most important feature of my night photographs. The scenes become unsettling. The sense of some sort of covert psychic harm is undeniable. What is unclear is what exactly is endangered. The question becomes whether it is the plant forms or an as yet undisclosed

human presence about to enter the setting that is in greater danger. Clearly, these man-made edenic suburban settings are in harm's way from their own creators. Ours is a dangerous existence. We are threatened not only by natural elements and other species – we are the special "damned" for we are threatened by members of our own.

Van Baron's Favorite (1991) photograph 15" x 15"

Rio Lagartos, Mexico (2003) photograph 15" x 15"





Pete Baldes

Richmond, Virginia

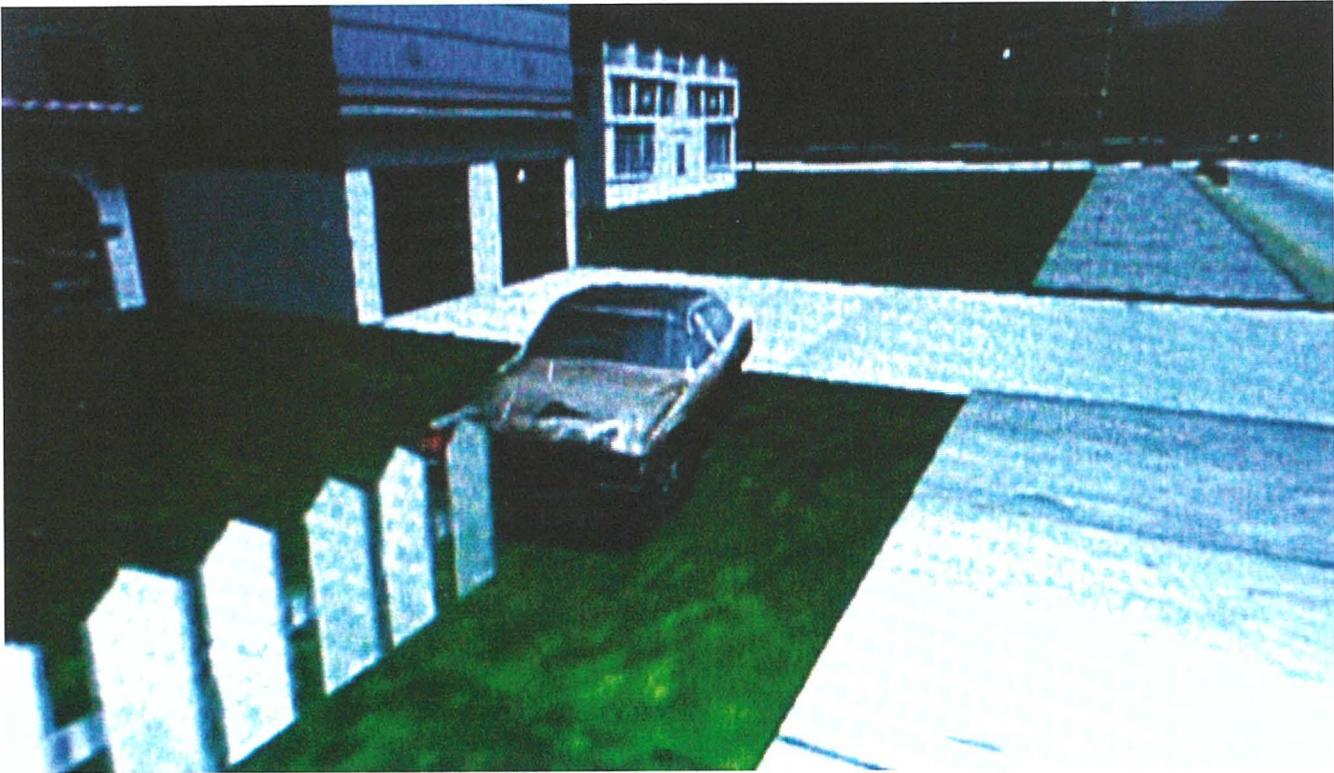
I play games with my work, literally and figuratively. In *Driver*, a single channel video piece, I am playing a video game (*Driver: You are the Wheelman*, Reflections/GT Interactive, 1999) but I have refused to “play the game.” I treat the game space as a place for exploration. I search for edges, for software glitches and for my own games to play, things to learn. I consider this a performance video, but rather than using my body in real space, I have found a space for social commentary within the structure of the game. Whether turning off gravity or running over the neighbors’ fence, people’s inhibitions and desires become visible through

how they interact with virtual spaces. “Almost Blue,” by Elvis Costello is the soundtrack: Almost me, almost you, almost reality ...

In *Walmart* I am playing a completely different type of game. I use the video camera to “scan” the front of a Wal-Mart store and then fracture the linear timeline into individual moments. These moments are then collaged together using Photoshop to create a new space, a new time. 4D becomes 2D. Each frame an individual point of view, just as I and all the customers walking in and out have our own points of view.

Walmart (2004) archival ink jet print collage 15" x 44"

Driver (2001) recording of videogame play 2 min. 36 sec.



Terri Bright

Greenville, South Carolina

I am a stranger in most of the places that I photograph. Whether I am in an unknown neighborhood or a foreign country, unfamiliarity breeds in me feelings of both discomfort (from being lost or alone) and excitement (the anticipation of exploration and discovery). The conflict between the disorder of my actual surroundings and my internal desire for pictorial order and beauty is the impetus for my current body of work.

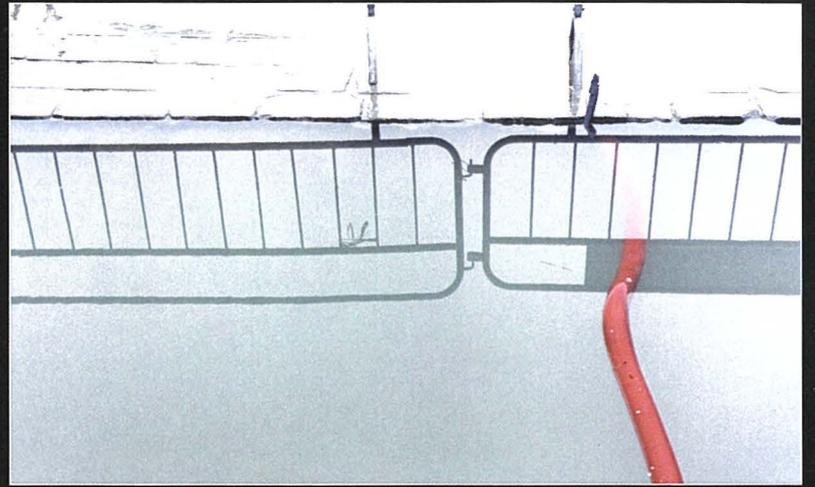
As I photograph, I seek out details, shadows and misplaced objects. I am attracted to imperfection – to scenes not flawlessly constructed or

illuminated, to spaces not scenic or ideal. When encountering the suburban landscape with its orderly construction and tailored lawns, I am witness to a quiet stage where errant objects appear to rebel and to have meaning. I seek out these unique objects, patterns, and rhythms that personalize the environment. This allows me to turn what is public into a private experience, and to create quiet, elegant narratives from the everyday experience. As such, the objects in my photographs exist as small truths or clues that have been left behind, waiting to be noticed, contemplated, interpreted, transformed, and released.

Untitled (lawn/newspaper) (1999) c-print 5" x 8"

Untitled (red hose) (2002) c-print 5" x 8"

Untitled (car/petals) (2004) c-print 5" x 8"



Heather Deyling

Savannah, Georgia

Memory is directly affected by perception. Space, or our environment, influences perception. In my work, landscape is evoked as a stage in which a moment, a memory or an emotional state is played, replayed and in some cases, reinvented. A story unfolds among the colors and shapes.

My paintings and prints are born of a process of recycling my work and collecting new images. Recently, I have been using digital photographs as source material. Complete images and fragments are scanned, manipulated digitally, printed and used as studies for new work. I begin each new painting based on a study but eventually the image takes on a life of its own. As each piece develops, a nar-

rative emerges, usually fragmented and based on flashes of memories. As the image and narrative become more cohesive, a sense of place develops in the painting. Landscape becomes the setting for revisited memories, skewed by time and emotion. Spaces are reinvented in my own abstract visual language.

The finished image functions as a representation of both a space and a narrative. The element of abstraction creates psychological space for the viewer to interpret the image. This allows the viewer to create his or her own story and derive meaning through interacting with the image on a more personal level than one might with a more conventional representation of a space.

Shadows on Cecil B. (2005) digital print 4" x 5.5"

From My Bedroom (2004) digital print 5.5" x 7.5"



Benjamin Edwards

Washington, DC

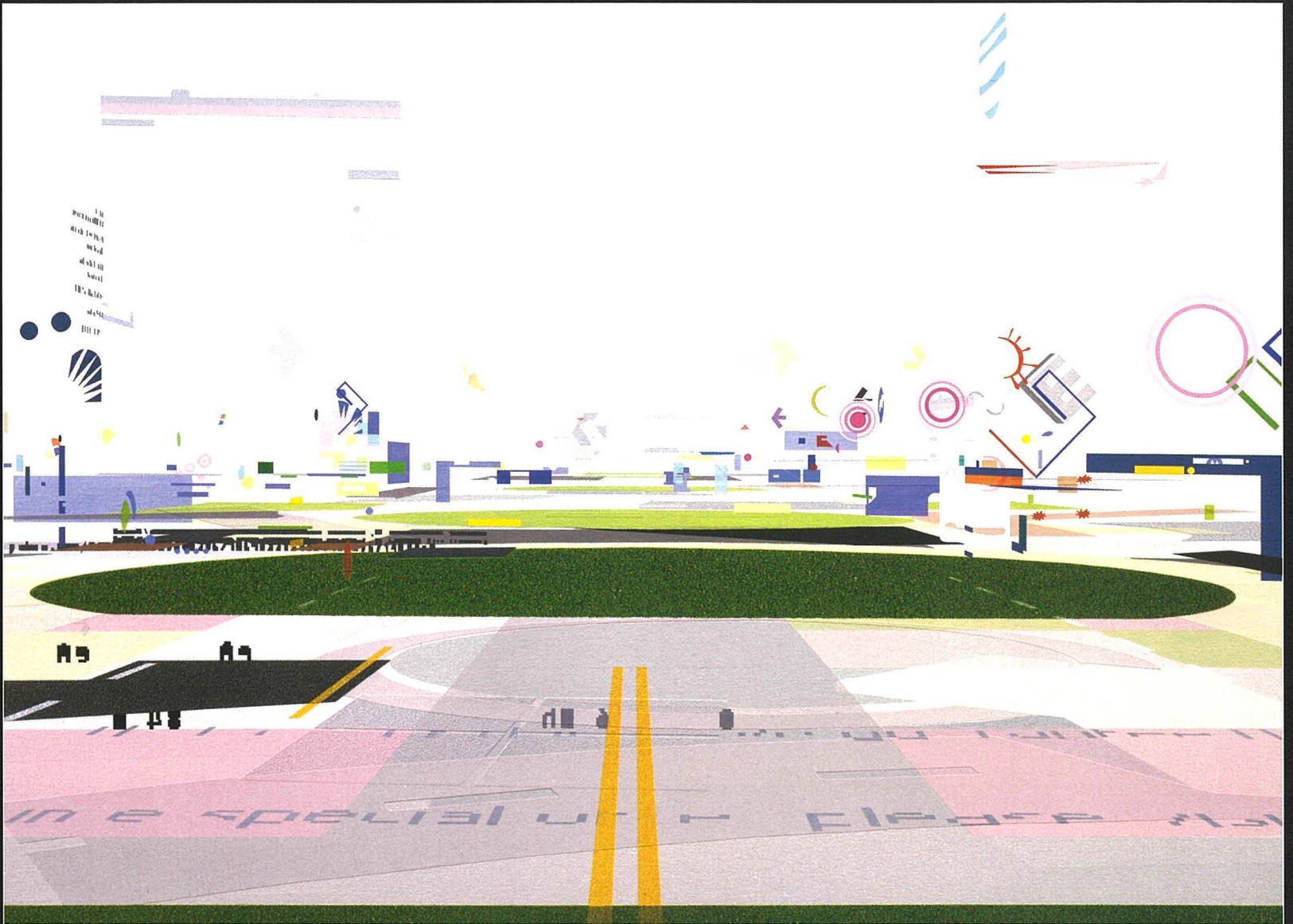
I first studied Jean Baudrillard's ideas of the simulacrum and hyper-reality in the late 1980s, which led me back to the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic*. Suddenly I began to see the built environment (as well as the whole of visual culture) around me as less than real and more like stage sets put up by someone or something. I went about my work as an artist, taking photographs of places while driving around cities and suburbs, and then using them to make paintings of my experiences; but I always had the feeling that as an artist I was only looking at the shadows on the wall of the cave and not at the underlying processes and systems that drove the effects.

In 1997, I started to see the kind of place that I wanted to build. I departed from my usual method of merely reproducing a place that I had seen and instead put several places together to form something new. I was inspired by the mega-mergers and corporate consolidation that had begun to heat up along with the U. S. economy, and I had intended to make something familiar

but with exaggerated features, as if to extend the phenomenon to its logical conclusion. This new way of constructing a place was akin to a novelist creating a character from a composite of sources, and I found that a vast new space opened up in my work, a space for me to imagine a story of which this newly constructed place was a part.

Since this time I have been constantly asking myself what does a capitalist utopia look like? What are the ideal forms and the values of capitalism? The images, styles, and attitudes presented to us in advertising represent only partial vignettes of a larger ideological picture. One can get a glimpse of a perfectly dynamic world and its connected inhabitants by watching cell phone or financial services ads. On the other hand, corporations like Disney profitably sell us the comfort and security of tradition. It's almost as if there's some grand scheme to push us forward to drive the economy and then pull us back to make us feel safe, sometimes simultaneously.

Approach and Immerse (South) (2003) acrylic, texture media and spray paint on canvas 18.75" x 26"



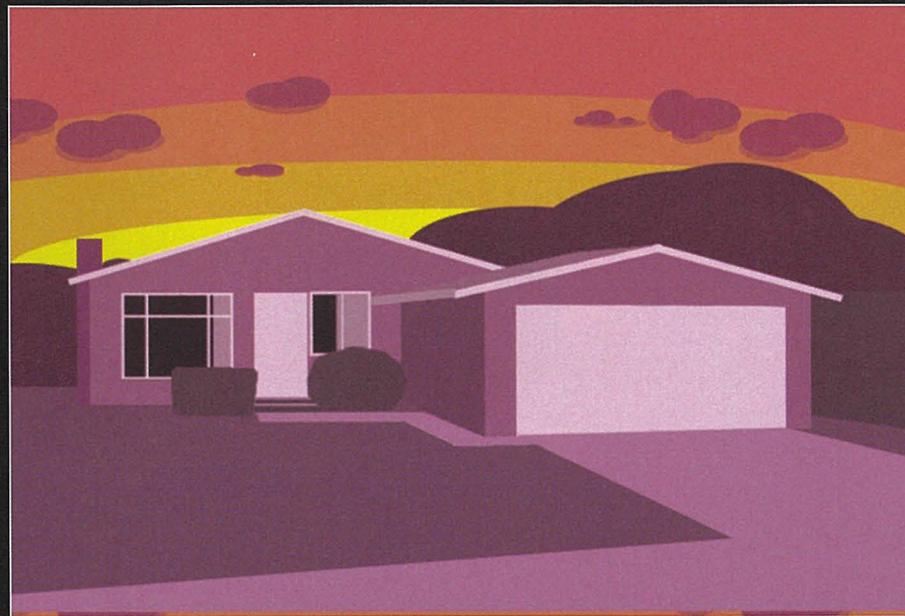
Kota Ezawa

San Francisco, California

Ezawa's work explores the appropriation and mediation of current events and images utilizing both still photographic methodology and video. He translates found film, video, and photographic footage into simplified drawings and animations that reduce complex imagery to its most essential, two-dimensional elements.

Ezawa utilizes appropriated imagery and rather than "filter" the original to make it look like animation, as digital technology permits, he reconstructs it by hand. Ezawa says, "What results is very stylized, but it's an honest effort at translation."

Kota Ezawa, Home Video (2001) animation video 3 mins.



Richard Garrison

Delmar, New York

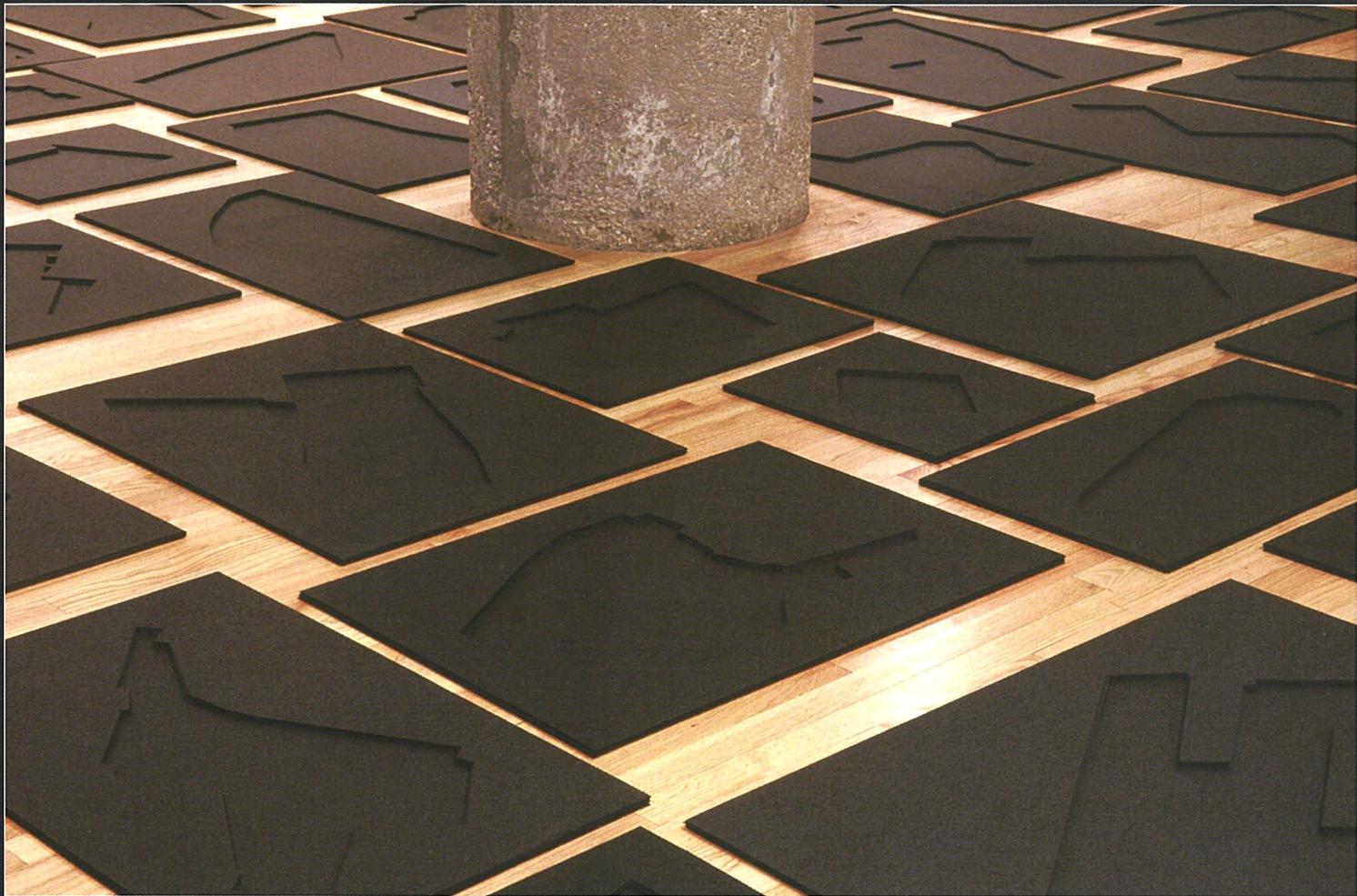
My work involves collective processes that reflect my observations and interactions with the ordinary elements of urban and suburban spaces. I create abstractions of the familiar, such as department stores, parking lots, housing developments, institutional spaces and daily tasks. Sites are interpreted with various

surveying methods including GPS (global positioning system) mapping, color matching, architectural measuring, photographic methods, and process drawing. Collected data is structured to define an objective yet intimate encounter with banality.



Westgate Plaza Color Scheme (2001) screenprint & graphite on paper 11" x 11"

Parking Lot Perimeters (2004) cut and stacked asphalt paper dimensions variable



Patrick King

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

My work is a careful and conscious reprocessing of the barrage of both collective and personal influences that a child of the first TV generation could not escape.

The idealism of another generation – my parents' – in rebuilding postwar America was an orgiastic celebration of mass naissance, rampant consumerism and a wholesale rejection of the past in art and architecture. This was a brave new world whose lie

was perpetrated by advertising, sitcoms, cold war propaganda and religious, jingoistic patriotism not unlike that of today.

Time and distance have allowed me an objective gaze upon my experience of coming of age in that America, while memory and more recent sojourns make producing work that is extremely personal virtually unavoidable.



Madonna of the Power Lines (1993) ink wash on paper 15" x 11"

The Siege of Jean Avenue (1993) oil on linen 55" x 96"



Lori Larusso

Providence, Rhode Island

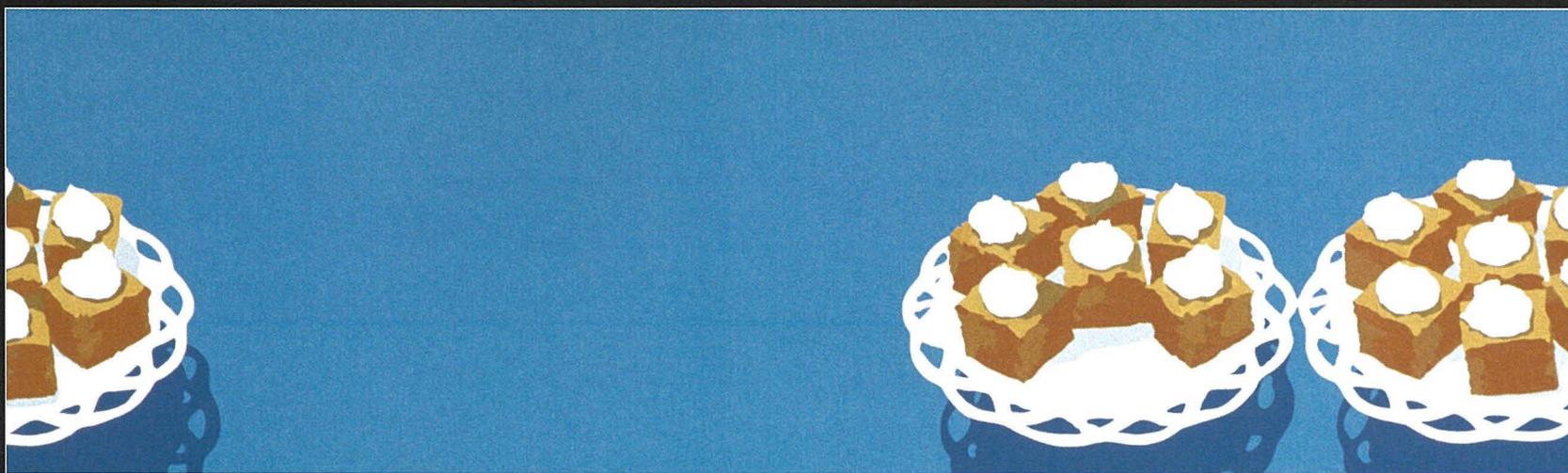
The work is two-fold.

A significant theme considers the inclusive reality of how society influences the individual, and how the exclusive individual copes with events and everyday being. Daily life is held in place through systems that maintain sanity and order. Suggestions of the constructed systems include the notion of disruption of that system.

A second theme throughout the work is of consideration and reciprocity. A look at the systematic must also care for the immediate needs and desires of the individual within that system. Through times of disruption the individuals entertain themselves with common indulgences of a consumer culture.

Deluge (2005) acrylic on canvas 65" x 68"

Still Missing (2005) acrylic and enamel on panel 59" x 18"



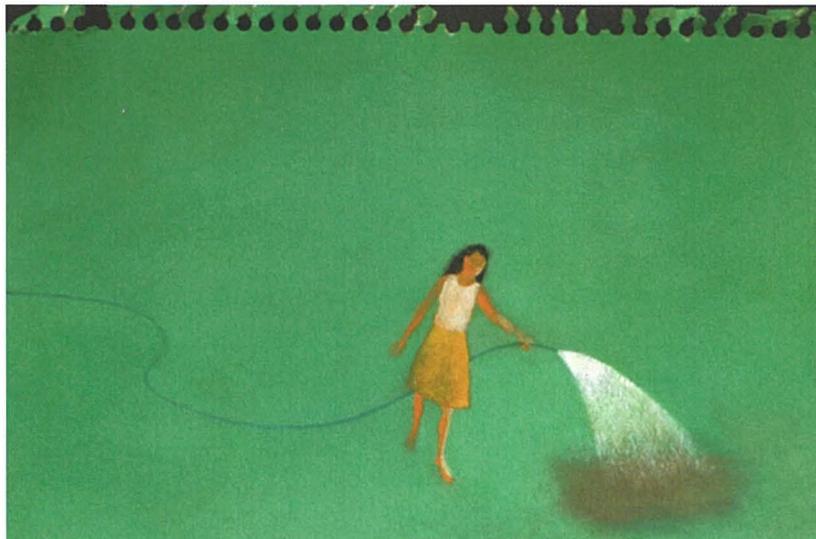
Blue McRight

Venice, California

My current series of oil paintings on paper, "On the Lawn," refers to the ubiquitous American lawn: a carefully – and sometimes not so carefully – maintained public stage upon which we enact our private lives. Drawing upon personal as well as culturally familiar iconography, the images in this series read as an elliptical narrative

expressive of the condition of being simultaneously hidden and exposed by suburban space.

In *Untitled (Girl with Hose)* and *Untitled (Boy with Watering Can)*, the figures and their commonplace tasks of cultivation appear symmetrical, yet are literally and metaphorically opposite.



Untitled (Girl with Hose) (2002) oil on paper 6" x 9"

Untitled (Boy with Watering Can) (2001) oil on paper 6" x 9"

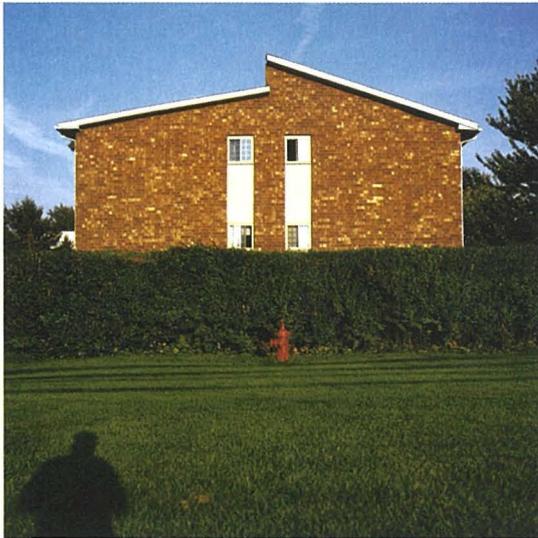


Mike Mergen

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I'm intrigued by the mundane; office parks, parking lots, shopping malls and housing developments. These nowhere places are viewed by us every day, but are never really noticed. I find it fascinating that nature is often obliterated

by development in the modern landscape only later to be reintroduced in a way that seems forced and awkward. By documenting these subjects, I neither endorse nor condemn them, but simply give them a chance to be seen.



Untitled 1 (from Suburban Landscape Series) (2004) pigment print 20" x 20"

Untitled 2 (from Suburban Landscape Series) (2004) pigment print 20" x 20"

Untitled 3 (from Suburban Landscape Series) (2004) pigment print 20" x 20"



Steve Millar

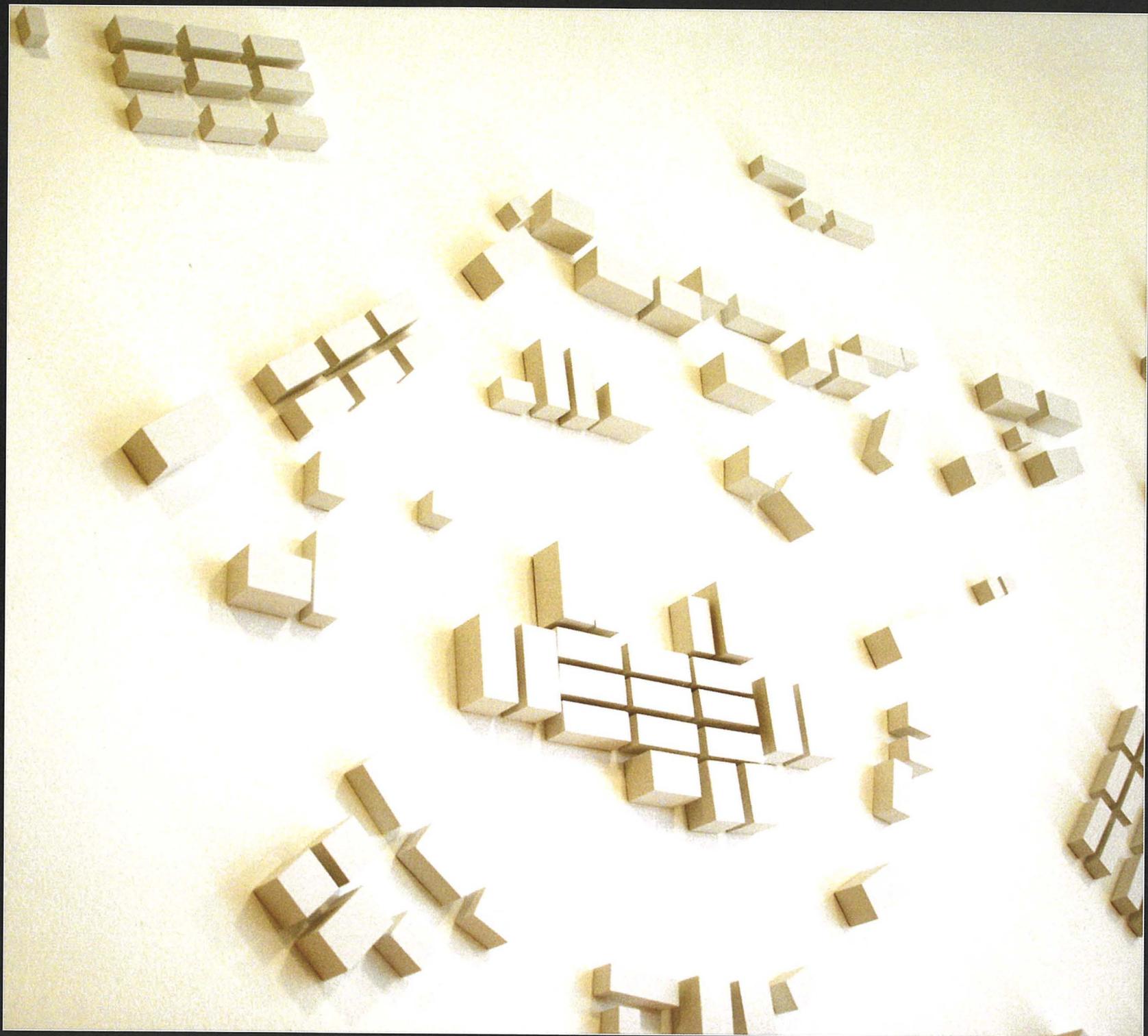
Croton-on-Hudson, New York

As I travel around a suburb, the houses seem to breed. New buildings rise on the next horizon. New centers appear until “center” has lost its meaning, and the ending has disappeared. Do the houses never sleep? Do they grow like spreading plants, sending runners into the earth that sprout as new constructions?

Suburban Glossary is an abstraction of suburban planning patterns. These patterns are varied: centripetal, radial, symmetrical, curvilinear, or gridded. They may follow the undulations of an existing landscape or rely on artificial systems. My installation catalogs these patterns of living. At the same time, it reveals the complexity inherent in the suburban experience.

I am also interested in the social meanings and implications of planning designs. The cul-de-sacs and winding streets of the American subdivision are a fingerprint of suburbia and are revealed as strivings for sanctuary, security, and class segregation. I am fascinated by the contradictions inherent in the design process: the desire to create a discrete utopia versus its often complicated and troubled reality. Each design carries its own history and associations and partially derives from political decisions about zoning. The installation may help a viewer reflect on the significant consequences of seemingly routine bureaucratic choices. Blanket condemnation of suburbia as a wasteland is a gross simplification; it is also flawed as a strategy for change.

Suburban Glossary (2005-06) wood dimensions variable



Mary Irwin Moore

Blacksburg, Virginia

My current work depicts images from everyday life that I find visually arresting. The subject matter is often something commonplace that has somehow taken on an extraordinary loveliness or exudes a sense of the monumental. Relationships amongst colors are particularly important to me. I'd be quite content to work purely with color without any reference to an outward reality, but subject matter provides compositional order and visual structural support for those color relationships.

It is usually some combination of these factors that beckons me to paint. Yet the way an image resonates within me goes beyond the formal elements that comprise it. Often the beauty in

ordinary settings, structures, or objects evokes in me a wordless longing for something that is beyond what we can see.

When I was working on *Pool in June*, I was attracted to the slightly skewed, angular composition, the color of the water, and the negative space delineated by the handrails. In this cropped image there is little reference to the natural landscape. A swimming pool strikes me as a kind of constructed personal paradise – a suburban version of the tropics that offers the alluring aqua waters of the Caribbean in a tailored, compact, contained form. In addition, the swimming pool is an archetypal symbol or monument of all that is summer in suburban America.

Pool in June (2004) oil on canvas 32" x 48"



Armin Mühsam

Maryville, Missouri

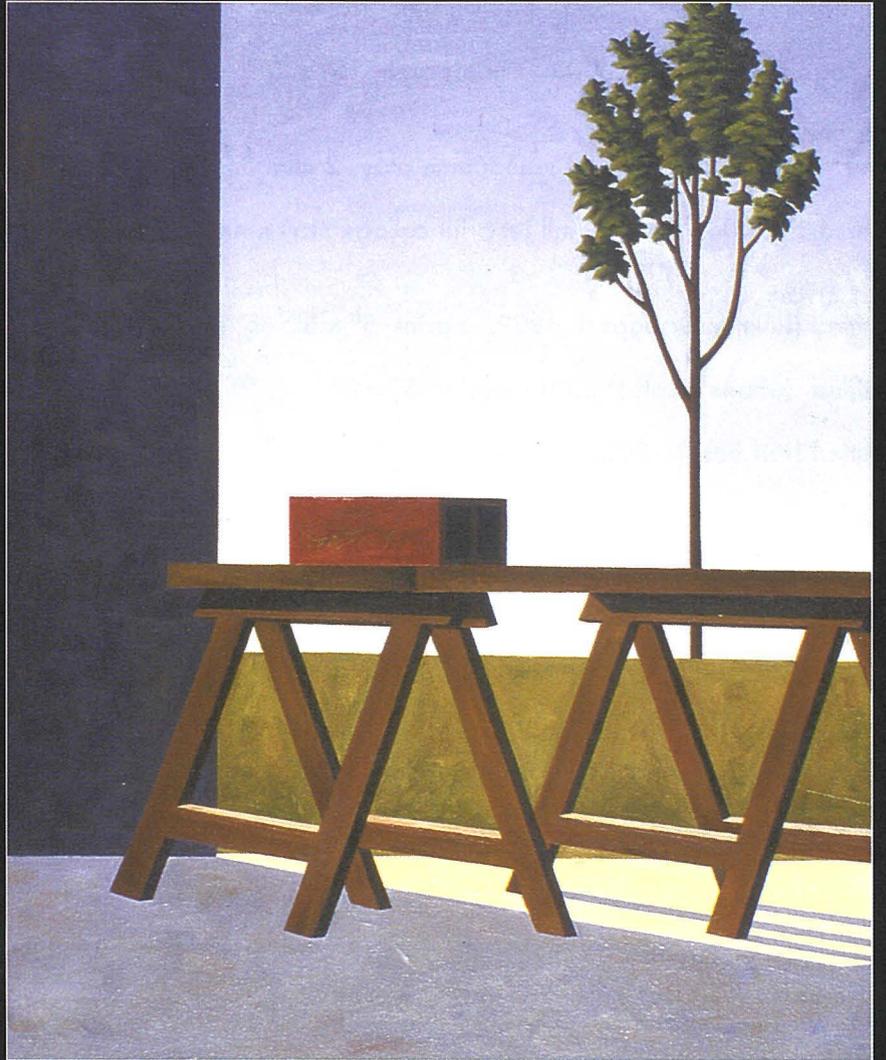
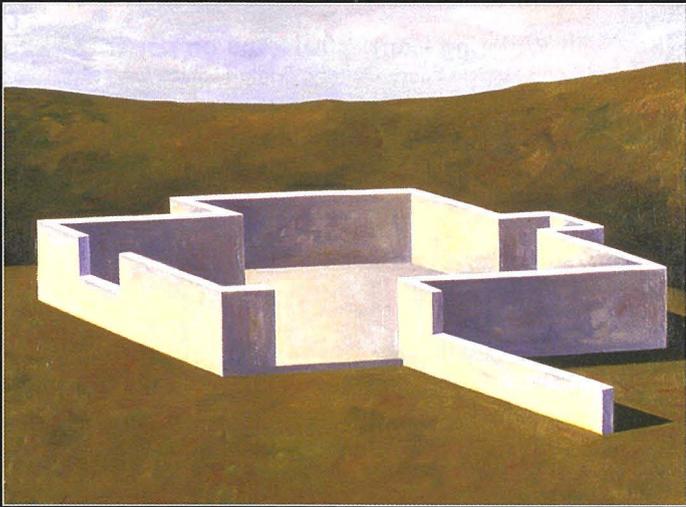
Our urban planners envision the suburbs as the transition between town and country, combining the amenities of city life with a closer proximity to nature. But where is nature? Suburbia has not merely blurred the boundaries between man-made and natural spaces, it has erased them, and at the expense of the latter.

The idea of suburbia raises the old question that haunts human consciousness: Are we merely part of nature and therefore “entitled” to perpetuate our species and the habitat it requires? Or are we already a species separate from the natural order and thus under the obligation to critically reflect upon our relationship with nature? The answer is, of course, “Both.”

I am fascinated by this paradox, which is part of the mystery of human existence. As much as we strive to understand nature, we always end up with culture. As a landscape painter, I try to visualize this paradox through the interaction between architecture and land. I am interested in the structures we build on and into the ground, the imprint something hard and angular leaves in the soft earth. I believe these structures are the embodiment of how we view ourselves in relation to the natural environment and how we think the world should be – after all, we certainly have the means to make it conform to our will.

Foundation 6 (2004) oil on canvas 18" x 24"

Signorelli's Tree (2004) oil on canvas 22" x 18"



CUL-DE-SAC: ART FROM A SUBURBAN NATION
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

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Hypothetical Strategy 1997. webpage text

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Courtesy of Dr. William Goldiner; thanks to Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York

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Home Video 2001. animation video 3 mins.

Courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery, San Francisco

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Untitled (Boy with Watering Can) 2001. oil on paper 6" x 9"
Courtesy of the artist and Patricia Faure Gallery, Santa Monica CA

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Steven Millar

Suburban Glossary 2005-06. wood. dimensions variable

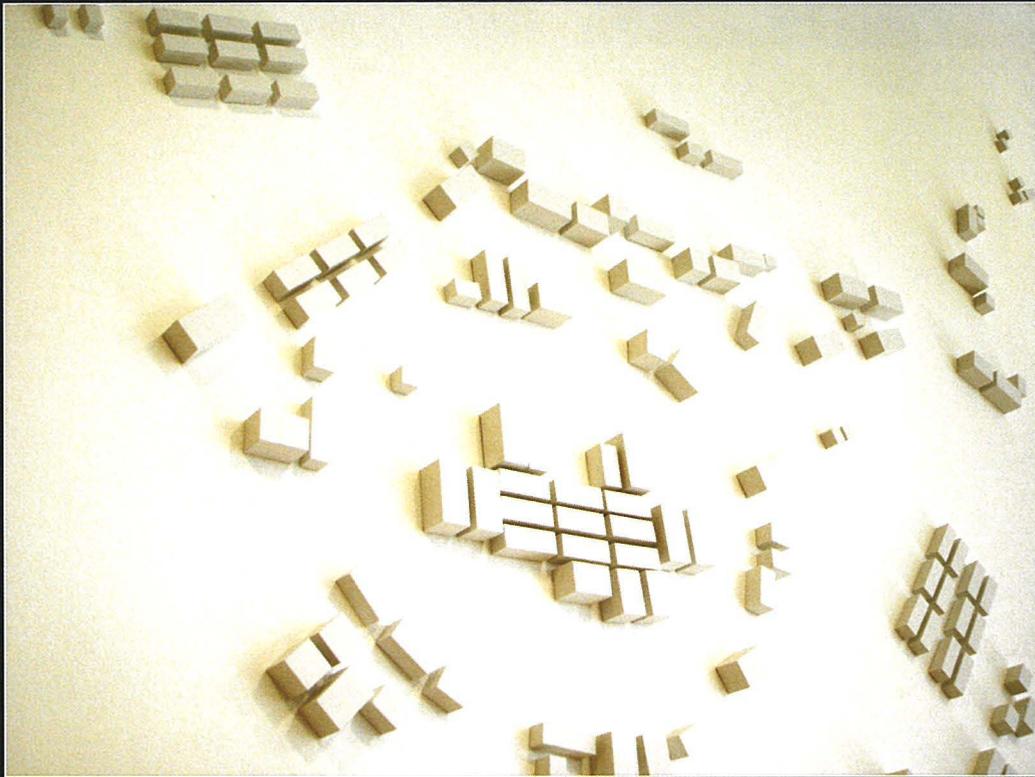
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