Peter Drake, "Dads," 2005, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 11".

art&antiques
May 2007

Back to the 'Burbs

ARTISTS USED TO FLEE AND NEVER LOOK BACK. NOW, A NEW GENERATION IS FINDING INSPIRATION IN AMERICA'S SUBURBAN SPRAWL.

BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ

Suburbia, that vast, automobile-loving antidote to the aggravations of the big city, promised post–World War II Americans "the good life." With relatively easy home ownership, shopping malls aplenty and eight-lane highways for simple trips to the post office, the suburbs supposedly offered room to spread out in, free of crime, grime and congestion. Of course, it didn't exactly work out that way, and many suburbanites—who today account for more than half of the country's population—are realizing that the world they inhabit can exhibit many of the same kinds of problems as the concrete jungle, in addition to newer ills like ugly, green-space-devouring, runaway sprawl.

Lately this self-contained world has become a source of fascination to numerous American artists who either grew up in, or later became rooted in, "the 'burbs." Overall, their shared outlook is more that of inquisitive cultural anthropologists than of polemical social critics. Neither sentimental nor damning, they regard the suburbs as an intriguing environment whose inhabitants and customs—backyard barbecues, car pools, bake sales—are at once the stuff of real, "normal" life for millions and, for outsiders looking in, the perplexing trappings of someone's wildest dreams. (University of Memphis art historian Sara Doris offers a lucid account of the social and cultural forces that accompanied the suburban boom and helped foster the emergence of new art forms in her new book *Pop Art and the Contest Over American Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.)

"The suburbs are neither one extreme nor the other," notes the New York–based painter Peter Drake. "There's the David Lynch model, which looks at the suburbs as a completely tarnished experience; there's also the 1950s 'Father Knows Best' model, which is hopelessly naive. I believe both visions are true and false, simultaneously." Drake, who grew up in Garden City, Long Island, one of the earliest American suburban developments, dating from 1869, teaches art at the Parsons School of Design in Manhattan. Among the themes his paintings examine are what he refers to as "the idiosyncrasies and metaphoric power" reflected in the traditional roles of many men and women in the suburbs, including stay-at-home housekeeping moms who oversee their families' interior living spaces and go-to-work dads whose domain is the yard or lawn (think mowing, snow-shoveling and masterminding the barbecue grill).

Drake's artistic observations can be provocative and rather nuanced at the same time. Of his recent acrylic-on-canvas pictures of heavily armored tanks rumbling through ordinarily tranquil, residential streets, he notes, "We take for granted the images of war in faraway places, in other people's living spaces, that we see in the news. But what would war look like in our own backyard? To imagine such a scene and paint it creates a jarring image." By contrast, Drake's large-scale "Delightful Garden" brings together every kind of ceramic gnome and decorative lawn sculpture imaginable in a composition that evokes a classical convocation of deities.

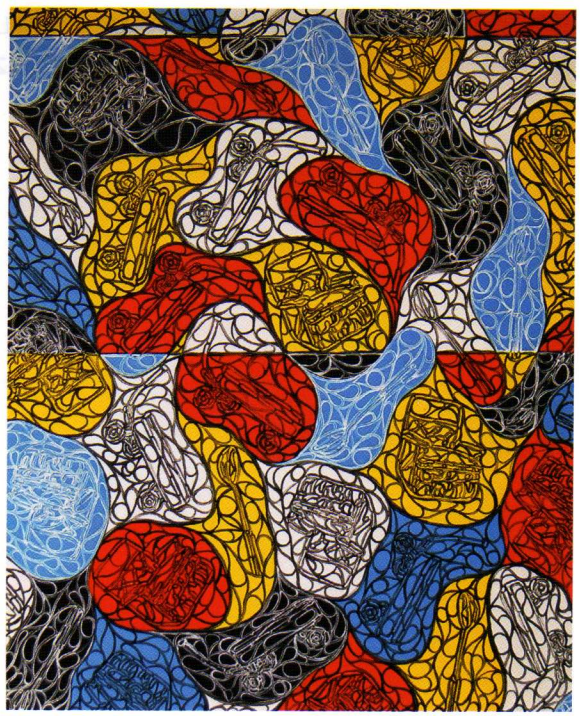
For the painter, it recalls Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights," albeit "as a place where what is delightful or revolting is entirely up for grabs," Drake says. "Many people have become so accustomed to the David Lynch vision that they assume that when artists look at the suburbs, they have to be cynical. To me, though, 'Delightful Garden' may be seen as pastoral."

A native Northeasterner, Jon Waldo cuts stencils based on his own simple line drawings of familiar objects—picnic tables, cars, children's toys. Combining those repeated images with seemingly random patches of color and bold, shape-defining outlines, he creates dense compositions whose deep pictorial space becomes a repository of some of suburbia's most enduring icons. "A recliner, a little red wagon, an electric iron—on one level, these things are totally banal," Waldo observes. "But in a Thoreau-like way, they can be extraordinary, too, because they symbolize the promise of the suburbs: comfort, family life, security. For me, these common objects are deeply personal and packed with emotion."

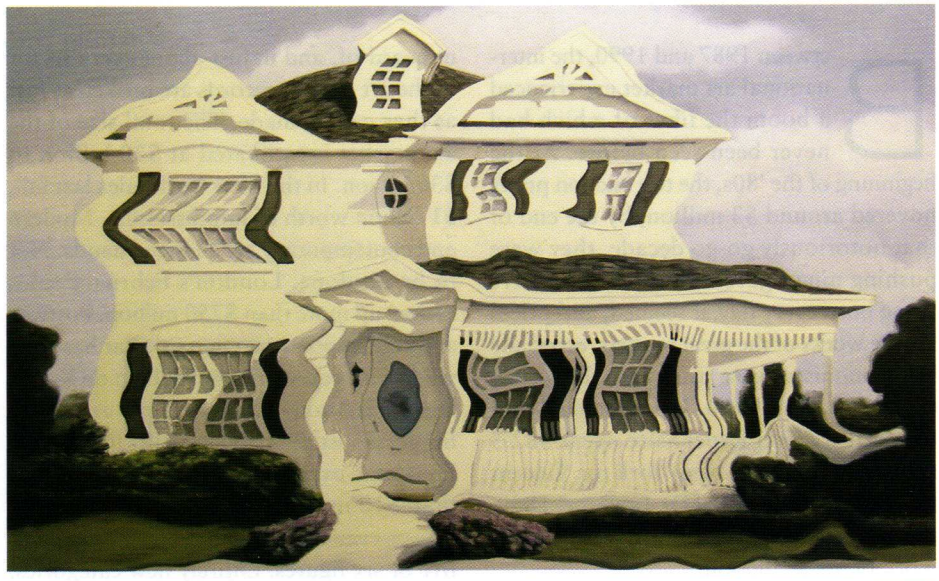
In gouache-on-paper works like "Peaceable Kingdom," 2005, Amy Chan, who is based in Richmond, Virginia, subtly comments on sprawl and the use—or abuse—of physical space in the car-dominated suburbs. "I don't think the average person there sees the changes in the landscape in an aesthetic way," Chan says of those temples to corporate marketing prowess that are among the jewels in suburbia's crown. "Instead, with each new store that's built, I think people are seduced by the idea of what products they'll be able to buy."

Barbara Griffiths, an Englishwoman who moved from London to a Connecticut suburb nearly a decade ago, says she has purposely tried to view her adopted hometown through an anthropologist's eyes. "I'm fascinated by the various 'tribes' that populate my suburb," she says, citing, for example, "the tribe of women who like cats, the Episcopalian flower-planting committee and the tribe of wives of Canadian men who once lived in Singapore." A painting like Griffiths' "The New Pioneers," 1997, offers a somewhat surreal take on the aspirations of suburban homebuilders in an image of a well-dressed couple whose dream house appears to be taking shape amidst the rubble of old and new civilizations—ancient statuary, a toilet bowl and PVC pipes. To better understand the dynamics of suburban "tribes," Griffiths joined one—a local book club. Such groups, she says, are "all about seeking and finding a sense of community."

Carson Fox gives physical form to ideally beautiful versions of suburban lawns or gardens in wall-mounted or on-the-floor mixed-media works that bring to mind expanses of grass or colorful flowerbeds. In these psychedelic creations, birds flutter (but look closely; they might be fighting),



Amy Chan, "Peaceable Kingdom," 2005, gouache-on-paper. Jon Waldo, "Joanna" (above, right), 2007, acrylic and oil on canvas.



Carson Fox, "Yellow Kissing Ball" (detail), 2005, artificial silk flowers, butterflies and birds with glitter, glue and fiberglass. Robert Selwyn, "Untitled (House)" (below), 2003, oil on linen.

and flowers grow in exuberant profusion. "These works are about indulging myself in a fantasy environment I've always wanted to create," Fox says of her suburbs-related essays in ornament.

If flowers, gnome statuettes or mirrored globes on pedestals help make the front lawn the quintessential decorative venue of suburbia, the design and looks of suburban houses themselves may express a variety of attitudes or emotions, from aspirations to affluence to homeowner's pride. Last year, when the Katonah Museum of Art, in Katonah, New York, presented an exhibition titled "I ♥ the 'Burbs," the museum's curator, Ellen J. Keiter, pointed out that the house has long been "the central symbol" of the American Dream. For many generations, she noted in the show's catalogue, the house has served as "a metaphor for family, security, prosperity and American values."

For painter Robert Selwyn, such a sense of stability was shaken up by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Selwyn grew up in suburban Bethesda, Maryland. His hallucinatory images of "squiggly" houses, as he calls them, resemble reflections on a pond's rippling surface. What do they mean? "They're open-ended," he admits, then thinks for a moment and adds, "But I think they refer to memory in general and to the memories we have of growing up in the suburbs, some very clear and others fuzzy."

Chicago dealer Linda Warren, whose gallery has shown the work of Drake, Waldo and Fox, observes: "The suburbs as a place where you're obliged to fit in—that's a theme that seems to interest many artists and viewers alike, even, or especially, those artists who grew up there or live there now. That's because many feel themselves to be, by nature, different. They're natural outsiders, natural observers."

Thus, if what the 'burbs-inspired art they create has to say about its subject matter sometimes seems ambiguous, that may be because these artists can and do appreciate the very human hope for a better, more secure and comfortable life even as they realize that dysfunction or tragedy *and* moments of unabashed joy can occur anywhere, anytime, under any roof. "Whether in the inner city or in the suburbs, human nature is still, well, human nature," Drake observes.

It's that sense of understanding of what makes human beings tick and what attracts them to the suburbs that gives Drake's work and that of his fellow artists their resonance; it is echoed in their sense of wonder about this conceptual and actual place that so many people call home.

For these artists, the suburbs are definitely more than just a place on the map. They are also an indelible place in the heart.

ART & ANTIQUES *New York correspondent and art critic Edward M. Gomez grew up overseas after attending kindergarten in Levittown (now Willingboro), New Jersey.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Claire Oliver, New York.
212.929.5949.
www.claireoliver.com
Represents Peter Drake and Carson Fox.

Linda Warren Gallery
Chicago. 312.432.9500.
www.lindawarrengallery.com
Represents Peter Drake and John Waldo.

Bernard Toale Gallery
Boston. 617.482.2477.
www.bernardtoalegallery.com
Represents Amy Chan.

Barbara Griffiths
New Canaan, Conn.
E-mail: fishgrit@yahoo.com

DFN Gallery, New York.
212.334.3400
www.dfngallery.com
Represents Robert Selwyn.