Ross RACINE

Interview by Tejas Pande, posted on the Rising Wisely blog (Bengaluru, India), October 15, 2010

I have found great inspiration on many online forums expounding the practices of various artists belonging to the family of "land art". Simply put, it helps establish the relationship between the land (we inhabit) and its varied usage. It commonly uses facts and imagination superfluously to weave together a narrative of changing landscapes. These narratives exist on film, painted canvases, recorded sounds, written words or even life-size models. One such storyteller through his drawn images is Ross Racine, a Canadian artist based in New York. He draws beautiful, elaborate and haunting aerial images of fictional suburban properties. Through his drawings he explores and critiques suburbia itself, a commonly perceived symbol of urban growth and decay. Their spatial layouts often embody various core values characteristic of suburban areas such as inaccessibility, exclusivity, utopian planning and so on. Every drawing is accompanied by an idyllic title, subtly supplementing the commentary on the residential areas. The roots of a suburb in the context of Bangalore might find its way back to the immediate post-independence period with the establishment of planned layouts such as Jayanagar or walled colonies for various PSU's, especially the ITI Colony. Recent developments of the real estate in Bangalore around the outskirts in the southern and eastern parts of the city find strong reflections in his images of the suburbia. Here is the conversation Ross Racine graciously agreed to over a few emails.

1

What inspired you to look at suburbs as subjects of your drawings?

There are several reasons why I chose suburbia; some are related to issues of form, some to issues of content.

Formally, among the various types of subject matter visible from air travel or aerial photographs, I was spontaneously attracted to suburbs because of their linear qualities. There is an analogy between their linear design, particularly in an area with few trees, and the lines in an artist's drawing on paper. One may consider a suburb viewed from above as simply a large drawing.

In terms of content, suburbs are to me symbolic of our global society, as they are the urban constructions, most often recent, that most clearly illustrate population growth, extensive land occupation, and wasteful overconsumption.

2

Have you ever sought to look at evolving suburban areas in newer cities around the world?

I am generally curious about all forms of urban development and, with the help of online aerial imagery, I do roam outside North America and Europe. But at this time, the familiar suburbs of the type I grew up in remain the perfect vehicle for my current concerns. I intend to continue working with aerial views in the coming years, but not necessarily with suburban subject matter. It's hard for me to say at this point, since I don't plan ahead far in the future; I rather tend to let inspiration lead me into unforeseen territory.

3

How have you structured an idea of a suburb through your drawings?

Through the third question, I was keen on finding out more about a) your process of translating ideas into your drawings. How do you b) decide on selecting certain visual elements to make your images of suburbs? c) What do you choose to exclude? How does that process of exclusion enrich your visuals? Feel free to elaborate on any aspect of your process I might be missing out here. My main interest lies in understanding the various elements that construct your drawn suburbs.

a) I sketch a lot on paper, mainly exploring street design ideas or brainstorming with some of my elements (ex: with houses or trees). I keep these sketches for possible future use. Many of them end up in the computer, where I modify them and create variations. After a while, I may add more definition on a promising sketch and maybe create its street layout in Illustrator, a program well adapted to this task. Finally, if I decide to make a full-fledged drawing out of it, I'll finalize the Illustrator layout, transfer it to Photoshop and build the image.

b) Originally, from the observation of aerial photographs I selected certain types of elements (ex: houses, lawns, driveways, streets, trees, etc.). I then created a vocabulary of my own renderings of each of these

elements. Currently I don't use aerial photos for such direct observation as much as I did in the beginning; I use them rather for general inspiration, and to discover new types of elements I could use.

c) I obviously exclude a lot of information. I need to make my images simpler than they would be if all the realistic detail were included. This is important and happens in all art that is based on observation, where the artist needs to find a balance between observation and invention, between including all the irregularities in observable reality and ensuring clarity of communication and originality of vision.

4

Have your drawings chronicled the changing nature of suburban landscapes?

Yes, in the sense of the scale of the ever-expanding extent of suburbia or the sense of being lost in its endless repetition. But, even as my drawings are understood as comments on contemporary suburbia, they do not readily offer more specific information on its evolution. I come upon my ideas for artwork in a very spontaneous manner. I prefer to create a drawing and then learn from it rather than have it illustrate a preconceived notion. In addition, once a drawing leaves the studio and steps out into the world, ready to be interpreted by viewers with different points of view, I need to accept a loss of control over the possible meanings of the work. I therefore learn a lot from viewers' comments on my work.

I get inspiration from a variety of sources. Obviously from the domain of urban planning, as in contemporary, historical or utopian city design. Also from maps (I have been a fan of maps since my childhood), from diagrams in general, and from readings on urban studies. On the other hand, some of my sources of inspiration are very far from city planning. Abstract painting for example, which fuels my interest in the links between the macro and micro views of the world, and between very large and very small phenomena.

5

The structure of your drawings (bird's-eye-view, indistinguishable landscape containing the suburb and so on) has been quite consistent, although the tone of your critique of suburban planning has varied over time. How have you negotiated that with the expressions of your interpretations of your subject?

The fifth question deals with a similar aspect of your process of creating your drawings, again. Although your drawings look "similar", they speak about their subjects in tones ranging from humor to sarcasm to deadpan "realism". Do you ever find your visual language limiting your conceptual expressions? If so, how do you negotiate the two?

This is a question about the relation between form and content in my work, a relation that is essentially a negotiation between the two. An image remains, first of all, based on form, that's why it's an image and not a paragraph of text. What the image looks like, its appearance is critical. It influences the artist during the creation of the work and is essential to the viewer's experience of the work. An image remains an image, before becoming a trigger for various interpretations. In this sense an image is always more than its possible and varied meanings.

Therefore I don't find my language limiting my conceptual expression, because the language and the conceptual expression merge in the work of art. Similar subject matter (aerial views of suburbia) used in conjunction with other visual languages, as illustrated in aerials by other artists, offer very different viewing experiences, although the underlying non-visual concepts can be very similar. This is the nature of visual art, as opposed to a type of illustration whose aim is to simply translate a non-visual concept into an image.