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The Place We Call Home

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IT has been decades since the squeaky-clean optimism of "The Dick Van Dyke Show" defined our image of suburban life -- more than time enough for the sarcastic dysfunction of "Roseanne" and the steamy exploits of "Desperate Housewives" to work their transmutation.

Of course, the truth about suburbia lies somewhere between these extremes -- as an enthralling new countywide celebration of suburban culture seeks to show. Among the offerings are a social history of Westchester, a study of urban sprawl, a take on suburban life by contemporary artists and a suburbia-themed film series.

So, what is suburbia? The term remains elusive, despite several bureaucratic measures of definition: size of population, density of living, legal or administrative status, proximity to the city. This uncertainty is part of its charm.

More broadly, the word refers to the environs -- the periphery of a city or town, somewhere in-between better-defined places. We define it by what it is not: in short, as being neither urban nor rural. It is an imaginary space onto which we can project our hopes, fears and fantasies.

It is also bound up in a wider set of debates on ways of living: the suburbs confront us with questions about community, the nature of family and core social values. More than half of all Americans live in suburbs, according to the 2000 census. It is the crucible of our age.

No surprise then that this robust subject continues to attract the interest of artists, filmmakers, television producers and writers. Moreover, it makes perfect sense that Westchester -- the definitive 20th-century American suburb because of the early television writers and other authors who lived here and depicted it -- should play host to an examination of suburban life.

Debates on suburbia often center on the issue of representation: who lives here, and what do they stand for? This question motivates "I 3/5heart 4/5 the Burbs," an in-your-face, brash exhibition of roughly 70 paintings, prints, photographs, sculptures and more at the Katonah Museum of Art. Forty-seven artists are taking part, among them a few Westchester locals: Dan Cohen, Steven Millar and Gail V. Biederman.

As expected, many of the displays fixate on the darker side of suburbia, parodying the usual cast of "freaks, fatties and fanatics," to borrow from Garrison Keillor's review of the French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy's new book "American Vertigo," charting Mr. Lévy's travels through our suburbs. The book, like this art, is a catalog of clichés.

But there is a grain of truth in all clichés. Lee Stoetzel's photograph of a model home made entirely from McDonald's foodstuff is a strikingly literal embodiment of the idea of a McMansion, for instance. The artwork was inspired by the supersized houses appearing in the artist's once-rural Pennsylvania neighborhood, but it could just as easily have been motivated by urban developments in Purchase, or any other Westchester village.

There is also a truth to suburban car culture, the subject of paintings and installations by Amy Chan, Tad Lauritzen Wright, Ms. Biederman, Sven Pahlsson, Jayne Holsinger and Sarah McKenzie. The works point to the "centerlessness of suburbia," the exhibition curator Ellen J. Keiter writes in the catalog. But



they also remind you of the countless miles of road needed to connect everything.

Ms. Chan's painting "Peaceable Kingdom" (2005) slots American suburban icons (big-box retail, fast-food diners and McMansions) into the vertical space of traditional Chinese landscape painting, with each building set on its own little lawn-green island linked by a network of meandering causeways. I feel carsick just thinking about it.

A particular way of life is integral to perceptions of the suburbs. It is also the subject of several artworks, including Diane Arbus's "Family on Their Lawn One Sunday Afternoon in Westchester, N.Y." (1968). The photograph, now a classic, shows a husband and wife lying leisurely on parallel sun chairs, drinking and reading, their child playing happily beyond with toys in a near-limitless backyard.

Looking at this image, all kinds of value judgments on suburban life begin to creep into your head. Is this affluent young couple happy, or is the distance between their sun chairs indicative of some kind of emotional rift? Is life out here leisurely, or is it dull, materialistic and empty? It depends on your point of view, or prejudices, but to me it is an image of the suburban ideal: relaxation in a private, tranquil setting.

Whereas the Katonah Museum exhibition deals broadly with the theme of suburbia, an exhibition at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers offers a focused social, cultural and historical survey of Westchester County. It is a big show, with more than 300 exhibits spread around the museum. It is also one of the best-researched and the best-looking shows I have ever seen in this space. Frankly, the museum has never looked better.

"Westchester: The American Suburb" is the kind of exhibition that you can lose yourself in for hours. In addition to heaps of great archival photographs, there are paintings, memorabilia, old real estate advertisements, portraits of famous residents, a vintage Ford car and three model kitchens complete with retro appliances like a 1950's aqua-green Sunbeam Mixmaster. I remember licking those beaters.

There is also a display of early Tupperware -- and, for those who feel especially inspired by the sight, the nearby Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville is featuring the story of the original Tupperware Lady, Brownie Wise, on Monday night. (She devised the idea of sending housewives as salespeople into suburban homes all over America.)

The Katonah exhibition begins with a display of television memorabilia (mostly photographic stills) from beloved postwar situation comedies. Series like "I Love Lucy" (during the run of that show, they moved to Connecticut) and "The Dick Van Dyke Show" helped create the popular image of idyllic suburban existence: a sprawling home, a car and a dizzying range of domestic labor-saving devices, not to mention a television set.

Following sections break down the elements of suburban life, according to punchy themes like "the domestic ideal," "owning your own home," "consumerism," "the yard" and "commuting." Among the more curious exhibits are several old real estate advertisements for housing in Westchester from the late 19th century to the 1960's. There is even a video segment from an episode of "The Dick Van Dyke Show" in which the Petries buy their New Rochelle home.

Of course, commuters had been moving out to Westchester from New York City years before Rob and Laura took the plunge. The first spurt of settlement began in the 1890's after railroad and streetcar track was laid through the region; it spiked again after 1945 as soldiers returned home. It continued right through the 1950's and 1960's, as New York City became less attractive to families.

What drew residents to Westchester County, then as now, was largely the promise of a quiet, countrylike ambience -- dispersed homes, lots of natural landscape, and a villagelike atmosphere, all within easy commuting distance of New York. The main change to that ambience, beginning in the 1970's, has been the commercial and apartment-housing development. White Plains, a site of both, is now considered a satellite city.



Complementing this exhibition is a new book about the county, "Westchester: The American Suburb." Published by the museum and Fordham University Press, it was edited by Roger Panetta, a history professor at Marymount College who is a curator of the exhibition, along with Bartholomew Bland and Laura Vookles. It is crammed with curious facts, among them a prediction that white people will become a minority of residents in Westchester by 2020.

So just how prevalent in America is suburbia? The answer lies within reach in a thoughtful exhibition at the Westchester Arts Council's Arts Exchange by the aerial photographer Jim Wark, with accompanying text by the urban historian Dolores Hayden. The photographs and text, published in a companion book titled "A Field Guide to Sprawl" (W. W. Norton & Company), present a rare moment in which art, urbanism and social consciousness mesh.

The photographs detail an abundance of new suburban housing and urban developments, many of them in once-unpopulated and arid desert regions. Between 1990 and 2000, an accompanying wall text tells us, "Las Vegas and its suburbs were the fastest-growing metropolitan area in the nation, with a growth rate of 85.2 percent." It is little wonder the region has problems finding enough water and curbing pollution.

What is most interesting about these aerial photographs, as Ms. Hayden also observes in her wall texts and book, is the way in which words like suburb, city and countryside no longer reflect the reality of urban development across America. Most of the images in this show depict a multilayered, interconnected city-suburban environment, or the development of exurbs -- housing enclaves beyond city suburbs.

It may just be that the American suburb is already a thing of the past.