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Cul de Sac

By

Jen Moon

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

Therese Mulligan, Chair

Date

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Date

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Date

February 2007

Acknowledgements

As my graduate studies draw to a close and I reflect on my time here at the Rochester Institute of Technology, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for all those who have contributed to my education.

I am greatly indebted to Dr. Therese Mulligan, my thesis chair, and committee members, Dan Larkin and Jessica Lieberman. Each has been kind enough to share their considerable talents. Professor Jessica Lieberman's enthusiasm is contagious. As a result of her knowledge, more often than not conversations with her resulted in a flood of new ideas. Professor Dan Larkin's technical expertise was an invaluable guide. Even more, I will forever value his unflagging support. Dr. Therese Mulligan's knowledge of the art world is immense and her reputation as a critical thinker and writer is well deserved. She used her knowledge and skill to help me find the words for my images. She expected, and brought out, my best.

I am also in the debt of my friends and classmates. You have shared in my good times and helped me through some of the most challenging experiences of my life. My life is richer for having you all.

Finally, I wish to thank my family. They have all helped me to believe in myself. I cannot imagine a more loving or accepting group of people. I must mention my parents in particular. The support I have received from them is unparalleled. It has never wavered, not even a little. I am truly blessed.

Cul de Sac

By

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B.F.A., Art, University of Iowa, 2002

M.F.A., Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2007

Abstract

This thesis examines suburbia's relationship to nature and culture.

From the beginning of my artistic career I have been interested in photographing the landscape, striving to make a familiar view unfamiliar as a means to question how we use space and the impact this use has on us. Prior to graduate school I sought out views foreign to me, but as a graduate student at the Rochester Institute of Technology, I turned inward to the familiar, the landscapes I know most intimately—suburbia. Discovering a way to both question and express my relationship with suburbia led me to experiment with several mediums. From traditional 4x5 black-and-white photography to color photography, from salt sculpture to video, I was willing to try my hand at any medium that might bring me closer to my subject. I used these mediums to explore night imagery, which I focused on as a means to investigate themes important to me.

As I have compiled my body of work on suburbia, it seems I have come full circle as evidenced in my show *Cul de Sac*. At first I was drawn by the allure of the American Dream. As I focused closer on my subjects, I came to look at suburbia not in its details but in its simplicity. What I saw were not the objects, not the homes or the people in them, so much as the space around them. I realized the spaces represented the emptiness I found in suburbia. For me, suburbia was not about the promise but the price.

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Introduction

From the beginning of my artistic career I have been interested in photographing the landscape, striving to make a familiar view unfamiliar as a means to question how we use space and the impact this use has on us. Prior to graduate school I sought out views foreign to me, but as a graduate student at the Rochester Institute of Technology, I turned inward to the familiar, the landscapes I know most intimately—suburbia. Discovering a way to both question and express my relationship with suburbia led me to experiment with several mediums. From traditional 4x5 black-and-white photography to color photography, from salt sculpture to video, I was willing to try my hand at any medium that might bring me closer to my subject. I used these mediums to explore night imagery, which I focused on as a means to investigate themes important to me such as suburbia's relationship to nature and culture.

Origins, Influences and Themes

I began photographing in earnest as an undergrad at the University of Iowa. At first my attraction to photography was visceral. I chose a variety of subjects based on their photogenic qualities rather than content, and as a result, what was lacking in my images was something of me. It wasn't until I discovered night photography that I found an outlet to create and express my particular point of view for the first time.

With night photography, it was very important I discover the images complete. I never scouted potential sites during the day because I was only interested in how the night revealed the scene, undisturbed and whole within itself. The only exception would be to occasionally light the image with my car's headlights to highlight the view.

During this time, I photographed rural and small-town nightscapes in Eastern Iowa. Iowa is an agricultural state where many of the residents' livelihoods depend on the land; however, I grew up in its largest city, Des Moines, and rural Iowa was what you drove by on the way to somewhere else. Documenting rural Iowa took me to spaces that I was witness to but not a part of, the industry and agriculture where Iowa's economy resides.

My photographs from this time are quiet, calm and orderly images (figure 1). For many, the night is full of the unknown and thus is something to fear, but for me, it is peaceful and welcoming. There is no anxiety in the images and little tension, and it was surprising to hear over and over how the seeming comfort of those photographs



was so unexpected. These images were my honest reaction to the night. After all my early experimentation, I was finally photographing what felt uniquely mine.

I was most interested in empty spaces where people played out their lives during the day. Views were composed as theatrical sets. I thought about what happened in those train yards, farms, gravel roads and parks during the day. I preferred the spaces to people, the absence and potential in the scene rather than the actors. You can't take the image people present to the world at face value, but you can trust and learn from the evidence they leave behind.

Over the next two school years, from fall 2000 to winter 2001, I spent two semesters in India. My photography developed as I faced new challenges in that diverse land of a billion people. Again, shooting at night led me to insights impossible to find in the crush of daily life. Being able to look at the empty theater of India without all the crowds and chaos of the day led me to create introspective views of the spaces and rhythm of Indian life, to reflect on Indian art and how I represented what was significant to me, a college student from the American Midwest (figure 2).

The work I created was much less a record of their space than a documentary of my experience of the space. I attempted to make the foreign familiar by framing images as I had in Iowa. I also looked for structures that were similar to things I'd seen in the U.S.



Searching in this way made me consider how the spaces were used and what objects and structures were used for. Returning home, I had a new perspective about my own world by going outside it; it allowed me to see the familiar as unfamiliar.

I finished my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and entered graduate school at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York. My undergraduate work had given me the technical skills to make photographs, but it was in graduate school that I found I had something to say. For the first time, I turned my camera towards my home—suburbia.

The next step became clear to me while I was home for Thanksgiving break and walking on the paths that wind behind the houses in my parents' subdivision and through little wooded areas. I was reminded of the night walks that I started taking when my family moved to the suburbs in 1989, and for the first time I began to consider why the night had captivated my interest. Night meant solace, a place where I had complete confidence and a chance to ruminate on ideas. I wasn't ready to give up on it yet. I had experimented with photographing spaces during the day and had found the images lacking. It was time to stop photographing other landscapes and begin to look to my own.

My family had aspired to move to the suburbs, and when I was 12, we did. Our move had a great impact on me. It represented a class jump for us—we were the first in my extended family to move to suburbia. My mom was the first to graduate from high school and I was the first to attend college. Suburbia was the promised land of middle-class success that was received as payment for years of hard work.

The photographs in my early suburban work were closely tied to the concept of the American Dream, that dream of suburbia in which shared middle-class values and the familiarity of space and place evoke a sense of safety, stability and community. The design of the suburbs with its winding tangle of cul-de-sacs and dead ends means that you know virtually everyone who drives down your street. Beyond the familiarity of people in your neighborhood, there is also a sense of safety in how similar the houses look. I thought that meant we would fit in, we would become a suburban family like the ones I saw in my favorite commercials. However, the suburbia I experienced also meant a homogeneity of society and culture that was deadening. The simultaneous attraction and

repulsion of the suburbs was difficult to represent and I was looking for a way to express it.

When I first began making images of suburbia, I was surprised and frustrated by their reception. An example of the rift between my perception and that of my professors



can be found in *Neighbors* (figure 3). In this image, I saw the

allure of the manicured world.

The balance inherent in the design of the landscape appealed to my perfectionism. The house in the center was

spotlighted—glorified. The

color in the sky was unique and

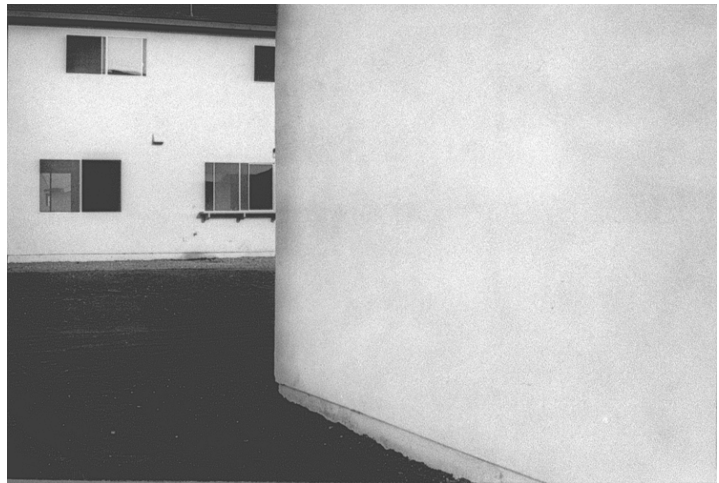
alluring. Now, however, I see the disturbing view expressed by my professors. The neighboring houses are encroaching on the small house in the center. The angle of the camera tips the two-silhouetted houses into the center house. The sky is eerie and unnatural, ranging from a cool, blue grey on the left side of the image to a warm peachy taupe on the right. There are no clouds visible, just a solid palette of transitioning color.

As my work developed I explored the history of suburban photographers. No discussion would be complete without mentioning *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, an exhibition at George Eastman House in 1975. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, assistant curator William Jenkins concludes that the images in the exhibition are less about the subject than about the process: “As individuals the photographers take great pains to prevent the slightest trace of judgment or opinion from

entering their work... if “New Topographics” has a central purpose it is simply to postulate, at least for the time being, what it means to make a documentary photograph.”¹

The passive frame and sense of neutrality that exist in much of the work included in the exhibition were at odds with my own artistic vision

(figure 4). Growing up a generation later gave me strong emotional ties to suburbia, but the understanding expressed by the artists of *New Topographics*



shaped my ability to manipulate the photographic document. The impassionate images of *New Topographics* are passive and uninviting, a world you do not want to enter. These sit in juxtaposition to my images, which strive to draw the viewer in as well as repulse. I am less interested in exploring the nature of documentary photography than the nature of my subject and how it affects me.

Television provides an example of how I approach suburbia through my personal relationship to it. For me, television is integral to the suburban experience. In *TV House* (figure 5), the blue window is a microcosm of the outside world. The large plant and blue light in the window mirror the blue sky and trees surrounding the exterior. Everyone’s inside, alone, learning how to fit in.

¹ William Jenkins, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man Altered Landscape*, (Rochester, NY: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), p. 7.

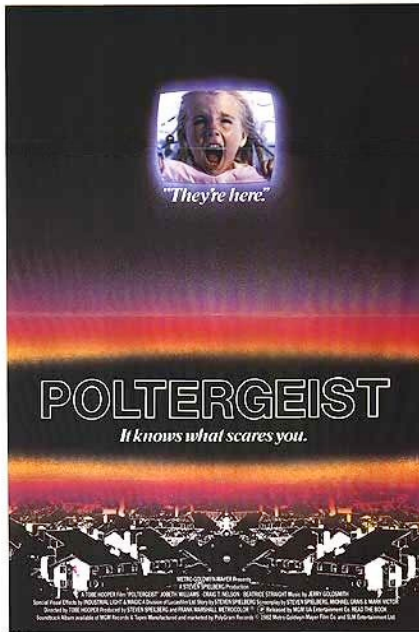
Television is a powerful force for standardization, causing the homogenization of dress, manners, and desire. Middle- to upper-middle-class neighborhoods are an embodiment of the American Dream idealized on television. In addition, television inspires and affirms the conformity present in suburbia and its blue light is the stand-in for people in my images.

For me, television also served as the stand-in for suburbanites during my childhood (figure 5). I had been exposed to 12 years of pop culture representations of suburbia by the time I had moved there. Thus I formed an expansive and detailed impression of the suburbs years before actually setting foot in one. Two examples in particular stand out as relevant to this discussion and my experiences; the films *Poltergeist* and *Edward Scissorhands*.



Moving to the suburbs was like moving into a television set. The pristine lawns, perfect patio furniture and muted palette of house paint appealed to the perfectionist in me and yet at the same time I found it disturbing. I was reminded of *Poltergeist* (figure 6), a film in which a family moves into their dream home in a new subdivision only to discover the houses were built on cursed land. A tree attacks Robbie, the son, through his bedroom window. A daughter, Carol Anne, is sucked into a netherworld through the family television set.

I was five years old when *Poltergeist* was released and not much older than that when I first saw the film. Seeing it at such a young age left a lasting impression on me; as a young girl, I especially identified with Carol Anne. It would be years before I experienced suburbia firsthand, and the idea of something so frightening lurking beneath the surface of that stable middle-class neighborhood challenged my other experience to the comforting, pleasant concept of suburbia. The trailer for the film starts out by explaining that the development is just like any other and each house looks just like the one next door. The implied safety of conformity is challenged by the horrors lurking beneath. It seems obvious that the more disturbing qualities of suburban life were not lost on writer-producer Steven Spielberg.



Just as the film portrays a suburban neighborhood with an ominous threat beneath the surface, I strove to suggest a similar ominous mood in some of my own images many years later. In *Three Bushes* (figure 7), three small manicured bushes cower as they are surrounded by silhouetted ground below and trees that reach completely overhead. A rich, softly streaked sky occupies the center of the image, suggesting the duration of extended time. The threat of nature taking back this suburban scene is palpable.

In the film *Edward Scissorhands* (figure 8), the threat to suburbia exists not from within suburbia but rather from outside it. Danger comes from difference. The houses and people in the film are swathed in exaggerated pastels that draw attention to the

calculated color palette used in suburbs. A well-meaning resident brings the title character Edward, into suburbia.

At first, Edward is a disaster everywhere he goes because he is not like anyone else—instead of hands, he has scissors. He begins to fit in by manicuring this ultra manicured world, first bushes, then pets and finally the people themselves. While carving an



ice sculpture he creates snow for the first time; before Edward, the snow in suburbia was fake. The residents cautiously begin to accept him, but because his individuality threatens equilibrium he cannot remain there. His difference enhances their lives, but it also makes him dangerous, not only physically, but existentially as well. Because of his hands--his difference--he accidentally kills a resident. He must leave the development forever for their safety and his. He is remembered and appreciated, but only when he has



been removed. For years after, tales are told of how snow became real.

Edward Scissorhands brought real snow to the suburbs; nature not controllable by suburbia, and in many of my pictures, snow dominates the scene, heightening the line

between nature and culture. By photographing late at night during or just after a snowfall, I looked to capture a pristine setting with no intrusions upon the wintry blanket. I was particularly aware of how suburban planning sought to subjugate nature and how

the presence of snow seemed to upset that plan. The snow breaks through and sculpts its own landscape. In addition, night breaks through the controlled veneer of suburbia. The suburbs are not designed for viewing at night. Landscaping lights switch off in late evening and activity grinds to a halt.

White House (figure 9) is an example of the type of image I sought. Nature has retaken the manicured landscape. The thick layer of freshly fallen snow has been molded and shaped by strong winds.

Night photography is ideal for capturing snow untouched and natural, before it is moved and marred. The cloudless night has left the sky black and the snow textured shades of gray and white. A blanket snow has taken over the refined lot. It has seemingly overtaken the house, resigning it to the background.



In 1973, photographer Bill Owens prefaced his book *Suburbia* by explaining his point of view relative to his subject: “This book is about my friends and the world I live in. In the fall of 1968 I began working as a photographer for the Livermore (California) Independent... The people I met enjoy the life-style of the suburbs. They have realized

the American Dream.”² He presents a positive attitude toward suburbia and its inhabitants but then counters it with the statement: “To me nothing seemed familiar, yet everything was very, very familiar. At first I suffered from culture shock. I wanted to photograph everything, thousands of photographs.”³

Owens’s expression of culture shock and the desire to photograph everything suggests the anomaly of suburbia. Suburbia isn’t just tract housing and manicured lawns; the entire community functions differently. Owens discussed and documented suburbia as a foreign place, implying that suburbia is abnormal and worthy of study. His work goes beyond the images of inhabitants and their neighborhoods. It includes records of how suburbanites carry out their day-to-day lives, everything from how they pay their



bills and clean the bathroom to with whom and how they celebrate holidays.

In *Untitled* (figure 10), a couple stands in their kitchen. The woman is feeding a child a spoonful of baby food. All three look at the camera, and the

caption below them reads, “We’re really happy. Our kids are healthy, we eat good food and we have a really nice home.” The caption suggests that they rate their happiness based on the good food and nice house they live in—a shallow assessment of happiness and I suspect Owens is fully aware of that. On the flipside, I believe he is sincere when he

² Bill Owens, *Suburbia*, (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), p. 5.

³ Owens, *Suburbia*, p. 5.

writes that these are his friends and he enjoys living in the suburbs. His work straddles the line between criticizing and rejoicing suburbia. I believe few residents of suburbia



would find that the book was critical, but to a viewer who finds suburbia problematic, this book represents what is troublesome. I aspire for my own work straddle this same line.

At first I was interested in the deviation found in more established suburbs such as my family's neighborhood. Older suburban landscapes are altered and shaped by their residents. To find images in these

developments, I scanned the landscape for anything that stood out--a special reflection or unique lawn ornament, something different for a place to start. I then further investigated with a walk around the area to determine whether there was a view worthy of photographing. *Untitled* (figure 11) is an example of the types of images I was interested in. I relied on the strange pink and blue color palette and overgrown trees and shrubs for the composition. The houses in the image are barely visible and barely identifiable as suburban.

I gradually moved away from the older suburbs, thanks in no small part to the work of Todd Hido. His images helped me define what I was interested in and this had a dramatic effect on what and how I chose to photograph. The similarity between our works was upsetting to me at first. It was hard to ignore how much some of my images looked like his. *Untitled* (figure 12) is an

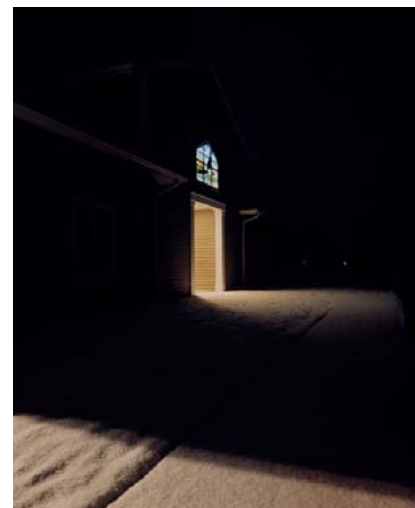




image I took of a suburban church and the use of light and color palette resemble images of Hido such as *Untitled* (figure 13). I was disconcerted to find another photographer's work that possessed such a similar sensibility. With further investigation and reflection, that discovery proved to be a defining moment in my work. I was able to clarify my own intentions by studying his photographs.

Hido's images are of an outsider looking in at a lonely, closed-off world. They are isolated and uneasy, filled with evidence inviting the viewer to complete the narrative. They are images of older suburbs and inspire a sense of nostalgia in viewers. Lighted windows in almost every image draw in the viewer to consider the people inside (figures 13 and 14). My images, on the other hand, are not nostalgic. There is no narrative for the viewer to complete. Until this point I had photographed in both new and established suburbs, but by studying Hido's work, it became clear to me that my interest was in investigating what I thought of as "new suburbia" or "sprawl."

Sprawl has become a derisive term for poorly planned suburban growth. In *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*,

authors Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck define sprawl as an invention, an abstract system of carefully separated pods of single use where daily needs



are only accessible by car. This is in opposition to traditional neighborhoods, which are naturally occurring, pedestrian friendly and diverse. Daily needs are accessible by foot.⁴

There are five components of sprawl: housing subdivisions, shopping centers, office parks, civic institutions and roadways. In cities, however, different types of structures are interspersed throughout residential areas, and people meet their neighbors at the post office or corner store. By placing all residential areas apart from other types of buildings, residents of suburbia lose the opportunity to socialize with neighbors; in other words, this type of segregation fosters isolation. The homogeneity of structures goes beyond the style of houses erected to the very fact that houses are the only type of structures visible.

Looking at Hido's images also helped me to clarify my interpretation with the chromogenic print. My images tend to be much darker than his. The decision to print my images this way was intuitive; the mood I wanted to create was never present in a lighter image. My negatives are well exposed and I could print them as light as day, but my view always gravitated to a darker range.



William Eggleston is another photographer who photographs the suburbs in color and his sophisticated use of color was inspiring to me. In her book, *The New Color Photography*, Sally Eauclore wrote, "Eggleston overlays

color and texture upon a stable geometric scheme... Such a stolid symmetry could easily

⁴ Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk & Jeff Speck, Suburban Nation: The Rise Of Sprawl And The Decline Of The American Dream (New York: North Point Press, 2000), p. 4.

deaden an image's plastic power and emotive energy. But, Eggleston fleshes out this balance with juxtapositions of color, value, texture and size contained within similar shapes.”⁵ This is seen in *Southern Environs of Memphis* (figure 15). The composition allows the eye to follow the curb up the center of the image to the parked car in the center of the image and then circle back along the edges of the house, sidewalk and grass. Eggleston uses color descriptively—the images are not about the color but rather about the subject. In my first images in color I didn't understand how to restrain the image this way.

I never considered photographing the suburbs in black and white. My experience was so closely tied to color I could imagine it no other way. For me, the houses' muted matching palette, the even, lush green of lawns never pockmarked by dead spots or weeds, and the ubiquitous blue light from TVs inside are intrinsic to suburbia. Sky is the only variant open to a wide range of colors at night.

In my previous bodies of work, the use of color seemed unnecessary, as though the color were laid on top of the images, not integral to them. This was different. To realize my vision, the images had to be in color. I could not visualize suburbia without it. The fanciful, exaggerated pastels in *Edward Scissorhands* disturbed the still waters of its suburbia, but for me real suburbia's muted palette of acceptable house colors was just as arresting: Everyone gets their piece of the dream as long as the colors match.

Continuing my interest in making the familiar unfamiliar, I looked to photographers such



as Jan Staller for inspiration. Staller's work is disorienting (figures 16). The images play

⁵ Sally Euclaire, *The New Color Photography*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), p. 21.

with scale in such a way that they confuse reality. In figure 16, the tall concrete structures are unfamiliar, and the viewer has no immediate reference to identify what they are or how large they should be. The only reference point is the buildings on the other side of the water, which are small enough that they barely hint at the size of the concrete structures in the foreground. The color of the image is an unnatural shade of blue.

The Blue Print (figure 17) is an example of one of my images that employs similar techniques. The massive mound of snow in the center is unexpected and confuses the



scale in the image. In addition, color is an important component. I had discovered while working with night imagery that there is a point each morning before sunrise when a blue cast envelops the world, and I made it my

habit to make an image each morning as my night of shooting came to a close. Thus, a blue tonality dominates the image that exists only as a result of the film's reaction to the light at the hour of exposure. The yellow light in the window of the house on the left juxtaposes the blue in the overall scene.

Yellow and blue are opposite on the color wheel and in color printing, blue and yellow sit at opposite ends of the same scale. An image can be too blue or too yellow but not both. The interaction of blue and yellow became a motif in my photographs. The blue light of snow and night skies is also found inside the blue glow of television peeking

through the windows. Yellow is the warm color of interior house lights but also of streetlights.

The next logical step in my suburban exploration was to enter these houses and photograph from the inside out, challenging me to get far closer to my subjects than ever before. Up until this point I had primarily concerned myself with the dream—and my paradox—of suburbia, the ideal that existed only at some distance. Although I photographed often in my family's subdivision, I rarely photographed a house whose occupants I knew. While the images were personal and related to my experience, the subjects were foreign to me. Gaining access to the interiors of people's homes was difficult. I considered several strategies for photographing strangers' houses but in the end I found it practical to stick to the houses of family, neighbors and friends.

I had to make a choice about how much to intervene in the creation of the images. I decided not to move objects in rooms I was photographing. I would also refrain from using any light sources other than television sets and streetlights streaking in through open windows and blinds.

In my first attempts at interior photographs I focused on trying to express something specific to



suburbia. It seemed to me that the obvious way to accomplish that was to suggest something of the exterior. In *Pothos and the Johnsons* (figure 18), I mixed interior and exterior into one image. I juxtaposed the blue television light illuminating the foreground space against the yellowed exterior light filtered through the window screen. I was also

interested in playing with scale through the window. The evidence of television had flickered in so many windows night after night as I made the exterior images, and I now wanted to see from the inside out through TV's blue light.

As my experimentation continued I was drawn to more and more abstract views. I began to play with selective focus. I wanted to push the limits of my images and see



how far I could stretch them while still communicating my ideas. In the image *Soft Hall* (figure 19), I began to simplify forms. Very little in the image is in focus; only the edge of the doorframe is sharp. On the far wall the reflected blue light of

television is once again juxtaposed against the yellow roofline of the house across the street. I was interested in repeatedly pairing the two colors together to explore the relationship of inside/outside, and I countered my earlier images where the interiors, when not filled with the blue light of television, were often bathed in warm yellow. *The Blue Print* (figure 17) is an example of how I used blue and yellow in an exterior photograph. In *Soft Hall* I've turned the arrangement on itself, playing on the idea of what is inside mimicking what is outside.

Nancy's TV (figure 20) was one of the last images I made in this interior series. Over time I gravitated more to the TV itself. At last it had become the subject in my images. Making this image, I began to realize I was moving further and further away

from my initial intention. My focus was turning to my interest in television and culture and away from suburbia.

As I completed my work with the interior photographs, I knew I wanted to return to exterior images. I was proud of the original exterior images, but I felt they had not yet addressed the complexity of my



experience with suburbia. As I began again the photographs were more difficult to make. I wasn't sure where my photographs could go next and I had to look harder as the images came slower and slower.

The difficulty I had in discerning where to take my work next happened to coincide with my enrollment in Patti Ambrogi's Moving Image class. In the class she taught us how to work with the program Final Cut Express. As I learned how to use video cameras by working with ones from the cage, I became engrossed and knew I would be working in video for quite some time. I needed my own camera to have the freedom to experiment, so I purchased a compact Sony camera—the PC350. This camera's slow shutter functions and night vision capabilities made it ideal for me. Although I wasn't sure where all this experimentation would take my work, I was certain the night was still a key component.

At the same time, I had become fascinated with the idea of endless suburbia. Whether I was in Rochester, New York, or Urbandale, Iowa, the suburbs always seemed the same. I decided to make a video piece that would be hours long, an endless drive through suburbia. In doing so, I began to focus on the idea of the 'in-between.' Located

on the edges of cities, suburbs exist in between city and rural, culture and nature. Since the development of the first suburbs, houses have spread farther and farther apart. The impact of this isolation is both positive and negative—residents are freed from the annoying habits of their neighbors, but they are also left without the support of community. I wanted to capture some of this duality. To add to this notion of in between, it was important that the light remained twilight, never day, never night.

Making a video that was an endless stream of houses was difficult. The first technical issue to overcome was finding a way to keep the image consistent. It was important to me that I not repeat any of the houses in the video—I wanted it to feel as though the same houses were shown again and again, but in actuality they would all be different. To achieve this end, I used a map of Rochester to select which neighborhoods to videotape each night so there wouldn't be any overlap. To keep the camera position consistent, I placed my tripod in the passenger side of the front seat of my car. It was easy to replicate its placement night after night—it only fit into the space one way. Finally, I tried to keep my car at a consistent speed, about 5 miles per hour.

At most there was only a 10- to 15-minute window of twilight each night. I would arrive in a selected neighborhood a few minutes before the sun went down, roll down my passenger-side window and set my camera up. I began filming as soon as the sun lowered below the horizon, stopping as soon as the natural light was lost.

After weeks of videotaping I had hours of video of twilight drives in suburban developments. It was imperative to make the video as seamless as possible, and I experimented with several transitions to locate the smoothest one. In the end the video was more than three hours long. Although I had also recorded sound as I made the video, I elected not to use it because I wanted the experience to be a wholly visual one.

While editing *Twilight Drive* (figure 21), I experimented with different filters available in Final Cut and I used part of the footage I shot for *Twilight Drive* to create a



new piece. I chose one night's drive in a series of cul-de-sacs that I had grown particularly fond of. The evening was cloudy gray and I was drawn to how pixilated the image was as the sun went down and the tape was underexposed.

I stumbled on the mirror filter and was struck by the video's appearance; it encapsulated a different view of suburbia than my previous still imagery. The image of the houses as I drove around the maze of cul-de-sacs created the illusion that the houses were replicating, growing out of themselves and then folding back into nothingness.

I had a microphone attached to the video camera, and as I filmed, the microphone recorded the sound of my tires on the pavement. The evening I shot this footage was particularly cold after a mild day. The snow and ice had melted and refrozen, and the sound of my tires rolling over it was a crackling rumble as though the sound came from the houses as they were emerging from the ground. I titled the piece *Birthing Suburbia* (figure 22).



I wanted to convey the feeling of endless suburbia and unstoppable growth, and the cul-de-sac was the perfect location to explore these ideas. In the beginning, curvilinear streets originated from pathways responding to a steep landscape. Today,

however, their popularity has nothing to do with responding to the natural landscape. In *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck argue that this is because there are no honorable sites to create terminal vistas.⁶ The traditional model for city design has been a straight street that ends with an honorable site such as a courthouse, church or other grand structure, which provides a focal point to break up the design. The curvilinear design is so often used today to break up the monotony of straight streets because there are no more honorable sites. Civic and cultural buildings are now separated from housing areas and are surrounded by large parking lots.

Another feature of curvilinear streets is their ability to dissuade traffic. The confusing nature of a maze of cul-de-sacs and curvilinear streets is enough to convince most travelers to go around rather than through a sub development. This goes back to the idea of safety being fostered in suburbia. Because driving through a subdivision is never a shortcut, you know that most of the people driving down the streets are either residents or guests of residents.

Working on *Birthing Suburbia* and *Twilight Drive*, I felt satisfied with the new approach to suburbia, but I was unsure how to continue the exploration or translate these same ideas about in-between and endless suburbia to my photographs. I felt strongly that I needed to take a break from suburbia until I had a specific idea of how to proceed, so I began videotaping and photographing anything that caught my interest. One afternoon I videotaped a saltshaker at a restaurant as I waited for a friend, and over the next few days I filmed several more saltshakers. I was taken by the ubiquity of salt; there is a saltshaker

⁶ Duany, Plater-Zyberk & Speck, Suburban Nation: The Rise Of Sprawl And The Decline Of The American Dream, p. 35.

on almost every dining table in almost every house and restaurant. Suddenly it occurred to me that salt was the metaphor for the corrosive and preservative attributes of suburbia I had witnessed.

I began reading about salt and purchasing every different type of salt I could find. Instead of filming shakers I was far more interested in the salt itself. I made videos of salt moving in buckets, shaking and finally being poured. It was this early video that gave me the idea of projecting my images onto salt.

I purchased about 50 pounds of salt, a tracing projector, two ladders and a long, thick plank of wood. I used the ladders and plank of wood to hold up and steady the heavy buckets of salt as I poured them into a plastic pool. I used a black backdrop behind the ladders to keep the back wall from showing up in the video, and with the lights turned out, I projected one of my photographs onto the slowly falling salt. The effect was reminiscent of early film stock (figure 23).



My next experiments with salt were sculptural. I tried many types of adhesives to coat materials such as wood and plastic. My goal was to make a privacy fence out of or coated in salt. After trying a dozen or so possible methods I found that a spray adhesive created the closest look I wanted. I used thick kosher salt mixed with regular table salt to thoroughly coat the fence and still keep the glistening look reminiscent of ice or snow that was lighted. I lighted the fence with landscaping lights to achieve a twinkle.

Birdhouses also became an interest of mine during this time. I had seen some that were small replicas of the real suburban houses in whose lawns they resided. I

experimented with growing salt crystals out the windows and doors of the little houses. The birdhouses served as models of suburban houses as well as speaking to suburbia's taming of nature. Salt enveloping the houses was a physical manifestation of suburbia preserving and destroying both culture and nature.

Working with the salt allowed me to work out many of my impressions of suburban life. My relationship to suburbia is complicated and I had become overwhelmed. By exploring the attributes of salt, I was able to find a middle path that represented both my positive and negative feelings and I began to photograph the suburbs at night again. The night still provided the intimacy and clarity so important to my work, but my view had shifted.

After working with video and salt sculpture I began investigating other views of suburbia, looking to the space around the houses I was photographing. In *Cul-de-Sac*



(figure 24), an expanse of backyards and sky makes up the majority of the image while the houses themselves create a neutral bolt through the center of the image. I was no longer interested in any specific houses but

rather the spaces in between them. The grass is rust colored and dry. The houses are a range of pale neutral colors. The vibrant blue glow of television burns in the windows.

Investigating the space around the houses allowed me to pull my focus back a step and explore larger implications of the impact of suburbia on community.

Another image I made immediately following the salt work was *Untitled* (figure 25). I was again examining the space around houses. The foreground is filled with rustling tall grass in auburn shades as it slowly dies in autumn. The houses are once again small and relegated to the background.

White-tipped like old grave markers, stakes placed for future houses fill the middle ground.

To find these images, I explored the outskirts of different subdivisions, the newest I could find. The



moment all of the homes on a street were completed, while everything was still new and fresh, was the time I found most interesting. When my own family moved to the suburbs, our house was the last on our street to be completed and our street was on the edge of our subdivision. Only a block away you'd run into cornfields. This was the type of street that best expressed my interest in exploring the dichotomy of wild and tamed, weeds and lawn, rural and suburb. This was the type of place I needed to photograph (figure 26).

Following this same idea of 'in-between' and edges, I began to look directly in between the houses. The space there embodied so many of the layers I was looking for. Through the lens of my camera the houses could be layered and look close to each other. The concept of liminality was my focus in this work. I was fascinated by edges—the

edges of houses paired with the space surrounding it, edges of subdivisions, edges of property and sides of houses or edges of houses themselves. The edges brought me to the



threshold of understanding suburban spaces in a new way.

The images show spaces that for the most part are only seen by residents while they groom their property. Maintaining a proper

yard is important to observe property lines. Mowed lines are the only defining feature delineating one person's yard from another. There are rarely windows on the sides of houses anymore, so there is no view into one house from another. In these images the houses almost have the appearance of blind fortresses. The lack of windows gives the appearance of being blind, that residents aren't interested in each other, yet the lawn fetish suggests otherwise. In *The Lure of the Local*, author Lucy Lippard explores the concept of maintaining privacy in the suburbs while still finding a way to keep up with the Jones's: "Picture windows give onto the street—something of a contradiction, since privacy is one of the suburb's touted advantages... Concern for appearance and keeping up with the Joneses has been considered the source of the suburban lawn and garden

fetishes... Parks were supposed to be redundant in the suburbs where everyone had their own little private park-yard, but nowhere is communal space more needed.”⁷

As I began to photograph the space in between houses I realized I would have to get closer. Where homes were background before, I was now interested in showing the sides of the houses as well. To include them in the images I had to physically be in people’s yards, which posed a problem. In the past I had refrained from photographing on personal property so that if I did run into people in the middle of the night I wasn’t actually in their yard. As long as I wasn’t on someone’s property I wasn’t breaking the law, but photographing in yards left me more vulnerable. It was important that I keep my exposure times as short as possible and have widest depth of field possible. I wanted the entire image to be sharp in almost all cases.

I used a Mamiya RB67 and a very wide-angle lens. I preferred the open feel of the wide-angle lens versus the longer lenses. I had considered photographing with my large format camera because I missed having the larger negatives and I wanted the opportunity to correct the parallax in the images. After trying the large format camera a couple of times, however, I decided to stick to the Mamiya; setup and exposure times were simply too long when I used the 4x5 camera.



⁷ Lucy R. Lippard, The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society, (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 228

In *Untitled* (figure 27), the entire image is in sharp focus, from the grass in the foreground all the way back to the last house with the glowing window. To make this image, I positioned the tripod in between the two houses on the property line in the foreground, about halfway up from the sidewalk to the houses. Scenes such as this one often look much darker in real life than in the final print. It was not bright enough to focus through the viewfinder, so I approximated using the scale provided on my lens. To make sure the grass would be in focus I used my cell phone, which lights up for approximately 30 seconds when I push a button. I set my phone on the grass and then focused on it through the viewfinder. I preferred using my phone versus a flashlight or something similar because the glow of the phone was just barely bright enough to focus on and I wanted to draw as little attention to myself as possible.



Big Print (figure 28) is an example of how far into people's yards I had moved. I was almost flush with the edges of the two houses in the photograph. In compositions like this I tried to keep the viewer's eye moving around the image. The front edge of the

house on the left is cropped tight to the gutter. A pyramid motif is repeated again and again throughout the image, beginning in the top left corner of the image and moving to the roof lines of all the houses, the stack of illuminated bricks toward the center, the tree on the other side and then back out in the shadows cast on the other house. The view is

driven into a vanishing point in the center of the image, echoing the triangle motif in the shapes of the houses.

By photographing in between houses, I also bisected the composition. The repeating colors and textures native to suburbia enhance the structure of the image. Just as I had focused on blue and yellow in my early exterior images, now magenta and green became the dominating colors.

Also opposites on the color wheel, green grass plays off the warm taupe and magenta that are such popular suburban house colors.



Looking at sides and spaces between houses encouraged me to become more

interested in the shadows cast on houses. In *Untitled* (figure 29), the shadows playing across the side of the house become the dominant subject of the image. The relief shape cast looks like a house inverted. I used the shadows that houses cast on each other as a stand-in for the impact households have on each other. These are bleak places. The allure has worn off for me.

Process

I began printing a few long exposures, color negatives that I had experimented with in the past. Professor Dan Larkin showed me how to color balance a difficult

negative that had values not immediately obvious. I experimented with different colorcasts and densities to develop a mood that approached my ideas of night.

Next, Dan suggested that I try working with a tungsten-balanced film. Not only would the tungsten color balance correct the yellow light cast by the streetlights, it is also more stable and less subject to reciprocity failure than daylight-balanced film.

Reciprocity failure is the rate at which a film stops behaving as predicted and exposures more than a second long are subject to it. When using black-and-white film, the only thing required to combat the rate of reciprocity failure is to increase the exposure time to about double. With color film, not only is the density of the negative affected by reciprocity failure, but the color in the negative also shifts. The result is an unnatural, eerie-looking world. Although I wasn't intending to create images that were faithful to the look of the night to the naked eye, it was important to me that color be fairly accurate.

After several tests comparing Fuji's and Kodak's color negative films, I found that Kodak's 100T color negative film was closest to the view to which my work aspired. The Kodak film was warmer and seemed more saturated. Likewise, while experimenting with papers I found the Kodak Supra papers held the richest tones. I experimented with Fuji papers a few more times to be sure Kodak was the ideal substrate. I had seen others work with different brands of paper and film with great success, but nothing has come close to how pleased I am with the range and delicacy of the Kodak products.

As my project developed, I also experimented with digital processes. Over the past two years my digital skills have expanded greatly and I was confident in my ability to scan negatives and work with Photoshop to create digital prints. While the results I achieved were acceptable, I was never completely satisfied with them. The images in my

thesis work relied heavily on shadow detail. I have yet to see a digital print replicate the delicacy produced by a traditional C-print.

Aside from my technical reasons for preferring traditional C-prints as opposed to digital C-prints, I also preferred the process. Working in the darkroom was important to me. Seeing the images over and over as I manipulated the color and density slowly one way and then another allowed me to reflect on them as they were created. Working with imagery on the computer is easier but doesn't give me the space to reflect. The short walk from the darkroom to the processor room allowed me to stay in an image for a few moments and think about my intentions. I find I am more patient with an idea when I have that sort of structure and limitations.

In many ways working digitally blows open the doors of possibility. When I began working with video, I found the endless possibilities to be thrilling yet daunting at the same time. While I felt creatively limited when working digitally with still images, I reveled in the possibilities when working in video.

Once I had established a methodology, I began to photograph in earnest. My initial impulse was to just get in the car at night and explore. There was no daytime exploration and I shied away from asking others about potential sites. The world undergoes such a transformation at night that it was important to me to simply wander around and see things for themselves firsthand. I bought a map of Rochester and began to loosely plot out areas of interest.

Using the medium format, my exposure times generally ranged from 15 minutes to an hour. In most cases I made at least two exposures of each image bracketing one stop. Early on I used a handheld light meter for most scenes but stopped as I gained experience exposure times generally ended up in the same ballpark and eventually I knew

how long to make the exposure by looking at the light in a scene. Cloudless nights were by far the most difficult to photograph. Without the clouds to reflect the light back into the scene, anything not directly illuminated by streetlights or landscaping lights was extremely dark. Under those circumstances my exposures were usually closer to F/16 for one hour. F/16 was the widest aperture I used at any time. On a cloudy night I could rely on F/22 for 30 minutes to an hour. Snow on the ground changed the exposures greatly, and I shot most snow scenes at the smallest aperture possible on my Mamiya, F/32 for 4 to 8 minutes.

Thesis Exhibition

Deciding what series to include in my thesis exhibition was difficult. Over the past few years my work had moved beyond photography into video, installation and sculpture. My initial idea was to create an installation that included video and sculpture and then line the walls leading into the installation with photographs from the last series of suburban exterior nightscapes. Over the previous two years I had made hundreds of exterior suburban night images and it was clear that some of my early exterior images should be included. They were the key to understanding the ways my images had progressed, providing contrasts to the new. However, I lacked confidence that the photographs alone could match the metaphorical power of the work I had planned utilizing salt.

I took my ideas to my thesis committee as we looked at the work and talked it over. They challenged me to explain what the salt sculpture and video added to the show. This gave me an opportunity to step back and see my images together and I came to realize that salt worked as a linchpin, bringing together my complicated feelings about

suburbia. Thinking about salt had changed my perspective and how I photographed, but the work's presence in the show seemed unnecessary. It was time I allowed the images to speak for themselves.

Still, letting go of the salt work was difficult. Not only had I invested a great deal of time and money in exploring the material, I had a great deal of affection for their aesthetic quality. My last most endearing concept was to line the hallway leading into the gallery with birdhouses coated in crystallized salt. The response from my committee once again was to ask me what it added and why it was necessary. Try as I might, I could not articulate a reason beyond my affection for the material. Their counsel convinced me I had chosen my committee members wisely and my foray into salt ended.

With the salt work out of the picture, I needed to decide which images to include and which to leave out of the thesis exhibition. When I reviewed the complete body of my work, it became apparent that the interior images were also out of place. Like the salt work, that series had been important in my development, but it seemed to diverge from the concepts I wanted to convey.

Of the videos, *Birthing Suburbia* most closely represented my vision of suburbia, so I decided it must be included in the show. I had envisioned that piece as a video installation almost from its inception. Around the time of the show, the gallery was to install a new video projector and screen. I planned to block off that section of the gallery with one of the movable walls to create a small room for the video installation and use surround-sound speakers for a richer, fuller experience since the sound was key to the viewers' overall experience. As a bonus, the wall-mounted video monitor that was also being installed would screen my other video *Twilight Drive*.

Unfortunately, there were technical difficulties and the ceiling-mounted projector was not installed in time for my show. At the last moment the wall-mounted monitor was installed and I used that to screen *Birthing Suburbia*. The installation was dependent on sound and I feared that the quieter sounds in the video would be lost in the noise of the gallery, especially during the show's opening. To solve this problem I provided noise-canceling headphones for viewers to wear. The headphones reduced the ambient sounds in the gallery just enough to preserve the integrity of the installation.

Many of the images suggested a larger size than I was able to print at RIT, which was 20x24 inches. I saw the images at least twice that size. After doing some research I discovered a lab in New York that specialized in custom-made C-prints at fairly affordable prices. I decided to print *The Blue Print* and *Big Print* at 40x50 inches. Including prints this size was a top

priority for my show because of their resulting impact, but I resisted the impulse to include more large prints because I was unfamiliar with the quality of the lab's work. I



didn't know how the images would look at that size and I wanted a manageable number of prints so there would be time for corrections in case of problems. When they finally arrived from the lab, though, I was thrilled. Seeing my images that size was immensely satisfying and I almost wished my whole body of work were that size for the show. However, printing the rest of the images, which were 20x24, satisfied my desire to produce as much of the show myself as possible.

I chose an open layout for the gallery space, allowing the viewers to see many



works from different vantage points

(figure 30). For the title wall, I placed

the image that was on my postcard

under my title and name. As the viewer

wound around the first corner, *The Blue*

Print was the first image in the sequence

(figure 31). It is one of my strongest images and one of only two larger photographs.

From the blue print the images were more or less sequential, showing the evolution of my thought process. The first 10 were from my early series of night photographs (figure 32).

I selected what I felt best

represented the dream of suburbia so important in my early work.

Rounding the second corner, the wall-mounted monitor worked perfectly into my sequence. I made the video after



the older exterior work and before the later work, and it spoke to the shift in my work (figure 33).

Selecting images from the later series proved more difficult. Just as the dream of suburbia had captured my interest in my early work, the concept of liminality was my focus in this work. To demonstrate this I focused on the edges of houses paired with the space surrounding them, edges of subdivisions, edges of property and sides of houses or

outside edges of houses themselves. When constructing the show's sequence, I tried to represent these ideas several times (figure 34).



I struggled for some time to come up with a title for my show. A title alluding to the concept of liminality seemed particularly appropriate, and during a thesis committee meeting, it finally arrived: *Cul-de-Sac*. It seemed perfectly descriptive of the work,

representing a common subject and an apt metaphor, as well as a bit of whimsy. A dead-end street with only one entrance/exit, the word *cul-de-sac* has a poetic place in my work. I imagine an endless maze of cul-de-sacs looping in and out, an in-between space to wander in and out of, ending up where you started. It both refers to how difficult and winding the journey to my thesis exhibition has been as well as to the landscape of the suburban sprawl I represent in my photographs.



Conclusion

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that space changes communities and the people who live in them. A few weeks ago I was walking with friends one evening in a pleasant suburban neighborhood. As we were walking their daughter ran up to a little girl standing in the front yard of her home. My friends commented on how uneasy they felt at this, two young children innocently playing together, because of how out of place it

was. Children don't go into front yards anymore. My friends worried that the little girl's parents would assume the worst and be alarmed by their presence. They began to talk about how there were no front porches, how they were isolated, and at the same time how much they liked their new home in the suburbs. Their daughter does have a place to go play with other children, in an organized, supervised center provided by the community- it's just not in their yard. Childhood doesn't happen by accident in the suburbs.

As I have compiled my body of work on suburbia, it seems I have come full circle as evidenced in my show *Cul de Sac*. At first I was drawn by the allure of the American Dream. As I focused closer on my subjects, I came to look at suburbia not in its details but in its simplicity. What I saw were not the objects, not the homes or the people in them, so much as the space around them. I realized the spaces represented the emptiness I found in suburbia. For me, suburbia was not about the promise but the price.

When I look forward to where I may take my work in suburbia, it will be to attempt to reveal ever more clearly the absence of that emptiness: the vagaries of space and boundaries. This might be found in details, the mow lines between properties or the ends of sprawl and the beginning of the rural. Still I am fascinated by the power of the American Dream and am drawn in hopes of discovering clues as to why people accept, even long for, the isolating, homogenous arrangement of suburbia.

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