

# The journey to Utopia and back

## Katonah museum looks at suburbia from the inside out

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In the past two decades, numerous volumes and studies have been written about the American suburbs. The social phenomena of mass migration out of the cities since World War II spurred a culture that is now nationwide.

But the American dream of utopia morphed into rampant urban sprawl that gobbled up green space. While robbing us of our sense of community, it gave us our own private turf.

Looking over our shoulders at suburban life raises a new consciousness of who we are and how we live. The Katonah Museum of Art multimedia exhibit, "I <sup>TM</sup> the Burbs," is a wide-ranging exploration of the 'burbs and features the work of 47 contemporary artists including Diane Arbus, Gail V. Biederman, Mark Bennett, Jason Falchok, Todd Hido, David Hockney, Lori Nix, Bill Owens, Joel Sternfeld, Larry Sultan and Lane Twitchell.

The work is divided into two categories. "Private Realms" and "Public Realities" create a push-pull rhythm of the up-close and distant. In "Public Realities," aerial views from varying heights pull us out to see the big picture, a compilation of tiny squares, endless roadways and cul-de-sacs translating into



"Casey With Bree Driving" by Jayne Holsinger.

anonymity and uniformity trudging into the abyss of monotony. "Private Realms" includes family scenes that put a face on the suburban resident and microcosms isolated in the archetypal pieces of the suburb puzzle — outdoor pools, lawn chairs and even the neighborhood nuclear power plant.

Curator Ellen Kieter's expertly written catalog provides interesting explanations, histories and insights to the work. But before reading

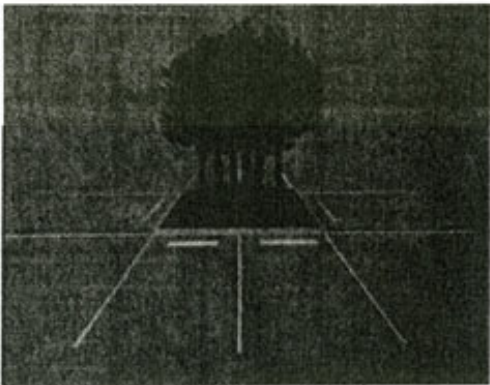
the catalog or taking the informative tour, a walk through the three-room exhibit with a clean mental slate renders a different, more visceral viewing experience. Seeing thousands of tiny cars in the 9-foot digital photo, "The Sprawlville Parking Lot Triptych," by Sven Pahlsson has that "yeesh" affect that drives one to buy a motor bike powered by bio-diesel fuel. In Gregory Crewdson's "Untitled, 1999" a mise-en-scene photo-

graph of a man building a large mound of old, used possessions in his back yard (inspired by the film "Close Encounters of the Third Kind") taps into our consumptive impulses of "use and discard" in fast order. And owning "stuff" — lots of it — means we have to have bigger houses, more closets, roomier attics and basements for storage. Enter center stage:

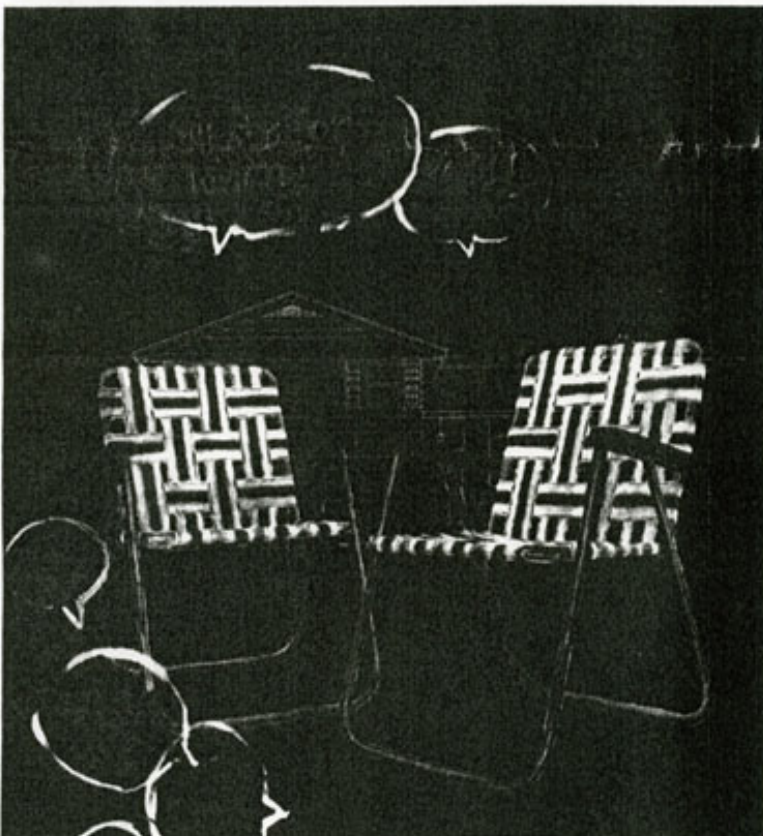
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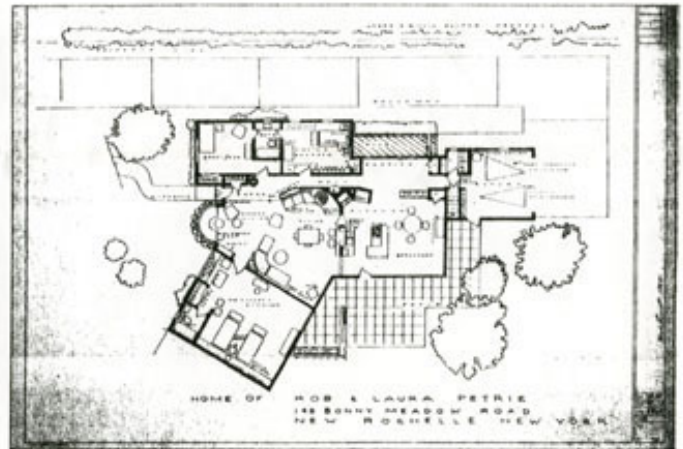
"Untitled" by Robert Selwyn.



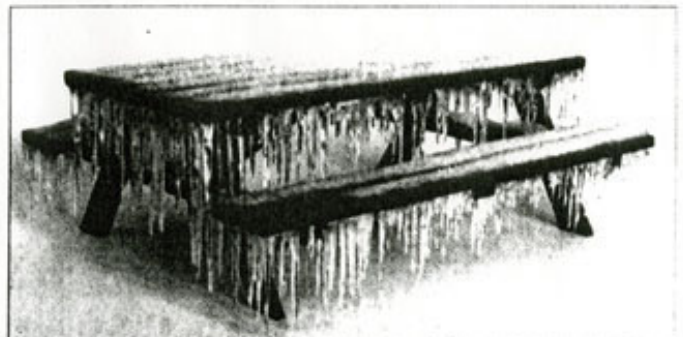
"Untitled" by Chris Ballantyno.



"Two Chairs" by Dan Cohen.



"Home of Rob and Laurie Petrie" by Mark Bennett.



"Dead Center" by Vincent Mazeau.

# Suburbs

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the McMansion.

Lee Stoetzel's "McMansion 5, 2005" is a large black-and-white photograph of a newly constructed opulent mansion atop a graded hill of dirt. But on closer inspection something is out of whack and here an explanation is essential to "get it." Stoetzel created miniature houses made entirely from McDonald's food and packaging materials; the dirt is about 40 pounds of cooked ground hamburger, the stonework is pieces of chicken McNuggets, plastic drink lids are windows and Quarter Pounder boxes are roof shingles. The overt intention of Stoetzel that McMansions and McDonalds are synonymous with quick accessibility and insatiability at the cost of ubiquitous landscapes gives way to the fascination of his materials and creative process.

Lori Nix also photographed her constructions of small houses in "Circleville."

The aerial night shot is of homes on a cul-de-sac anchored by two towering electric transformers with spanning power lines. The now generic cul-de-sac promises privacy and begets isolation; there is no place you can walk to. Suburban living depends on high energy use and Nix illuminates several dead crows on rooftops. The birds are a regular casualty of power lines but here it casts complacency for dead wildlife at the cost of high energy use.

Racism in the suburbs is the theme of a handful of pieces. According to Kenneth Jackson, race figures significantly in suburban housing patterns, and in "Crabgrass Frontier" he says "it is fear of those with a different skin color that has driven many people to seek the suburban sanctuary." But that sanctuary changed with more minorities wanting to live in the suburbs. Westchester Coun-

ty's (N.Y.) desegregation battles of the 1960s in Yonkers and New Rochelle were over space and land. Steven Millar's "Levittown, PA" recalls racism at an all-time low for the Northeast. Tiny white, blue, yellow and pink cookie-cutter rectangles are houses set in the typical Levittown tract housing grid. One "house" has the name Myers stamped on it while all the others remain blank. The name is a pungent reminder of how in 1957 the all-white Levittown became enraged at the first African-Americans, William and Daisy Myers and their three children, who moved into a Levittown house. The Myers house was assaulted by hundreds of angry neighbors hurling rocks and bottles, flying Confederate flags and singing "Old Black Joe." Despite death threats and public protest, the family remained in their home, breaking the color barrier for Levittown.

In 2002, a national report titled, "The 2000 Population by Age, Race and Hispanic Origin" said that the Hispanic population grew from 86,194 to 144,124, in Westchester County. In the show, reflecting the growing Latino population in the suburbs are photographs from Stephanie Diamond's "It would look like...." project. Diamond elicited anonymous written responses from local Latinos answering such questions as "Is there anyplace in the suburbs that reminds you of your home country....what would it look like?" Or "Is there anything here that feels uncomfortable.... what would it look like?" Diamond's photographs are based on the answers and include images from Latin American countries. A photo of a graveyard in Puerto Rico was about a person who missed his deceased father; another from one who hoped to live in a house surrounded by beautiful trees. The questionnaires Diamond used are

available next to the photographs.

Although African-Americans and Latinos are represented in the show, the messages of the work are more suggestive than graphic and too subtle for the ethnic battles that are being fought today in the suburbs.

The suburban family unit appears in several works, including one from the cult classic photographic essay, "Suburbia," by Bill Owens (1972) reprinted in 1999. In "Untitled (We're really happy. Our kids are healthy, we eat good food, and we have a really nice home.)," Owens shows us young, happy parents feeding their infant in the dining area of their home while outdoors a cruder reality just beyond the swing-set is an eerie industrial landscape of electrical tower grids. Denial of the outer world becomes necessary for inner happiness.

The quintessential family portrait by Diane Arbus is her "Family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, NY, 1968." Arbus' lens captures a "Marilyn Monroe" blond and her husband sunbathing while their young son splashes in a kiddie pool several feet behind them. The husband covers his eyes, the woman sleeps and the child has his back to us, all personifying that inner remoteness that belies the nuclear family.

Particularly engaging is Mary Fielding McCleary's "Allegory of the Senses"—a huge, deeply intricate collage of the artist's family in their urban Texas living room. Casually placed religious symbols appealing to various senses include a chalice of wine, a large sculptured hand, upside down images of Jesus and a bouquet of pure and holy lilies. Mother, father, teen son and dog are casting their gazes in different directions, allowing our own eyes to skirt the densely textured surface, gathering each minute detail. Tiny toy

goggle eyes intriguingly dot the entire work and appear on each living thing — one is midpoint on the father's forehead — the third eye? — suggesting an omniscience integrated in everyday life.

Respite from the social message is David Hockney's beautiful lithograph, "Water Made of Lines," a meditative, solitary swimming pool of the bluest, gently stirring water. Also, Gail V. Biederman's organic wall installation, "Shelton to Croton," is a road map made of yarn traversing from wall to wall to corner to wall. Biederman's piece references her two hometowns; enveloping the viewer in its larger-than-life scale.

Overall there is an imbalance in the exhibit from too many "aerial" perspectives — more than 12 — where this repetitive theme of ticky-tacky boxes and lined roadways are numbing.

Blandness pervades in Mark Bennet's lithographed blueprints of old TV show homes of Rob and Laura Petrie and "The Brady Bunch" culled from repeated viewings of the sitcoms — the assumed fascination is again with the process.

But socially based art usually requires background information to understand and appreciate the work; the caveat being a shifted focus from the art aesthetic to the story. In "I ♥ the Burbs," art as intrinsic socio-political commentary is a tool that raises collective awareness and allows for self reflection. Jump-starting a keener sense of place reveals the suburbs' assets and deficiencies; a the starting point to promulgate stricter zoning, open space preservation and building community.

"I ♥ the Burbs" will be on view through April 9 at the Katonah Museum of Art, Route 22 at Jay Street, Katonah, N.Y. Museum hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., and Sunday, noon-5