

In this issue, we feature the work of Ross Racine, a Canadian artist based in Montreal and New York. While it is almost inevitable to be immediately struck by his suburbs series, one is all the more so once informed that Ross works freehand, “stroke by stroke”, producing images that do not contain photographs or scanned materials of any kind. The photographic first-glance impression thus gives way to a more subtle compositional atmosphere.

As deceitful as the apparent realism is the “skeletonisation” of the suburban logic that Ross offers to us (here, we borrow the notion of skeleton from topology). In fact, the imaginal suburbs produced by Ross put before our eyes the neat endpoint of a process of planetary suburbanisation that, with its proliferation and recurrent (or recursive) morphogenesis, has lost reference to any organising centre. As the artist says, “these invented suburbs exaggerate existing situations and lead the subject matter into the investigative domain of science fiction.” It may well be that science fiction – more than horror – is exactly the lens needed to understand suburbs and suburban living in general.

The suburb, as we know, has always occupied an uncomfortable locus in urban planning. Indeed, it can be granted that the suburb remains an uncanny presence in planning thinking. On this point, Ross comments: “Examining the relation between design and actual lived experience, the images subvert the apparent rationality of urban design. Beyond the suburban example, my digital drawings are a way of thinking visually about design, the city and society as a whole”. Yet at the same time, Ross’ images implicitly beg one question: is there any rationality at all in urban design? Architectural modernism praised itself for being anti-traditionalist and thoroughly rational; but, most suburban development has been premised upon a more or less nostalgic view of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gemüt*. The ensuing foam-structure (or even, knot-structure) should not be surprising after all.

Is another Suburb possible? Ross’ point of view remains aerial. He eschews from bringing us into the lifeworld of the inhabitants of the places depicted here. Instead, he has chosen to deliver to us, without comments (*sans phrase*), the bare outcome of the operation. If there is a point of hope in such scenery, we believe, it is precisely in the insurgence of the in-between. The production of suburban space is so generous in interstitial topologies that the challenge to the catastrophic endpoint immediately comes from the imaginal and political levels of spatial experience. Ross’ science fiction suburbanism is, perhaps, an invitation to psychogeography and psychotopology.

*Mattias Kärrholm and Andrea Mubi Brighenti, lo Squaderno (Trento, Italy), no. 46 (Suburbs & Interstices), December, 2017*

Ross Racine uses spontaneous hand-drawn sketches as inspiration for his compositions. Drawing directly onto the computer using Illustrator and Photoshop, he converts them into complex visual renderings of suburban communities. (...) Racine presents suburban communities from an aerial view that upon first glance, appears to be plausible plans for an orderly suburban utopia with uniform homes and yards. After taking a closer look, the viewer is aware that something is amiss. (...) It is left to the viewer to decide whether Racine is portraying a plan for a neighborhood not yet constructed or one that is already built.

*Katherine Murdock, X-scapes (exhibition catalog), Visual Arts Center of New Jersey (Summit, NJ), April 2013*

Critiques of the suburbs rarely stray from charges that they are, at best, safe and predictable and, at worst, isolated and conformist. From the ticky-tacky houses spoofed in *Weeds* to the psychological unrest in *Donnie Darko* and *American Beauty*, mocking and pessimistic approaches to carefully ordered communities too often amount to retreads of old clichés, however true they may be. The twelve works in Ross Racine’s latest exhibition, “North of Piney Acres,” depicting vast bird’s-eye views of invented lots-and-blocks subdivisions, offer a refreshingly playful yet irrefutably critical perspective. Drawn freehand in Illustrator, layered in Photoshop, and exported as ink-jet prints, his pieces use imagery that borrows from 1930s aerial photography and satellite-based Google Earth to comment on the suburban population explosion of the mid- and late twentieth century. The rings of streets and houses in *Heavenly Heights*, 2008, ripple infinitely outward, a visual manifestation of the American housing booms that took place in the years following both World War II and 9/11. Racine’s persistent use of overcast monochrome evokes the midcentury white flight that emptied urban centers only to create other messes—in the environment, for example. Elsewhere, *West of Grassy Knolls*, 2010, departs from the allover compositions with its secluded, insular community plotted on a gray expanse as desolate as the moon.

While Dan Graham’s *Homes for America*, 1966, addressed mass production and consumption through deadpan parody, Racine amplifies the city planner’s logic with madcap humor. In *Elmwood and Oaklawn*, 2009, he places industrial buildings and

garbage dumps next to homes and ball fields, and the beach is nowhere to be found in *Goldenwood Shores*, 2009. In other works, swimming pools jump from front yard to back—if proper orientation can even be identified—and carless roads loop irrationally, lead nowhere, or never intersect. Dizzying but never oppressive, Racine's fictive neighborhoods come to suggest that urban designers today, devoted to sustainability and smart growth, have learned lessons from the past. Even residents are repurposing abandoned strip malls and big-box stores. There's life once again in the suburbs.

*Christopher Howard, "Critics' Picks: Ross Racine, The Front Room", Artforum (New York, online), May 2011*

(...) But the raw fact is, most of us are not so unique. Our lives, except for the smallest details, pretty much resemble the lives of others, particularly those in our social group, whatever it might be, defined by economic class, race, educational background and many others. The truth is that we are intensely social creatures and our social context often overwhelms our individual traits and aspirations. This would seem to be the message imbedded in Racine's drawings of suburbs.

Still, the mystery of these diagrams (for that is what they are) is to be found precisely in what is missing from them: the machinations of human desire and hope, which varies—if ever so slightly—from person to person.

Because each human creature is different from all others—think of DNA and each life's story—the ordinary and the normal are ultimately revealed to be paradigms that lead us away from the actuality of the human condition. Racine's drawings, through the extremity of their normality, bring us back. For this reason, they have a profoundly powerful, unforgettable effect.

*Lebbeus Woods, "Mystery of the Normal" in "Slow Manifesto", Princeton Architectural Press (New York), March 2011*

(...) The fine detailing, the degree of realism and also the choice of titles all combine to create a believable world in which viewers can readily imagine themselves. On the other hand, although their treatment is realistic, the images are based on a visual vocabulary that is very much abstract, as these aerial views reveal the definitely line-based character of suburban subdivisions. The artist himself admits this debt to abstraction.

(...) Suburbia is particularly potent subject matter for the artist, allowing a comment on society's occupation of the landscape in order to transform it. His images show an affinity with photographs of works of Land Art from a few decades ago, leading to an analogy between earthworks created by artists and suburban developments created by urban planners. Do these images show the excesses of urbanization as it encroaches on nature, or civilization's increasing control of its environment, or simply an artist's obsession with the contemporary urban landscape? In any case, the artist himself does not believe the works necessarily need to embody a single interpretation.

*Céline Éloy, FluxNews (Liège, Belgium), n°55, April 2011 (translated from the French)*

An ingenuous and gorgeous example of a more provocative alternative was also on display this autumn, featured in the both *Urban Times* and *Northcoast Zeitgeist*. Canadian-born New York artist Ross Racine is not a photographer. Racine's works, despite looking like photocollage, are in fact drawings, using *Illustrator* and *Photoshop*, and according to the artist, contain no elements of photos at all. Racine takes the geometry of the cul-de-sac past its logical end-point, working out subdivisions that are completely disconnected and insular, which is a rational impossibility. Likewise, he riffs the gimmicky, wasteful patterns of house-and-yard developments by making patterns of overly haphazard, over-paved, under-occupied clusters of residences.

*M. M. Jones, Bauzeitgeist (online), January 2011*

We find particularly interesting how his images address a variety of concepts so closely tied to the contemporary built environment, including the ubiquity of satellite imagery and the feeling of being watched, our growing familiarity with aerial viewpoints, and of course, the issue of sprawling suburbia. In a recent interview, Racine suggests that it is not so much about being watched as it is about watching; the viewer as the all-seeing observer, the decision-maker. Something that only becomes evident in front of an actual 24 x 32" print, where the viewer can examine the details within each "property", making the experience almost like eavesdropping.

*Ana Cañizares, Arkinet (Barcelona, online), June 2010 (translated from the Spanish by Archiblock)*

These amazing images are not photographs but drawings, and not of real places but of imagined ones. What is especially striking to me about Ross Racine's work is how real they seem, and that's not just because of the precision of his gift for drawing. It's also because in many ways the subdivisions he depicts are different, but not all that different, from the familiar.

Take *Highland Farms* shown at the top of this post. The lot sizes look right; the location in the middle of farmland looks right; the complete absence of walkable destinations looks right; the name of the subdivision certainly seems real. It's really only the circular configuration that makes us think of fiction rather than fact and, given some configurations we've seen in the Arizona desert, Texas, or Dubai, it's hard to be sure of even that. I might still have some doubt, if it were not for seeing some of the other images. Above is what we might think of, I suppose, as the ultimate disconnected cul-de-sac. It's called *Cedar Valley*.

*Kaid Benfield, Switchboard (Washington, DC, online), September 2009*

One of the many contentions against urban/suburban sprawl is its propensity to disturb the aesthetic of serene countryside to make way for generic networks of roads and cookie cutter housing design. Artist Ross Racine offers an alternative reality where subdivisions morph into the landscape in a more creative juxtaposition between the American Dream and the natural environment.

Although Racine's work escapes the constraints and traditions of real world subdivision design, it does provide insight into the types of potential that exist for evolving beyond standard urban sprawl. I am certainly not advocating any of these designs for the new standard in subdivision design, but I do find Racine's work inspirational as it is a return to trying to envision the overall aesthetic of the street layout and housing placement (something that has been of seemingly decreased importance in recent years). On the flip side of the coin, Racine's work also invokes a sense of impending doom and desperation. It shows the harsh visual impact that subdivisions can have. It also provides a fresh look at how inefficient the designs can be in terms of density and road networks (although some of the designs do show creative solutions to these problems).

*Josh O'Connor, Localplan (Asheville, NC, online), August 2009*

Artist Ross Racine draws aerial views of imaginary suburbs that blur the lines between reality and whimsy. The drawings borrow from real world examples of the sprawling suburbias so visible from any Google Map and create intense magnifications of the geometric patterns we see. Both fantastic and oddly dystopic at the same time, the images seem to belie a sense disorientation through disorder-by-order. Driving through any American suburb, this feeling may be well familiar. Row after row after spiral after spiral of organized, seemingly generic homes is supposed to be a system of order. But Elm Court, Sycamore Lane, and Poplar Street all share such similarities that it's often impossible to identify where one is. The images created by Racine amplify and, in a way, seem to texturize this feeling.

*Architecture For Guerillas (online), August 2009*

Over the past years the Canadian artist Ross Racine has designed a series of digital fake suburbs. All drawings can hardly be separated from real suburbs and so are their names, which include *Cherry Meadows*, *Walnut Village* and *Happy Hollow*. The collection called Subdivisions is undoubtedly inspired by maps of real suburbs, which have become real pieces of art when seen from the air. The critique of modern planning and urbanism behind these drawings is really sharp. Racine's creations reveal the everlasting blueprint tradition of common planning practice. The paradox of neo-traditional planning is explicitly uncovered. New neighborhoods have to look organic and from above they do, but in fact they are carefully designed, according to modernistic principles.

*Joop de Boer, Volume (Amsterdam, online), May 2010*

## "THE SUBURBS ARE US"

*Vu d'en haut* presents thirty-one works by Ross Racine, a Canadian artist who was awarded the prize of the 2011 Liège print biennial.

Green spaces, roads, developed areas, all observed from above, are the principal pictorial elements in the work of this artist. Fascinated since childhood by maps, Racine creates landscapes of geometrically shaped suburbs, sometimes concentric, sometimes even representational as when they are shaped like rockets or cups. Most of the subdivisions are lost in a barren no man's land, creating a striking contrast with the dense mesh of often twisting streets, all lined with endlessly repeating residential properties. On the crisscrossing streets or lonely highways in each of the communities, most probably live people, individuals and families. The artist easily stokes our imaginative powers: like children carefully observing an anthill, we are quickly absorbed by these urban landscapes that easily evoke the immense outdoor line drawings of vanished civilizations.

Some of the images express a feeling of immense boredom while others provoke a measure of anxiety, as when we contemplate those extra long stretches of winding streets leading to dead-ends. Mirroring daily life, the never-ending multiplicity of roads in Racine's images alludes to the choices and decisions we all need to make throughout our lives. What makes us make a turn to the left rather than one to the right or keeps us going straight ahead? Racine indeed considers his constructed landscapes a metaphor of our lives, forcing us to confront unpredictable and anxious futures, deliriously snaking into the unknown. These North American subdivisions, secret loves of the artist, are first and foremost models, "symbols of society as a whole, a society that creates its own environment, in a way its own new nature through urban design and architecture. The suburbs are us."

### **Between realism...**

Racine's esthetic compositions display a highly realistic treatment. Although rendered with as much detail as photographs, they are nevertheless digital drawings. Evoking inevitably the works of Robert Smithson, or on another scale, Google Earth, the prints are created by an intriguing process. They are first drawn freehand on the computer with the help of a graphics tablet and then reworked with image manipulation software, such as Photoshop and Illustrator. "The process is essentially a combination of drawn material and various modifications done to this material by the software", says the artist about his entirely virtual working environment.

### **... and fiction**

Beyond reflecting the demographic explosion of American post-war suburbia and mirroring a society dedicated to overconsumption, Racine's aerial views show us the relation between urban design and the imagined lives down below. With their tangle of unruly streets, these communities subvert the accepted notion of the suburban environment as a bastion of tranquility and rationality.

*Sophie Decharneux, Fanny Moens, "Ross Racine - Vu d'en haut" (exhibition catalog), Musée des beaux-arts (Liège, Belgium), March 2013*