

Ross RACINE

Interview by Nora Herting, posted on the *Proof of Concept* blog (New York, NY), April 15, 2008

Artist Ross Racine discusses his unique hybrid digital drawings of constructed suburban landscapes with photographer Nora Herting. You can view Racine's work at this month's show at Williamsburg Gallery Like the Spice.

Nora Herting: I am fascinated by your process and how you came to work this way. What attracted you to the computer?

Ross Racine: From 1985 to 1990 I had a day job in computers as a designer/programmer. I knew its possibilities for visual art. At that time, as a painter I had a longing to create images that were non-material, like dream images, for example. A few years later, I bought Photoshop 3 and never looked back. I left a painting happily unfinished! With the computer, my subject matter was at first photography itself. I felt I had to work through the subject of photography, as photography was the precedent of 2-D images that were less material than painting. Initially I worked from Muybridge images because I had been working with the figure as a painter.

NH: Were you working in the same language as painting and drawing in Photoshop? Were you using the brush tools? Were you still drawing?

RR: My technique has hardly changed from that time. Most improvements in the software have been for photographers or designers. I work stroke by stroke. All of my shadows are drawn in. I try to avoid any streamlined effects. It is important to me to avoid the trap of homogenization. I know I am using the machine but I want to make something that doesn't look like it comes from a machine.

I have never had ideas for creating photographs. I want my images to inhabit a place that is in between a drawing and a photograph.

NH: What place do you want them to reside in? Is it an interstitial space?

RR: I am happy if it is ambiguous, because there are references that the viewer brings to the work from a familiarity with the traditions of painting and other references that the viewer brings from the traditions of photography.

NH: Are you trying to ditch either media's connotative baggage?

RR: No. You can't ditch the baggage. Although it has been ten years, I haven't found many artists working in this kind of space between photography and painting. It is still very early in the development of computer drawing, earlier than I thought.

NH: I agree that this is a very innovative, and still new application of computer imaging technology. The dialogue between the two mediums really interests me. The way photography impacted painting and vice versa. Now it seems that computer imagery has liberated photography from its bearings of veracity. Initially people working with the computer strived to make things look realistic, now people are beginning to make work that is beyond reality. Your work is interesting because it occupies this aesthetic space between photography and drawing, both speak very differently about veracity. The implication is different if you believe the communities in your images actually exist. How do you feel about the implicit veracity of a photograph?

RR: Many people do view my work as photographic, at least at first, because of the realism and the surface treatment. But I want my images to be fictions. There is some fictional element to all of the work. Also I think they look like models of potential places.

NH: The process seems to be inextricably linked to the subject matter. Like all very good work, there is an interesting and specific marriage between process and subject matter. The veracity of a photograph informs the reading of these impossible landscapes.

RR: I am using the look of photography to compel people to suspend their disbelief. If I drew these directly on paper, there would be traces of my hand. That is what I have strived to remove from my work, both in painting and in digital drawing.

NH: As a photographer, I always wanted to penetrate that surface. When your final work is a photo, the surface is not something you have access too. It was exciting for me to be able to add texture and work on the surface of the photograph because as a photographer you can't go back and rework the image.

What is your relationship to suburbia? Have you lived in one of these places?

RR: I was born and raised in Montreal, in an older suburb near the city center, with streets with lots of trees. It was called Model City when it began. Later I have always lived in inner city areas. But I spent a lot of time as a child riding my bike around in winding streets that seemed so full of possibility. The grid is conceptual. But once you break out of it, anything is possible. As a child I loved maps and would draw my own cities.

NH: It seems so optimistic.

RR: As a kid, it did feel optimistic. Even if the suburbs are now my subject matter, as an adult I have always been an inner city person. I worked in the suburbs once. It was terrible just going there. What occurs in my pictures could be emblematic for society as a whole. We come in and clear the land and then plop down buildings and try to reinsert nature through a few planted trees. Nature is tamed in these images. But I want to avoid being more specific here because I want the viewer to draw his or her own conclusions. I prefer my image to work as a trigger, not a final statement.

NH: ... you were going to say "as opposed to photography" weren't you? I would agree with you. Where organic development occurs is within the series, not the solitary image. I always felt that photographers had to meet the expectation of working in a series to prove that a successful image wasn't an accident.

RR: As a photographer, you have a different relationship with your subject matter. You go out and confront your subject matter. Now I do work in a series, but I would like to return to a freer way of working.

NH: These two images are so different that one speaks so much about isolation. I also get this sense of isolation through your god's eye vantage. It makes me physically aware of how far away my body is to the subject. It makes me think of the literary term of dramatic irony where the reader is cognizant of the turn of events but the character is not. There is also something dream like about floating above these towns.

RR: I have had a lifelong attraction to maps. I have always wanted to work from this vantage point.

NH: Do you have stories about them?

RR: For this particular one we are looking at now—yes. But I will not say anything about it because I want the viewer to invent a possible story.