

Posted on Sun, Sep. 14, 2008

Views of the 'burbs suddenly sprouting like crabgrass

If you're familiar with the renderings of suburban ennui that put Cheever, Updike and Didion on the map, you have to wonder why it has taken art so long to get its hands on the McMansion-and-Hummer crowd. Cameras were focused on the suburbs early - look no farther than Ed Ruscha's 1968 artist book, *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* or William Eggleston's groundbreaking 1976 monograph of his color snapshots, *William Eggleston's Guide* - catching the bland sameness and disconcerting eccentricity that can coexist at a city's outer edges. But other than Eric Fischl's paintings of disaffected suburbanites and Gregory Crewdson's staged photographs of sinister suburban scenes that are actually shot in rural New England towns, images exploring the suburbs were surprisingly scarce.

Not any more. Over the last five years, suburbia has come to be everywhere you look in art, and seems to offer limitless ideas and approaches. At least that's the impression you'll gather walking through the Abington Art Center's "Global Suburbia: Meditations on the World of the 'Burbs."

The works in this exhibition - by 15 artists and an artist collaborative selected by the show's curator, Sue Spaid - borrow from every art movement of the last six decades or more, but their images and the attitudes they pose are surprisingly fresh. Suburbia is not always posited as the dark, David Lynch vision it used to be, for example, but as a place of great potential, just waiting to be put to better use. This the green generation, after all.

You can see this in the work of Matthew Moore, who is showing large color photographs of land that he and his father planted after a blueprint for a housing development, substituting sorghum for houses and black-bearded wheat for roads. Or in the photographs of Barbara Gallucci, who photographed the same downstairs den in some 20 Levittown houses in the Long Island version of that archetypal development, showing how families had reinvented the built-in-TV wall original to each house after its Admiral TV eventually failed.

McMansions get their due drubbing in Lee Stoetzel's photographs of "mansions" that he constructs from recycled fast foods and their containers. His life-size wood facsimile of a VW bus seems as much a homage to the optimism of early suburb developers and dwellers as a symbol of the hippie generation that couldn't wait to escape suburban conformity.

Some artists have even eked a poetic, somber beauty from that original vision of perfect living for everyone. Sarah McCoubrey's poignant oil-on-panel paintings of everyday backyards featuring the requisite inflatable pool or swing set, Hiro Sakaguchi's pale, acrylic paintings of his futuristic plans superimposed onto old neighborhoods, and Mark Shetabi's empty plywood and Plexiglas sculpture of an empty, parking-garage-type structure all capture that ineffable sadness of unrealized dreams.

Abington Art Center, 515 Meetinghouse Rd., Jenkintown, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays (Thursdays to 7 p.m.), 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. 215-887-4882 or abingtonartcenter.org. Through Nov. 30.

