# Edge City

by Christopher Brayshaw

*The landscape is effaced into sidereal expanses and contradictions...*
—Robert Smithson

Here's a picture:

Fall 1998, September or early October, if the slanting light in the trees is anything to judge by. To the north, sun illuminates the mountains, Golden Ears and Mount Coquitlam, Wigedon Peak and Eagle Ridge. Above the peaks the sky is a lighter, colder, blue, a color you might see scored by a jet trail late on a windy afternoon. The turbulence catches and refracts the light. But bring your eye down, across the blue mountain slopes and new subdivisions, past the oil storage tanks and highrises, freeway lanes and warehouse clubs, across the Fraser and the wooded islands in midriver, past fishing boats and barges, log booms, construction cranes, docks and piles, past sandbars exposed in the low water, eelgrass and cormorants. A heron flies along the far shore. Its long wings flex and dip, barely skimming the water as it crosses under the Port Mann bridge and its traffic, all those cars going home to Langley and Cloverdale and Walnut Grove. Their windshields and mirrors catch the downriver sun, the drivers and

Brayshaw, Christopher. "Edge City."*Edge City*. Surrey Art Gallery. 1998. 1-45

passengers inside tuned to the evening ahead or maybe just the radio, but certainly not aware of the river below or the brown turbulence around the bridge pilings, the swirls and eddies there. A log turns in the lee of one of the pillars, a seagull rides it, and closer to shore there are fishing lines in the water off Brownsville Bar, where a couple sits in scavenged deck chairs on the grey sand beach beside a motorhome, drinking coffee from a thermos, while behind them, past fences and gates and quonset huts, a forklift moves lumber in the cold. The plywood mill's departing workers walk in little clusters to their cars, their turbans and hardhats bright in the failing light. And behind them, in quick succession: a front-end loader negotiates the rail tracks; cars on River Road put their headlights on; a watchdog barks in a wrecking yard; the kids tagging the yard's back fence glance up; a train whistles in the cold; and someone takes a photograph.

What will this picture look like?

Its chances of capturing the scene's complexities aren't so great. Most likely the picture will simply express its maker's pre-formed *attitude* to suburbia, particularly if the photographer has come from the city. The journey to the suburbs in search of the exotic is a time-honored strategy for artists exhibiting in urban galleries, whose predominantly urban audiences are thereby shown images of subjects like wrecking yards and landfills. Studying such images, liberal urban audiences get to feel *concerned* (comprehending, if only subliminally, that their lifestyle is in some way dependent on places like the ones shown in the picture; that the dumpster in the lane behind their fancy West Side condominium gets emptied some place; better that place than the lane), but this unfocused concern, which, if properly focused, could lead to some sort of cultural change or transformation, is, instead, aesthetically muted, rendered the object of neutral contemplation.

Someone's objecting that I'm not being fair, that the photographer is doing something that's been legitimated by art history, and that consequently, the photographer's work has both aesthetic and critical use-value. I don't deny this, but perhaps we should probe this claim a little more closely, to ascertain just what the photographer is doing, and how this project differs, if at all, from previous urban artists' representations of the suburbs.

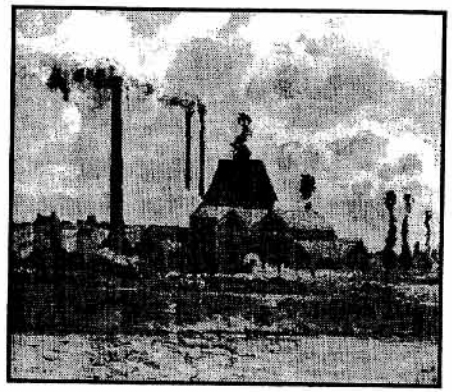
One important early drive to document the landscapes eventually named suburbia is found in the work of Impressionist painters like Manet, Monet, and Pissarro, who worked in and around Paris' rapidly industrializing outskirts. According to art historian T.J. Clark, "[T]he environs of Paris from the 1860s on were recognized to be a special territory in which some aspects of modernity might be detected... [such places] were areas in which the opposite of the urban was being constructed, a way of living and working which in time would come to dominate the late capitalist world....Where industry and recreation were casually established next to each other, in a landscape which assumed only as much form as the juxtaposition of production and distraction (factories and regattas) allowed, there modernity seemed vivid, and painters believed they might invent a new set of descriptions for it."[1]

Clark argues that the suburban Parisian landscape provided a fruitful ground for painting because the landscape genre and the act of painting were inexorably bound up with each other. Landscape painting could remain fruitful so long as it could depict the new changes that were occurring in the landscape, changes which, because new, and therefore modern, had not previously been assimilated within the landscape genre's conventions. In Clark's view, painting proved its worth as a viable representational mode by contending with, and incorporating, the new things it found in the suburban landscape. Such concerns, as Clark notes, are "practical matters, in other words, not just theoretical ones; from them derived the exercise of landscape as an art and the possession of its basic terms and skills....Was the city with determinate edge to be joined, in painting, by the city without one? How much of inconsistency and waste could the genre include and still keep its categories intact? So landscape was to be modern; but if it was—if the signs of modernity were agreed on and itemized—would the landscape not be robbed of what the painters valued most in it? Would it not lose its singular beauty, its coherence, the way it seemed to offer itself as an unbroken surface which paint could render well? For Monet and his colleagues, landscape was the guarantee of painting above all; it was the thing that justified their insistence on matter and making, on the artisinal facts of the art....The roll call of ages and stages of civilization could still be taken at Argenteuil, as once it has been outside Rome or Haarlem. Without such a roll call, landscape painting was a poor thing."[2]

1. T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1984), p. 147.

2. *ibid*, p. 185.

In the hands of artists like Manet or Pissarro, the landscape painting tradition—the unspoken rules by which the genre legitimates itself by differentiating itself from all other art practices—was extended and transformed. Conventions which no longer functioned were cast aside. For example, in Pissarro's *Factory Near Pontoise*, the fat, blunt shape of a new factory fills the painting's foreground, signaling that previously sacrosanct landscape painting conventions (recession-into-far-distance; equal emphasis on each part of the picture) are no longer congruent with new industrial realities, and will have to be replaced. Yet Pissarro's painting skill is such that we still perceive his picture "as a landscape painting," simultaneously perceiving that the criteria by which we judge such pictures have permanently changed.



Camille Pissaro,
*Factory near Pontoise*,
1873.
Courtesy of the
Museum of Fine Arts,
Springfield, MA,
James Philip Gray
collection.

Contrast Pissarro's emphasis on *depicting what is there* with an artist like Claude Monet's interest in *sustaining the landscape genre*, and the outline of a critique equally applicable to a Surrey photograph and 19th-century landscape painting begins to appear. What did sustaining the landscape genre mean to Monet? "It meant contriving to notice some things that loomed large in one's field of vision and to overlook others just as prominent; a picture depended on choosing and maintaining a certain point of view, doing so with fastidious and, in its way, cynical care. No doubt painting landscape had always involved some such process of reading out and reading in; but what the painter excluded had rarely been there so emphatically, so much wrapped up with the matter at hand."[3]

In short, since modernity's inception in the mid-1850s, artists' representations of suburban landscapes have tried to do two things. Some artists have tried to articulate the emergence of new social forms by finding formal equivalents for them in art. Other artists have tried to make the views of social reality expressed in art somehow conform to past artistic precedents; art thereby becomes a stand-in for an ideal social space, whether cultural or geographic. Manet, for example, suggests visual correspondences between the suburban landscapes he paints and the style in which they are painted. T.J. Clark describes Manet's solution as follows: "Surface would replace substance; paint would perform the consistency of

3. *ibid*, p. 179.

landscape, in spite of everything a particular landscape might put in its way; there was nothing that could not be made part of a picture—of a picture's fragile unity—if the painter confined himself to appearance and put aside questions of meaning or use."[4] Monet, on the other hand, takes a different approach with his "cynical" manipulation of reality. Over the course of his suburban career, Monet becomes less and less interested in things that change, retreating instead to household interiors, gardens, lily ponds, and other, essentially static scenes to which he still feels a powerful affinity.

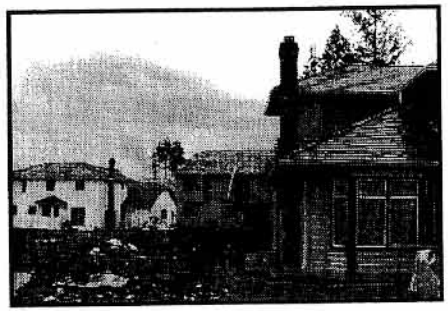
Manet and Monet's problem—how much modernity can a landscape include and still be recognizable "as a landscape"?—doesn't ever really get settled in the artists' lifetime, but recurs and recurs, even into our own time. What form does this contemporary problem take? The same as the nineteenth century one: an obliviousness to the emergence of new social forms, and a presumption (among those artists who do recognize that the suburban landscape is changing) that previous artistic solutions will suffice to call attention to these changes. This problem can perhaps be clarified by comparing two works by Dan Graham, one of the most sophisticated chroniclers of 20th century suburbia.


Dan Graham, *Homes for America*. (detail), 1966–7, Courtesy of the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Graham's 1966–7 work, *Homes For America*, is a conceptual artwork that emulates the "look" and feel of a piece of magazine journalism by employing dry, "factual" language and apparently artless snapshots of New Jersey subdivisions. Graham's great insight is his recognition that postwar suburban housing is a manufactured commodity that denies the subtle aesthetic and cultural functions traditionally associated with significant architecture. The tract houses Graham photographs are flung together quickly, according to serial logic. "[The projects] date from the end of World War II when speculators or 'operative' builders in Southern California adapted mass-production techniques to quickly build many houses for the defense workers overconcentrated there. This 'California Method' consisted simply of determining in advance the exact amount and lengths of pieces of lumber required and multiplying them by the number of standardized houses to be built. A cutting

4. *ibid*, p. 180-1.

yard was set up near the site of the project to saw rough lumber into those sizes. With mass buying, greater use of machines and factory-produced parts, and assembly-line standardization, multiple units were easily fabricated."[5]



Dan Graham,
*New Balloon Houses, Surrey, BC, 1989.*
Courtesy of the
Marian Goodman
Gallery, New York.

Graham's intent in producing *Homes For America* is twofold: to conduct a critique of minimalist sculpture by developing a social context for its formal appearance and historical evolution, and to critique emergent forms of "disposable" architecture. In *Homes For America* and his early slideworks, Graham not only provides a critique of these new architectural forms, but also documents the individuals who live among them. Thus, his photographs of identical houses painted different colors to "individuate" them from each other are interspersed with images of block parties, of families sitting in highway restaurants, and other images that give a sense of the new kinds of social infrastructure that have accumulated around the communities rising from the New Jersey marshland. In this, Graham's work is reminiscent both of Walker Evans' "journalistic" work at *Fortune* magazine, and of the deadpan "architectural studies" found in Ed Ruscha's best known artist's books, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) and, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). Like Evans and Ruscha, Graham doesn't accept the unfamiliar social environment as a formless sprawl, but rather, seeks clues to its historical genesis within the landscape, thereby accounting for the social forces legitimating the suburbs' creation.

It's surprising, then, that the photographs Graham made in Surrey in 1989 as a contribution to the group exhibition, *Some Detached Houses*, at Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery, represent a significant falling-off from the high standard established by his early work. The series, *New Balloon Houses, Surrey, BC, 1989*, focuses on images of new homes under construction in an unnamed Surrey subdivision. Ragged trees in the background indicate that the homes are a very recent incursion into what was once a forest; other than that, no signs of workmen or the inhabitants the homes are meant for appear. Whereas *Homes For America* and Graham's early slideworks elaborate a social context for suburban architecture, *New Balloon Houses*' homes are analyzed solely in an economic context, as symptoms of a speculative excess that converts the natural world into poorly fabricated "standardized units" for profit.

5. Dan Graham, "Homes For America," *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects 1965–1990.* Ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p.14.

In the work of many Vancouver photographers for whom Graham's work remains significant, the terms of *New Balloon Houses*' economic critique are deepened and extended, leavened with an appreciation for regional history that incorporates the social context absent from Graham's photographs. Still, *New Balloon Houses*' conceptual thinness points to a danger often ignored by artists and critics who see in suburbia allegories of economic and social administration at odds with the lived reality of life in the suburbs. Whalley is not Levittown, and suburban California is not Crescent Beach. Yet despite such important historical and social differences between suburbs, many critics and sociologists persist in judging them as inflexible, administered places. As California councilor and poet D.J. Waldie notes, "[Theorists] report that the [suburban] grid, briefly empty of associations, is a pattern repeating itself. The theorists and critics did not look again, forty years later, to see the intersections or calculate in them the joining of interests, limited but attainable, like the leasing of chain stores in a shopping mall."[6]

The tendency to think of suburbs as socially homogeneous places is even prevalent in the work of younger writers who should know better, like William Upski Wimsatt, a Chicago graffiti artist, hip-hop journalist, and cultural critic, a fierce defender of urban heterogeneity who cannot recognize the same in the suburbs:

> We think the suburbs are what needs to be changed about America. We think the suburbs are bad for America.
>
> Socially, they intensify segregation and mistrust. Culturally, they erode the sense of history, narrow the outlook and dull the imagination. Economically, they intensify inequality by isolating the rich and poor....
>
> 1880-1980 was the century of the city. The coming century will be the century of the suburb. We haven't even begun to imagine the new suburbs-based America. City and country alike will be over-run with parking lot architecture. Sidewalks, buses, trains, and other relics of public space will continue to disappear. The distinctiveness, character and

6. D.J. Waldie, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir.* (New York: Buzz Books, 1996), p. 6.

> history of the landscape will be washed corporately clean. Security guards and alarm systems will protect almost everything (except for the lives of the poor). Downtowns will become malls.
>
> Suburbanization is one of the most important trends of the coming century. It is one of the most important metaphors for where our heads are at these days. Everybody wants to go off with their own group, do their own thing, cut themselves off from everyone else and cease to be accountable. Every possible sub-group now has its own inward-looking magazine and organization.[7]

Wimsatt bemoans the fear of others that divides North America along social and economic lines, and works out his argument along a strict demarcation between city and suburb. Civic transit is cut in order to fund suburban roads; suburban libraries, hospitals and recreation centers are funded ahead of inner-city facilities. But Wimsatt's actual time in the suburbs seems strangely limited, simply consisting of a quick hitchhiking trip across the country.

Often, critics like Wimsatt employ a kind of dualistic thinking that repeats a pattern present in European thought and culture for centuries. This model opposes regional monocultures to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the cosmopolitan city, which walls itself off from the surrounding countryside in order to defend its heterogeneity from attack.

But far from being the homogeneous places that Wimsatt and other, like-minded critics suggest, contemporary suburbs are shot through with regional and historical particularities that make them as complex as any city. The problem is, there is no firmly established artistic context for elaborating these differences. The attractiveness of the "city/suburb" model is the ease with which it allows writers and artists to position themselves on an issue by invoking the spectre of a homogeneous suburban culture which, if it ever did exist, was only present briefly in certain California suburbs for a decade or less. But this model's cultural persuasiveness—informing everything from films like *The Truman Show* to the work

7. William Upski Wimsatt, *Bomb The Suburbs*. Revised 2nd edition. (Chicago: The Subway and Elevated Press Company, 1994), p. 11.

of artist-photographers like Joel Sternfeld and Lewis Baltz—accounts for its survival, despite its only tangential relation to historical truth. Pictures of tract homes, land clearances for new subdivisions, and the circuitboard patterns of suburban streets seen from the air are instantly recognizable images that rehearse well-worn tropes that audiences and critics feel comfortable with. Because they are familiar, audiences instinctively know what attitude to take toward them, and, having grasped them thematically, can simply focus on the visual pleasures they offer.

But as D.J. Waldie reminds readers,

> The critics of suburbs say that you and I live narrow lives.
> I agree. My life is narrow.
> From one perspective or another, all our lives are narrow.
> Only when lives are placed side by side do they seem larger.[8]

Who will bring this project to visual art, and how? Is it even possible to make images that reflect the heterogeneous complexity of contemporary suburbs?

Fortunately, there are precedents for such practices, not all in visual art. But to make images of suburban life that are as rich as the suburbs themselves, it seems to me that artists must first break with artistic modernism, a practice which establishes strict divisions between artistic genres, much as suburban zoning regulations of the 1940s and 1950s sought to separate citizens of different social classes and races. As critic Craig Owens has noted, "The genealogy of modernist theory, especially of its assumption that each of the arts occupies a specific area of competence, may be traced to that moment in the eighteenth century when it appeared necessary, for complex, but always ethical, reasons, to distinguish poetry from painting and sculpture. For strategic reasons that distinction was made according to time: in Germany, Lessing, and in France, Diedrot, located poetry and all the discursive arts along a dynamic axis of temporal succession, and painting and sculpture along a static axis of spatial simultaneity. Consequently, the visual arts were denied access to discourse, which unfolds in time, except in the form of a literary text which, both exterior and anterior to the work, might supplement it."[9]

8. D.J. Waldie, *Holy Land*, p. 94.

9. Craig Owens, "Earthwords," *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*. Eds. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman and Jane Weinstock. (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1992), pp. 40–51.

While modernist critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried sought to enforce strict divisions between artistic genres, other critics have seen these boundaries as fluid and permeable, or established solely by intellectual fiat. Often, as in the case of the American architect Robert Venturi, new theories of generic heterogeneity are informed by detailed studies of the vernacular landscape and popular culture. Venturi's seminal study, *Learning From Las Vegas*, written in collaboration with his architectural partner, Denise Scott Brown, develops a new theory of architectural complexity from an exhaustive study of the Las Vegas strip, which caused Venturi and Scott Brown to rethink the spatial and symbolic relationships between different kinds of buildings. As Venturi argues in his later study, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, "[I]n some. . . [heterogenerous architectural] compositions there is an inherent sense of unity not far from the surface. It is not the obvious or easy sense of unity derived from the dominant binder or the motival order of simpler, less contradictory compositions, but that derived from a complex and illusive order of the difficult whole. It is [a] taut composition which contains contrapuntal relationships, equal combinations, inflected fragments, and acknowledged dualities."[10] Venturi's description of architectural heterogeneity is as applicable to suburban landscape as it is to suburban architecture.

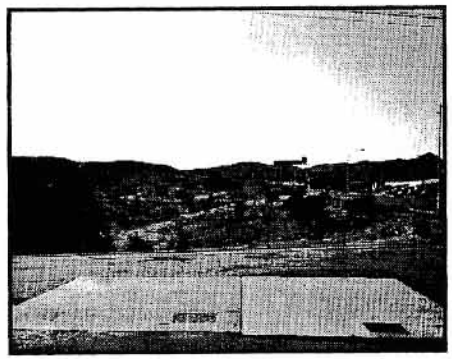
10. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. 2nd edition. (New York: New York Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 104.

If formal heterogeneity defines the real nature of the contemporary suburb, it follows that art which seeks to represent suburban complexity should emulate this complexity on a formal and thematic level. For example, the serial logic of Dan Graham's *Homes For America* formally and thematically references the serial nature of the construction process that the piece takes as its subject. Further, we might expect successful suburban art to be "novelistic," that is, to incorporate a variety of different generic motifs in order to better represent the complex nature of its suburban subjects.

In every case, *Edge City*'s works are hybrids which draw freely and eclectically from painting, sculpture, photography, video and installation art. This doesn't mean that the works dispose with historical convention all together—they don't—but rather that they incorporate different generic components, subordinating these to the overall success of the work. This also doesn't mean that the works exist in a historical vacuum. Rather, they draw upon a variety of art-historical strategies for representing heterogeneity, including:

- The use of a particular medium to unify a scene perceived to not fit comfortably within a preexisting genre. T.J. Clark identifies this tendency in artists as early as Manet and Pissarro[11]. Stephen Shore's photograph, *U.S. 93, Kingman, Arizona, July 23 1973*, is a good example of a contemporary application of this technique. In Shore's photograph, apparently unrelated architectural features are flattened and organized on the picture plane, locked into a stable configuration that gives the appearance of being spontaneous, but is actually carefully composed to suggest formal and thematic relationships between different architectural elements. In *Edge City*, Ben Reeves' and Kevin Schmidt's works pursue similar strategies, alternately condensing and fragmenting their suburban subjects on the flat supports of wooden panels and the gallery walls.

11. See note 4.



Stephen Shore, *U.S. 93, Kingman, Arizona, July 2, 1975.* Courtesy of the Artist.

- The substitution of everyday perception for an aestheticizing gaze. Scott McFarland's and Kevin Schmidt's works suggest a casual looking more suited to strolling than to viewing art. Robert Linsley's videos of the Vancouver Expeditionary Painters at work and Arni Haraldsson's appropriated video loop from the *Police Academy* TV show prompt brief, repeated scrutiny. Warren Murfitt's installation subliminally brings its audio component to viewers' attention as they approach.

- The dispersal of socially distinct activities in space. Artists like Manet and Pissarro considered the suburbs a privileged place for locating modernity, but this isn't strictly true: modernity is also present (maybe even more so) in the city than the suburbs. The point is that there's a long established tradition for locating modernity in the city, for example, Walter Benjamin's encyclopedic studies of Parisian arcades. But because the city is changing so rapidly, and effaces its past history so completely, these specific changes are hard to spot. Perhaps it's easier to see them in the suburbs, where the city's changes are spatially dispersed, cooling them out and making it easier to recognize differences. A good model of this technique's applicability to suburbia is Jeff Wall's recent photograph, *A Hunting Scene*, in which modern houses and a much older pastime,

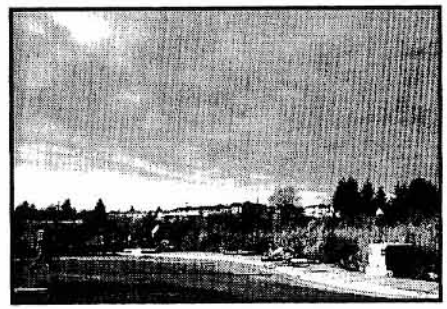


Figure 4. Jeff Wall. *A Hunting Scene*, 1994 Courtesy of the Artist.

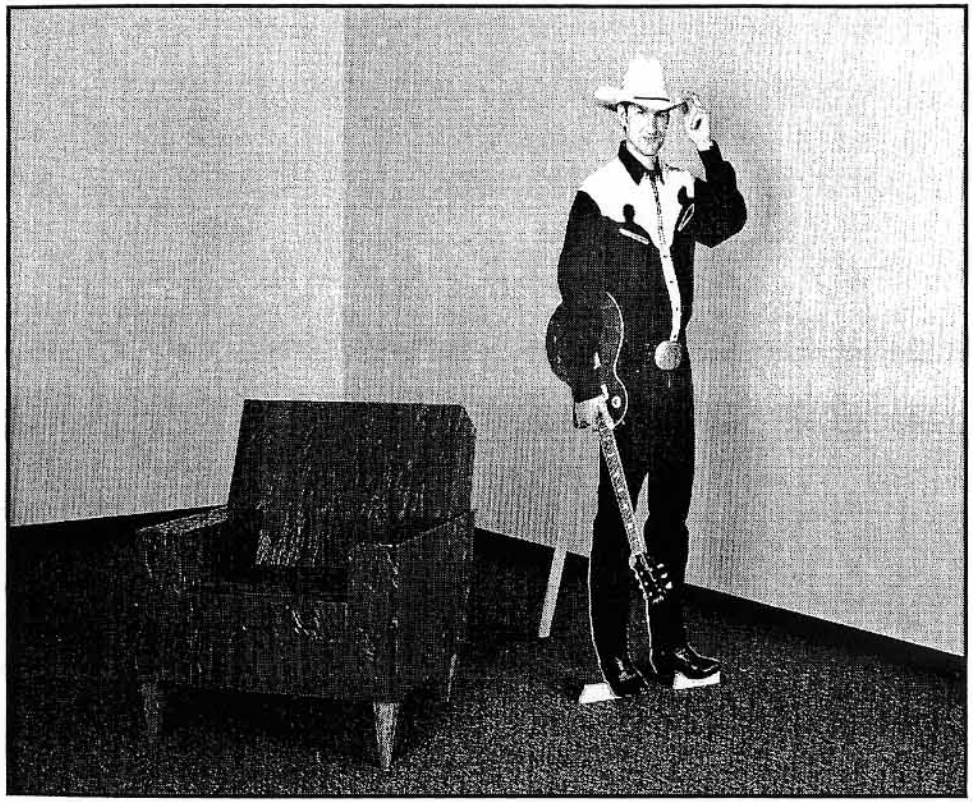
reminiscent of that found in paintings by Brueghel, are juxtaposed, implying that the suburbs are a place where old and new occupy an often uneasy co-existence.

In curating and installing *Edge City*, I've deliberately tried to create visual parallels to my experiences of wandering through the suburbs. My conceptual model was not museum style hanging, but the look of the King George Highway. In the exhibition, artworks are not presented as distinct from others; rather, my arrangements are meant to suggest thematic and visual continuities between them. I don't think these arrangements damage the works' integrity; rather, I think their considerations of suburbia are enhanced by their proximity to each other. The places where their edges meet and merge are points of aesthetic refraction.

Warren Murfitt's installation, *Randy Rides Alone* is a good example of the formal and thematic hybridities *Edge City* identifies and explores. Unlike other works in the exhibition, *Randy* didn't exist when I first visited Warren, but was rather developed over time, changing in response to his ongoing thinking about the suburbs and what form a response to them might take.

These changes weren't random, but purposeful, each introducing a new element to the work which could not have been included had the work remained in an earlier form. More importantly, these changes involved Warren's collaboration with other artist-technicians, so that, over the course of its development, *Randy* evolved from the work of a single artist to a collaborative work produced by several individuals, a "communal" work in the best sense of the word. In fact, the harmonious co-existence suggested by the smooth interchange of the installation's various components also functions as a kind of model for the new forms of social hybridity that each of *Edge City*'s artists locates in the suburbs.

*Randy Rides Alone* contains three different components: a green plywood armchair (quite sturdy, and meant to be sat in); a photographic stand-up of the artist, dressed in upscale country and western clothes and clutching a green guitar; and an upbeat soundtrack of twangy country guitar, (hidden inside



Warren Murfitt,
*Randy Rides Alone*,
1998, plywood,
photography.
Photo: Barrie Jones

Warren Murfitt,
*Randy Rides Alone*
(detail).
Photo: Barrie Jones

the chair, but clearly audible as you draw near). The installation also doesn't seem to have that much to do with Surrey. But consider the city's historical evolution, and several interesting parallels emerge. Most importantly, Surrey is a unique suburb, one in a farm economy was present as early as the late 1800s. Unlike the California suburbs described by Joan Didion and D.J. Waldie, or the New Jersey commuter towns photographed by Dan Graham and Robert Smithson, Surrey was not built on uninhabited terrain, but was rather developed slowly over time, as commuter houses replaced tracts of farmland. This "suburbification" of a previously agricultural landscape is still visible today along streets like 88th Avenue, where new subdivisions and working farms are located only blocks apart. The new houses being built today in Surrey are middle-class, not working class homes. Whereas earlier this century, many Surrey residents would actually work on or with the land, experiencing it as part of a daily routine, today, many Surrey inhabitants' experience of the city's agricultural lands involves driving past them, experiencing them as a visual trace of a slowly disappearing lifestyle. A thematically related change in country music has accompanied this change. Artists like Emmylou Harris and Lucinda Williams maintain a broadly based aesthetic which draws upon gospel, folk, and bluegrass traditions, while others, like the inexplicably popular Garth Brooks, offer the musical equivalent of a drive by the farm, evacuating the lived reality of country life in favor of a simulacrum designed to appeal to urban cowboys.

How do these ideas relate to Murfitt's piece? The green living room chair suggests a place to relax and meditate on the past, a contemplative escape enhanced by the piece's cheerfully twangy soundtrack. Memories of historical Surrey are present in the music, but only as a constantly shifting trace, not as a fixed, stable image. Civic history is non-recoverable, as Murfitt discovered when he set out to Surrey to buy the country and western shirt he wears in the installation's stand-up photograph, only to discover that it was easier to find "urban" than "country" clothes in Surrey. (Murfitt's search for a suitable shirt concluded in Cloverdale, a community which, of any of Surrey's civic landscapes, retains an authentic connection to an farm economy). The chair's bright green color and twangy soundtrack also register a connection to agriculture, but, significantly, a stylized one, emphasized both by the chair's tart green patina and the circularity of the short, looped soundtrack. Both these features emphasize the extent to

which Murfitt's work is a reconstruction of a memory-trace. This interpretation is underscored by the way in which Murfitt carefully routered the chair's plywood contours, exposing the random patterns of the woodgrain, so that, viewed from a distance, the chair seems to shimmer like a hallucination or something from a dream. Walk or drive through Surrey at the right time of day, and certain landscape features stand out with almost preternatural clarity. Cows lift their noses to a metal trough behind a warped wood fence that seems ready to fall but nonetheless still stands. Crickets sing in the long grass beneath the powerline right-of-way that cuts the King George Highway north of 88th Avenue. At the right time of year, it seems that an older, unspoiled landscape lurks just behind the one we see, inaccessible save for brief moments when the light is right, at the end of the day.... But Murfitt understands how subtly dangerous these dream-views can be, how, in their elevation of a sanitized past above the fallen present, they deflect attention from the world around us. Consequently, *Randy Rides Alone* is rigorously non-utopian. It doesn't suggest that Surrey's earlier, agricultural landscape was any better than the present. Instead, it simply acknowledges that things were once different, and that some permanent cultural change has taken place.

It's also important to note how, through its cunning incorporation of different artistic genres, Murfitt's work approximates an allegorical impersonation of a contemporary suburban landscape. Although viewers experience its three components simultaneously, the installation's cumulative effect depends on the varied effects offered by its individual parts. It's not painting (though the plywood chair's painted patina is important to the piece), nor music (though the chair's soundtrack amplifies our understanding of the chair), nor photography (though the photographic stand-up, meant to be viewed straight on, functions differently from the "static" chair and the "temporal" sound track). Similarly, though we experience familiar landscapes like River Road or the King George Highway as simultaneities, in truth these views are syntheses of various architectural and cultural features which are always changing. Thus, in considering works like Murfitt's, viewers gain an enhanced understanding of how this "synthesis" effect functions, enabling them to look more closely at the contemporary urban landscapes and historical transformations which Murfitt's work addresses.

Like Murfitt, Daniel Congdon is concerned with recent changes to the suburban landscape. Also, like Murfitt's contribution to *Edge City*, Congdon's piece is a hybrid. Although three dimensional, his *Monument For An Office Plaza* is not just a sculptural "object," but a philosophical proposition in the form of an architect's model.

Congdon's work consists of an architectural model of a bulky grey pseudo-Modernist building, a plaza, and, parked in a reflecting pool in the middle of the plaza on a ramp of grey rubble, a piece of public "sculpture": a brand-new Caterpillar excavator, required by the artist to be maintained in perfect working order for perpetuity.

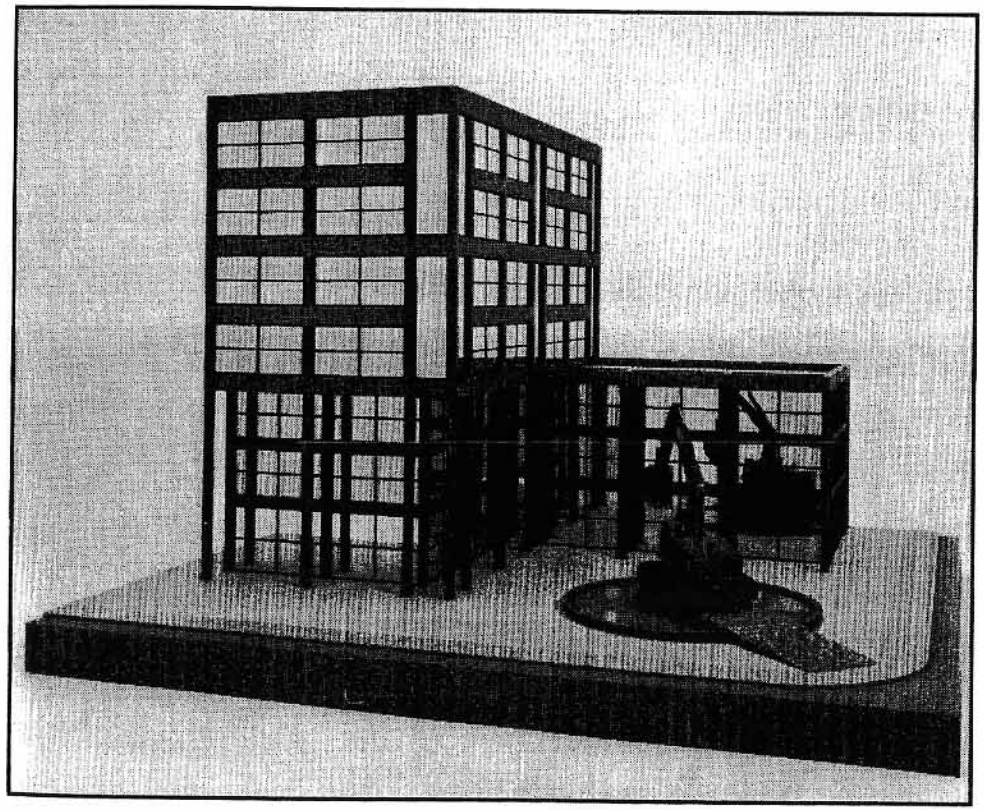
Traditional plaza "sculptures" memorialize the buildings before them, or serve as aesthetic supplements. What is forbidden to architecture (the public face of authority or of Law) can be slipped in the back door as decoration. Conversely, plaza sculpture can also represent citizens and their relationship to the power structure legitimating the building's construction (This formulation is made explicit in downtown Vancouver outside the Burrard Skytrain station, where a "praying" stone penitent memorializes 666 Burrard across the street). Sophisticated artists have always tried to complicate the historically complicit relationship between plaza sculpture and power by making works as forbidding as the buildings they're expected to memorialize. A good example of this tendency, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, could, until its court-approved demolition, be considered a steel precipitate from the modernist nightmare of a federal government office block it was sited in front of. Both art work and building were targets of workers' anger, but as "art," *Tilted Arc* was deemed more expendable than the building, and consequently destroyed.

Congdon's work isn't as polemical as Serra's, but is still subversive. How so? First, and most obviously, the excavator's presence implies that the building before it may one day be removed, undercutting architecture's age-old claims to permanence. Second, the reflecting pool doesn't "memorialize" the building, but the excavator. Congdon thereby places permanence not on the side of the building, but on the side of the citizens for whom the excavator can be considered an allegorical stand-in, through

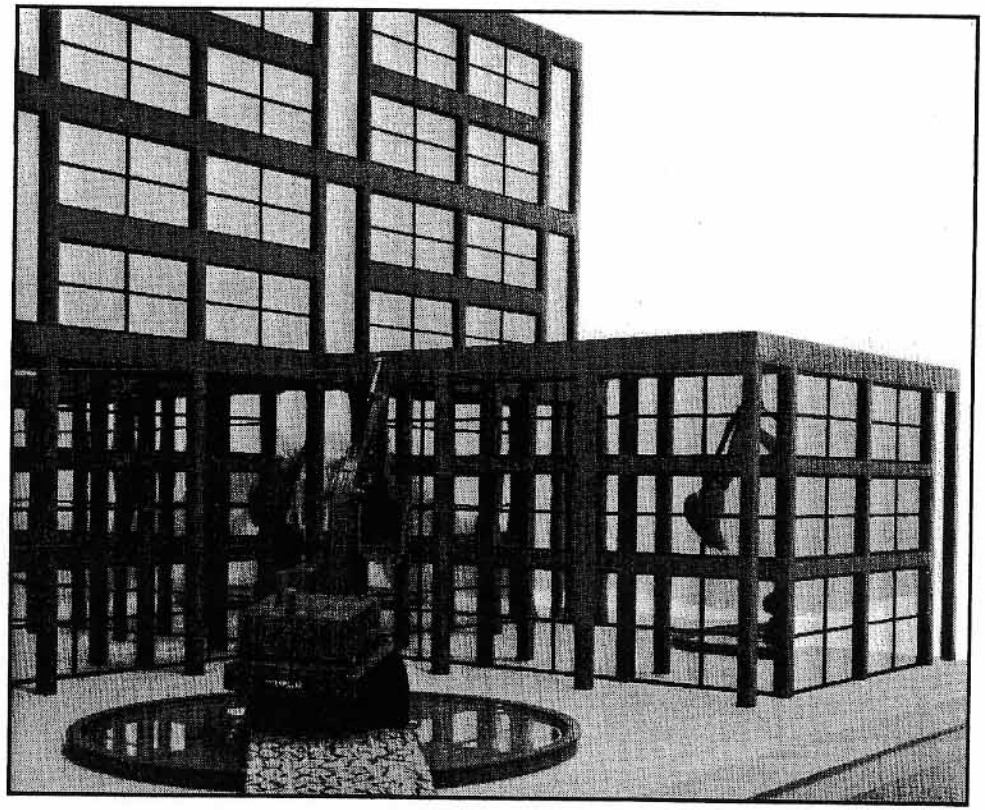
his specification that the excavator be perpetually maintained in perfect working condition. Third, the excavator's placement in the plaza aligns its form with the interests of the citizens who share the plaza with it. The excavator thereby functions as an open provocation to the power structure legitimating the building's construction. I call Congdon's *Monument* a "conceptual sculpture" because it slyly hints at, but does not represent, the outcome of the dynamic tension that it implies between the excavator and the building, and between citizens and institutional authority. Rather, the *Monument* is a model of these power relations, which maintains a certain pragmatic utopianism in its implicit claim that citizens' power, properly applied, can result in important political shifts and social transformations. The piece's utopianism is seen clearly in Congdon's specification that the excavator be maintained for eternity in perfect working condition. By making this specification, Congdon implies that there may be aspects of the present day which are worth bearing forward into the future, and that these are therefore worth preserving. The excavator can consequently be seen as an allegorical representation of a certain set of social relations. Part of the piece's humor, of course, is Congdon's insinuation that the excavator's job of destruction and rebuilding will not really solve anything, merely erecting another building on the site of the old one, which may, in time, be demolished in turn. The *Monument* leaves the prospect of the building's demolition as an open question. As Congdon argues, "I think it is...possible to see the work as expressing, in a more general way, the content of the relationship that exists between citizens and their cities. In this 'monument' this relation is not resolved, but is rather left in a kind of permanent state of tension. After all, the decision as to whether any particular thing gets built, or whether an existing building is left to stand, or is knocked down to make way for another is, ultimately, a political and aesthetic one. Here it is probably worth noting that some buildings probably should be knocked down and in either case, whether building or not building, the excavators will always be there to do the dirty work."[12]

How are these issues relevant to Surrey? The city is now changing very quickly. I saw the *Monument* in Congdon's downtown Vancouver studio one week, then, the next, surveying Surrey by Skytrain, rode up the hill from King George Station only to confront an office tower, just like the one in Daniel's

12. Daniel Congdon, artist's statement, April 1998.



Daniel Congdon,
*Monument for an Office Plaza*, 1997,
(detail), Photo courtesy
of the artist



Daniel Congdon,
*Monument for an Office Plaza*, 1997,
(detail). Photo courtesy
of the artist

model, rising above Whalley's single family homes and pawnshops and motels. To my urban eye, Whalley is a community in the midst of rebuilding itself through a process of rezoning and reconstruction which has seeded a new sea of highrises throughout a fading older neighborhood. Often, such redevelopment programs are naturalized by appealing to evolutionary metaphors, which imply their historical inevitability. Congdon's *Monument* holds out the possibility for a different kind of change, a reminder of citizens' their ability to set themselves against the power systems encoded in this new generic landscape.

Images of suburban citizens and their often conflicting relationships to political and institutional power recur time and again in *Edge City*. Sometimes these social relationships are represented abstractly, as in Daniel Congdon's *Monument*, whose grey building and yellow excavator dramatize a dialectical relationship between individuals and institutional power. Other images of citizens appear in the work of Scott McFarland, Kevin Schmidt, and Robert Linsley and the Vancouver Expeditionary Painters. All three of these artists depict recognizable subjects and landscapes, dealing with the relationship of suburban citizens to each other and the landscape.

Scott McFarland is represented in *Edge City* by two works: *Park Portraits*, an eight panel work composed of photographs output as digital ink jet prints, and *Participate*, a found text which acquires additional resonance when exhibited in conjunction with the *Portraits*. Made with the help of a telephoto lens in Surrey parks, the *Portraits* record anonymous citizens as they enjoy brief moments of leisure. A young East Asian man looks nervously out of the frame, as if recognizing someone; an older white man scratches his head; a young girl casts her eyes down; another, even younger girl passes with a fuzzy backpack on her shoulders. Racially and demographically these individuals seem to have very little in common with each other beside being in the park.

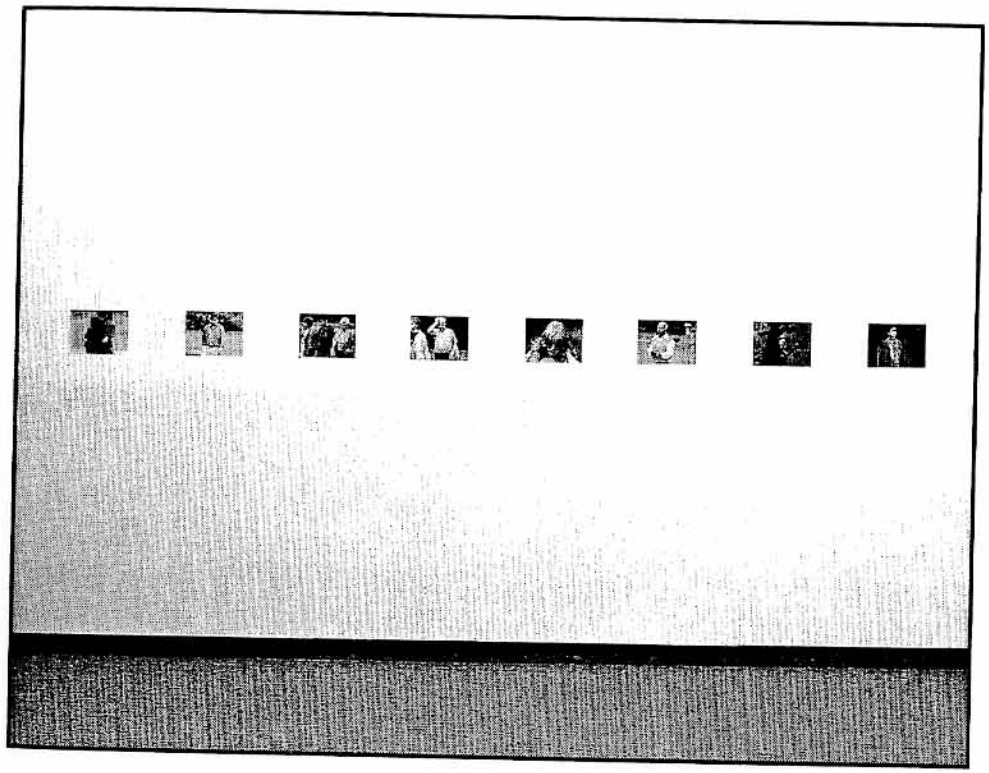
Historically, parks are descendants of landscape gardens, privileged communal spaces whose paths and vistas invite exploring with companions, adventures inspiring conversation, learning, and philosophical reflection. Civic parks are more democratic; the expectation is that anyone arriving is welcome to enjoy

their pleasures. These include the freedom to relax, at least momentarily, from playing an established social role, and the freedom not to require a reason to be there. These freedoms are very different from those found in the suburban mall, an ostensibly public place where you are free to browse (but not to linger), or where the "freedom" to remain comes at the price of a purchase. Conversely, in a civic park, it's possible to relax a bit, to step outside a system of purely economic determination. The *Portraits* allude to these freedoms, but their attentiveness to small details of appearance and gesture also highlights the extent to which their subjects carry over aspects of their other, social lives into the "free" space of the park. Still, despite these sometimes dramatic gestures, most of individuals depicted in the *Portraits* are absorbed in themselves, their thoughts turned inward. Absorption is a specific category, which art historian Michael Fried likens to, "the state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or (as I prefer to say) absorbed in what [a figure] is doing, hearing, thinking, feeling."[13] Fried contends that such images, for example, in the genre scenes of Chardin, have the effect of translating the length of time viewers stand in front of them into "a purely pictorial effect: as if the very stability and unchangingness of the. . . image are perceived by the beholder not as material properties that could not be otherwise but as manifestations of an absorptive state—the image's absorption in itself, so to speak—that only happens to subsist. The result, paradoxically, is that stability and unchangingness are endowed to an astonishing degree with the power to conjure an illusion of immanent or gradual or even fairly abrupt change."[14] Fried doesn't leave his argument on this formal level, but pursues it to a social end. "Images such as these are not of time wasted but of time filled.... [T]hey embody a new, unmoralized vision of distraction as a vehicle for absorption; or perhaps one should say of that vision that it distills, from the most ordinary states and activities, an unofficial morality according to which absorption emerges as good in and of itself, without regard to its occasion."[15] In other words, absorption is foremost a private task, which, because of its inaccessibility to others, causes conflict with the belief systems in operation outside of the park. In the working world, daydreaming is a cause of accidents and problems that can only be curtailed through continual surveillance, either by *Dilbert*-esque "cubicle police" or cameras. But in McFarland's photographs, the figures, although in a hypothetically public space, are fully absorbed in private thoughts we can only

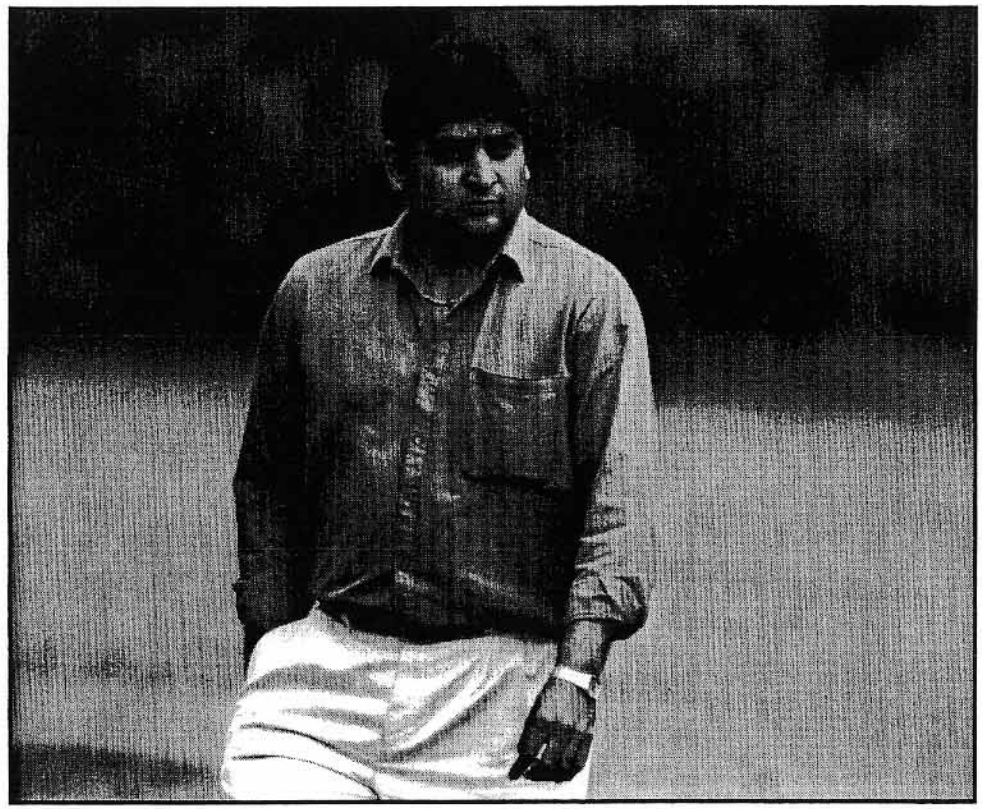
13. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot.* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1980), p.10.

14. *ibid,* p.50.

15. *ibid,* p.51.



Scott McFarland,
*Park Portraits*
(installation view).
Photo: Barrie Jones.



Scott McFarland,
*Park Portraits* (detail),
1998, Photo courtesy of
the artist.

guess at. There's a fundamental difference between our knowledge of them and their knowledge of themselves, a difference accentuated by McFarland's decision to print his photographs as inkjets, a process which causes the stable photographic image to break up and destabilize. In other words, the *Park Portraits* represent a barrier between individuals and the culture surrounding them, a limit to how close a culture or organization can get to its subjects or audience by dividing or anatomizing their activities. In other words, a municipal government like Surrey's can provide socially delimited areas for activities like recreation, but can't actually specify what those activities will be, particularly insofar as citizens will tend to reconfigure these spaces to their own ends, with little regard for the social uses the spaces were designed to be put to. (Kevin Schmidt's airbrush drawings also address this subject, to which we'll soon return).

McFarland's other contribution to the exhibition, *Participate,* also depicts a socially legitimated space for citizen activity: in this case, a 1970s mail-in ballot requesting residents of a new, planned town in south Surrey to select a name for their community. The ballot represents a democratic action not enacted in the socially legitimated space of the landscape garden, park, or public space, but rather in a private home. The ballot also represents—and here my thinking may not wholly parallel McFarland's—a choice between two different versions of history. As Walter Benjamin argues, the totality of past history is not equally accessible to all citizens for all time. So the municipal government's invitation to citizens to *Participate!* is not only a choice of a community name, but also a decision about what version of history will remain and which will be lost. "[I]t seems fitting that some aspects for the Proposal of the South Surrey area might incorporate some Spanish or Indian flavor from its early history. Names of boulevards, parks, villages, or even the town, could be given Spanish or Indian names and some architecture could be given a Spanish treatment. Members of the Council of the Municipality invite your comments on this thought."[16] Two unvoiced assumptions are present here: first, that a group of individuals can choose a single word that successfully differentiates their community from all others; and, second, that the liberal municipal government of the early 1970s actually values input from its citizens, and understands its


Scott McFarland, *Participate* (detail), 1998, found text, Photo courtesy of the artist.

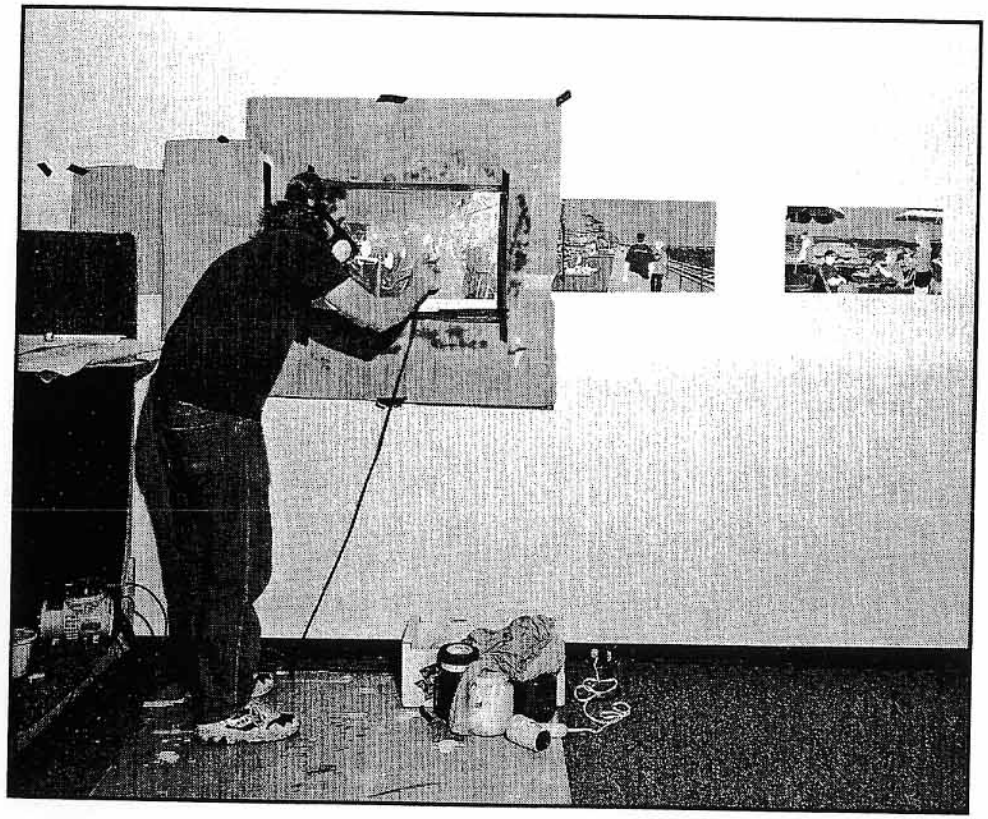
16. *South Surrey Plan/Study: A Proposal for a Liveable New Community* (Surrey: Corporation of the District of Surrey, Planning Division, 1971), p.5

responsibility as providing unbiased information to them to aid them in their decision-making process: "The concept received its impetus from elected representatives on the Municipal Council. The Council now seeks to stimulate public discussion on the concept so that an official community plan can be evolved. No private commercial interests have influenced the Plan/Study in any way.... Attend one of the meetings that will be held for the purpose of public discussion. Tell your views to the Mayor or any member of Council. Write to the Municipal Planner, Municipal Hall, Surrey, and your comments will be correlated and communicated to the Mayor and Council as part of the overall views of all the residents of the Municipality."[17] In its liberal openness and apparent transparency, the civic planning process of the early 1970s casts the development now occurring all up and down the Fraser Valley in a new light, where the rationale for development is not described in such a comprehensive a way, nor does extensive public input guide the development process.

Scott McFarland making a photograph in a Surrey park. Photo: Evan Lee.

17. *ibid*, pp.1, 11.

Kevin Schmidt's airbrush drawings address a subject similar to McFarland's; namely, the social reconfiguration of public space, in this case the White Rock strip. This crowded half-mile is bounded on one side by a steep hillside and, on the other, the gently sloping beach. In between are pizza parlours, soft ice-cream stands, beachware stores, Greek restaurants and stores selling Victorian tableclothes and teddy bears... a landscape somehow reminiscent of Gastown but also, with its pier and long, gently curving bay, of places further to the south, of Santa Monica or Santa Barbara. Residential houses are pushed back, onto side streets or up the hill, so the shore road consequently marks a boundary between the public park and the commercial strip on the other side. The strip is like an addition to the free park where it costs to park, food is expensive, and there are always plenty of souvenir t-shirts and postcards. This fortunate convergence of pricey entertainment and free recreation has made the strip into a popular cruising spot, which on weekend afternoons and summer evenings effectively turns the road into a parking lot, one decidedly unpopular with local merchants and residents, who could live with kids hanging around the beach, but find it harder to cope with wall-to-wall traffic, squealing tires, and the low, threatening sound of Wu-Tang Clan and LL Cool J rumbling from trunk speakers. The municipality has consequently



Kevin Schmidt, working on the installation of *Images of young, middle class, white males cruising in White Rock.* Photo: Barrie Jones


Kevin Schmidt,
*Images of young, middle class, white males cruising in White Rock* (detail).
Photo courtesy of the artist

initiated exorbitant meter fees, bylaws meant to keep cars moving and stereos down, and a proliferation of other parking regulations.[18] Despite these, teens' desire to cruise the strip continues unabated. One thing this conflict between the municipal government and its citizens illustrates is the folly of trying to legislate citizens' reconfigurations of public space out of existence. It just doesn't work. A second, slightly more interesting way of approaching Kevin's drawings is to recognize that the kids on the White Rock strip are rebelling against the bureaucratic municipality and irritating local residents, but are conforming to an overarching social structure, interacting in socially proscribed ways: meeting, flirting, and sometimes getting together. They accept the convenience of entertainment and recreation side-by-side and happily put it to use. Kevin's prints, airbrushed onto the gallery walls and various places throughout the city, take the form of a provocation of this conservative order. Traditionally, graffiti marks a disruption of an existing social order, so Kevin's "sprayed drawings" provoke South Surrey youth with images of themselves. This provocation takes the form of illustrations of aimless leisure: young, well-dressed guys lounging on park benches and wandering along the strip, giving girls the eye and whistling from cars. The characters have time on their side. But in Kevin's judgement, this time is a time of waiting and not accomplishing much. Much recent local art has lavished serious attention on slacker culture, memorializing it rather than criticizing it, a myopic false nostalgia for times that now, from the perspective of the late 1990s, seem much better than they were.[19] These works have been less anxious to reveal nostalgia's downside; namely, that childhood and adolescence is a waiting room, that memories of listlessly hanging out at the beach or on the strip will soon be transformed by the realities of a full-time job or advanced education. Kevin's works mark out an exemption from economic survival which the characters depicted in his drawings don't question, partially because of their age and partially because middle-class money insulates them from having to question their environment more fully. The cruisers, ten years on, will be the families I saw on my visits to the White Rock strip, the young parents stepping nervously around the kids gathered in constellations up and down the strip, their poses bright with theatrical rebellion. Kevin's images of this culture are colorful and funny, but a skepticism pervades them, too, because they depict a culture Schmidt is probably closer to than he might care to admit, and because he has seen its down side, and has chosen to try and

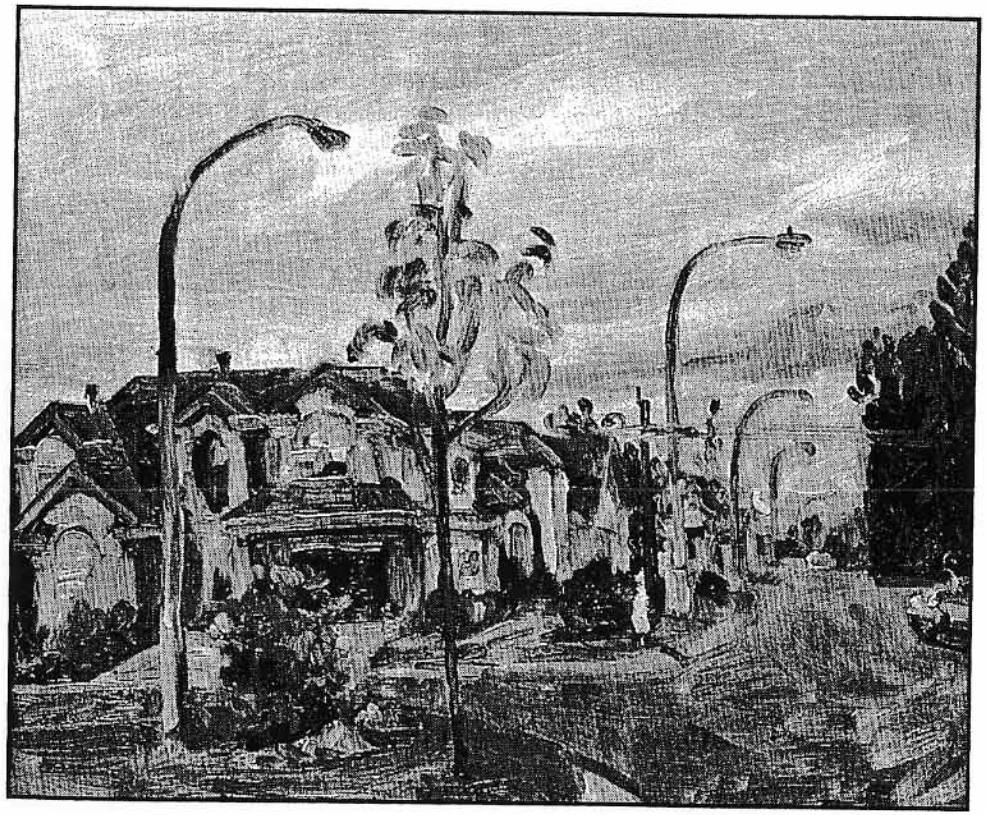
18. My observations are informed by several evening visits to the White Rock strip and informal conversations with merchants along the strip.

19. A view unintentionally articulated by the recent survey exhibition *6: New Vancouver Modern* (Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1998). Notable local exceptions include the Or Gallery's 1997 exhibition of Ron Terada's *Grey Paintings*, and the group show *Buddy Palace*.

distance himself from it by abstracting it as art. The White Rock strip is the oddly fragmented site of an ongoing conflict between municipal planners and youth. The interlocking planes of Kevin's flat, "constructed" images suggest social narratives referencing other, often conflicting social narratives, symbolic representations of social constructions of space that center on the White Rock strip.

Whereas Schmidt's drawings depict a landscape that he knows intimately, using that knowledge to invert it, Ben Reeves and Robert Linsley and the Vancouver Expeditionary Painters take a different tack, beginning not from special knowledge of a place, but from appearances, working outward to some general conclusions about suburbia's changing face. Of the two, Reeves' project is probably closest to the work of artists like Manet and Pissarro, a continuation of the project of "the painting of modern life." To make the paintings displayed in *Edge City*, Reeves took a Surrey map book and had a friend throw darts at it. He then drove to the locations indicated by the fall of the darts and produced a series of small oil on panel paintings, mounting the panels on his car's steering wheel as he worked.

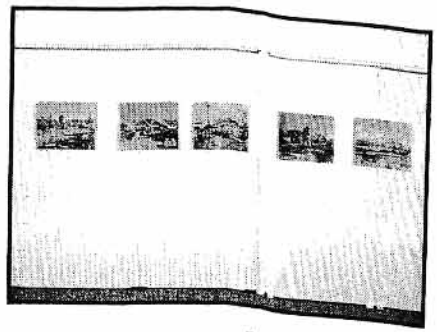
Because Reeves' paintings' locations were not chosen by him, but determined by the arbitrary throw of a dart, and because he's honor-bound not to practice the sort of "cynical selection" practiced by artists like Monet, rather treating everything in front of him with identical "indifference," a number of things make it into his paintings that haven't previously appeared in regional art. One thing I value is how all his houses seem lived in; though their architecture is a tip-off that almost all of them have been built recently, overall, because of the "indifference" with which both houses and landscape are treated, there's a remarkable integration of the houses with the landscape, a change from the work of artists like Dan Graham and Dick Averns, in whose photographs houses seem wholly alienated from the landscape. Because Reeves has looked closely at his subjects, he shows us not one generic kind of "monster house," but many. And because he tries not to take an attitude to his subjects but is simply content to represent them, a plenitude of new images are released. Reeves' paintings depict places where people actually live and work and



Ben Reeves,
*Map 49/E8.*
Photo courtesy
of the artist.

Ben Reeves,
*Map 38/B10.*
Photo courtesy
of the artist.

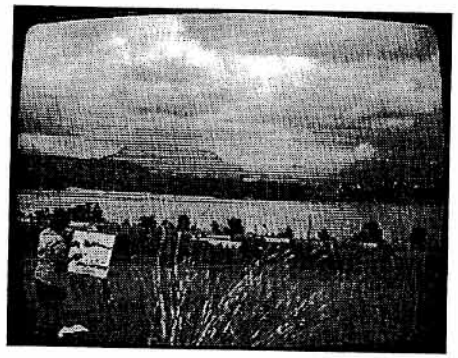
shop, and all of these views are treated with an almost infinite curiosity, that detects correspondences between things that have passed other suburban chroniclers by, a full range of fragmentary views that illuminate a larger community. I don't know of any precedent for Reeves' work in regional art. Robert Linsley's paintings of the late 1980s and early 1990s and certain "Vancouver School" photographs share certain parallels with Reeves' paintings, but while these earlier artists are mainly concerned to evoke specific views, Reeves' is different, a composite view. Maybe the closest precedent for Reeves' work isn't contemporary, but art historical: Atget's views of Paris and its environs, endless pictures, like a photographic encyclopedia. Of course, Atget, a quintessential modernist, thought he was building a comprehensive view of Paris, while Reeves of course is doing no such thing, rather producing a partial account, an art of fragments. I like these elliptical views and I like how, despite the essentially random nature of their composition, images of the Surrey I know from my visits to the municipality still appear: power lines, farmyards, the Skytrain bridge (almost assimilated into the background of a picture which is actually concerned with the end of a cul-de-sac somewhere west of the King George Highway), and of course the laboring agricultural landscapes that are still an important part of the city. Reeves' art is an art of edges, not in the sense of views of things on the periphery of something else, but rather of things butting against each other, of points of refraction between temporally distinct subjects. His paintings are also evidence of a democratic imagination that does not differentiate between socially distinct subjects, finding just as much meaning in a suburban parking lot as in more conventional views of the borderlands where 'city' and 'country' meet.



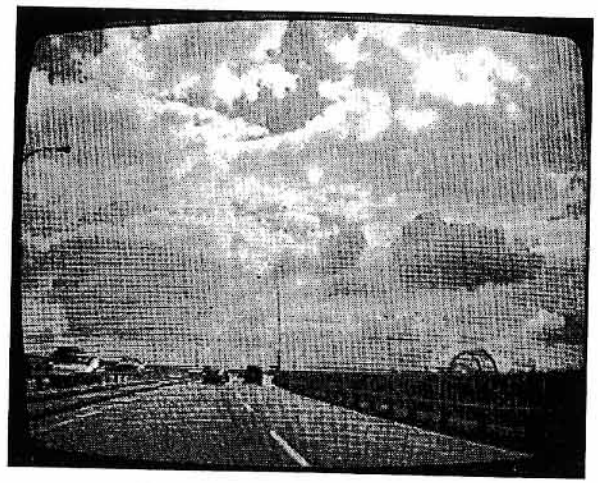
Ben Reeves.
(installation view).
Photo: Barrie Jones.

In the work of Robert Linsley and the Vancouver Expeditionary Painters, a different problem is addressed: why make paintings today, instead of photographs, sculptures, or videos? Perhaps painting offers a kind of experience—and requires a form of concentration—that is devalued in modern culture: standing still and looking for a long period of time. Perhaps a better way of looking at the

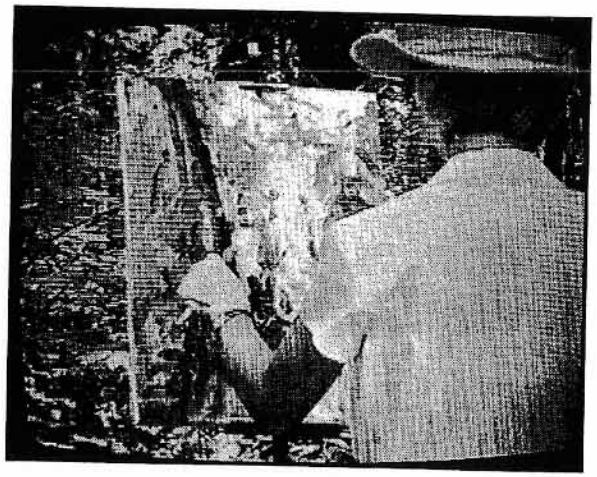
work of painters Robin Anderson, Coral Barclay, Kashmira Bhagat, Teresa Knight, Marleen Lamprecht, Cathie McKean and Bill Taylor, is to see their works as records of a certain kind of experience in the suburbs, and as investigations of subjects that urban artists might seek in the suburbs, which are not available to them in the city. Some of these images are obvious: mountains and the Fraser River, sawdust barges, and views across Georgia Strait to Vancouver Island's blue mountains in the distance. Others are less so: railcars, sunbathers, and clearcut hillsides full of crystalline subdivisions, light flashing from their windows and tile roofs. In almost all of the paintings, there are inexplicable passages where the painters' perceptions break down; where things in front of them will not cohere or stabilize, where modernity erupts in the middle of scenes which at first seem fairly simple to record. Unlike more slick, or cynical, artists, the Vancouver Expeditionary Painters don't ignore these eruptions, but dutifully transcribe them in their work. Like Ben Reeves, they are open in their approach to their subjects, as they struggle to find new visual languages adequate to their representation of their subjects. The videos which accompany the paintings illustrate the difficulty of ever finding stable landscapes to paint. The monitors replay endless hours of video footage: views down side roads and along highways; things that interfere or refuse to stabilize: inclement weather, changing light, someone's dog running off its leash; passerby wandering up just to watch or to offer "helpful" criticism; cyclists and joggers passing by. Someone steps on a fish hook. Someone else's truck gets stuck and revs its wheels in the sand. Robert Linsley's camera moves in a decidedly non-cinematic way, constantly shifting from restless panning to temporarily stable views that suggest possible compositions for paintings, tableaus that rise up from the unstructured chaos recorded on the tapes, only to disappear again. The world is always moving, and that painting is even possible in the midst of such chaos comes as a surprise. Popular views of *plein air* painters at work in the landscape tend to emphasize solitary communion with nature, something that doesn't appear remotely possible in any of the locations Linsley and the Painters visited on their 1998 Surrey Tour." Even in Redwood Park, which of all the locations on the videotapes seems best suited to quiet introspection, distractions abound in the form of cyclists, joggers, and quickly changing light. The



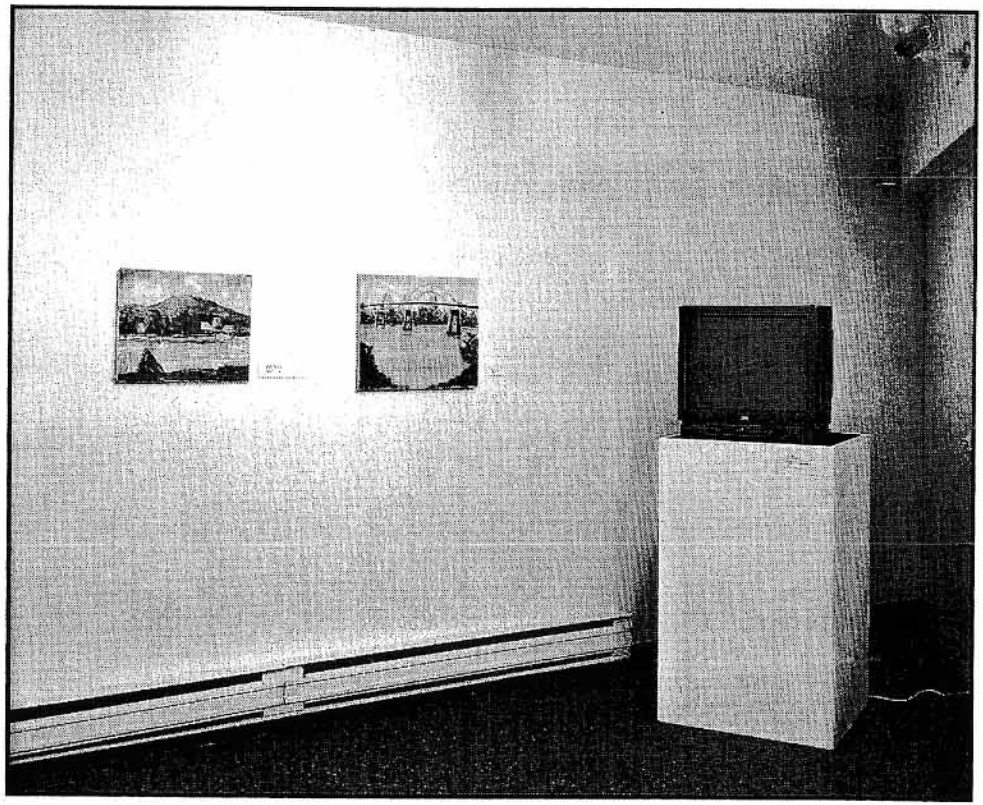
*After Work,*
(115A Avenue),
Video still courtesy of
Robert Linsley.



*An Afternoon in the Country,*
Video still courtesy of Robert Linsley.



*Painters in Repose,*
Video still courtesy of Robert Linsley.



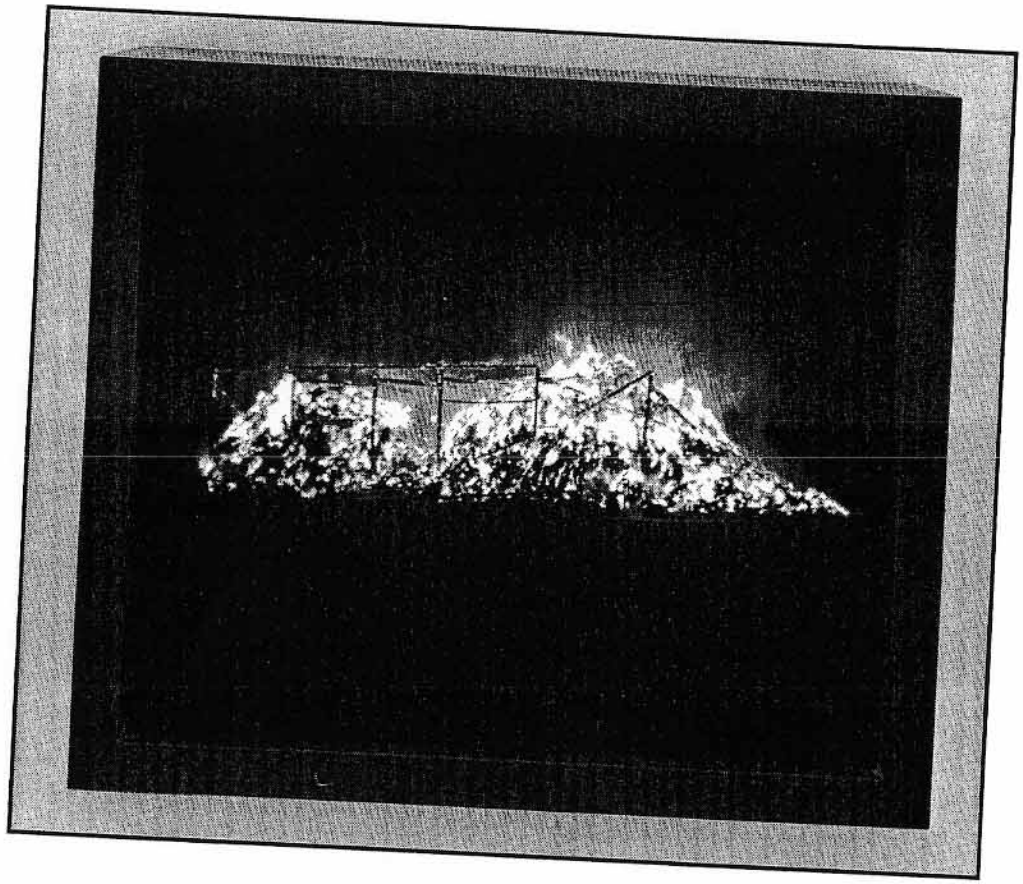
*Vancouver Expeditionary Painters with Robert Linsley,* (installation view). Photo: Barrie Jones.

Painters' perseverance at learning their craft in the face of such obstacles, and in exposing themselves and their work to public display (unlike studio painters, who control the circumstances under which their work is shown to the public) is demonstrated by their fusion as a cohesive group, depicted in the informal portrait photograph accompanying the installation of videos and paintings. The Painters share a wide range of reasons for painting, but at least temporarily, have come together to work toward common goals. Painting's utopian purpose may consequently be not only that it demands a kind of concentration which is not highly valued in the contemporary world, but also that, as a shared pursuit, it enables the formation of a kind of community, permitting individuals from differing social and historical backgrounds to come together in the spirit of shared intellectual and aesthetic inquiry. The group also provides a support mechanism of contemporaries, a release from the isolation of working alone, with only books as models. So the painting experience is not solitary, but a shared, social one, whose open, pluralistic model of community mirrors the new openness and heterogeneity found in the suburban locations the Painters visited with Robert Linsley in tow. The Painters' trips to Surrey also involved constant negotiations with local residents—in some cases, for things as simple as access to particular views; in others, complicated answers to the questions and criticisms posed by passerby, social occasions which provided the predominantly urban members with a different experience of the suburbs than that provided by simply driving through.

Dwight Koss and Arni Haraldsson's photographs adopt contemporary photographic models and then subvert and transform them in unique and unexpected ways. Dwight Koss' backlit photographic transparencies are still images, portions of which move, animated by a mechanical process lifted from advertising technology. The experience of watching Koss' photographs, particularly from a distance, is hypnotic, extending the fascination that inheres in the backlit transparencies' rich colors and dramatic presentation. But in Koss' hands the technology is not selling anyone anything; instead, his works open up something quite different for consideration. His photographs—of a burning building seen at night; a hotel pool; an elderly woman wearing what can be charitably described as historical costume—were not taken by him, but rather purchased from suburban thrift stores, then enlarged, animated, and made

to speak anew. Of course these images would have spoken to the people who took them, but their intent is now non-recoverable; all that remains to speak are the images themselves, and not the "content" first invested in them by their makers. What is the nature of this speech? The hidden dreams and fears of the suburban middle class. The suburban home, even the "discrete possessable cell" of the tract house, represents, in almost every case, a massive investment by its middle class owner, and as the SECURITY SYSTEM and GUARD DOG—WILL BITE! signs in front of many of these homes indicates, the desire to preserve this investment is so strong that, at a point, it almost becomes irrational, a fetish catered to by the home security aisle of the local building store.

Like Kevin Schmidt's work, Koss' work provokes suburbia with images of its hidden dreams. *Burning Down the House* takes an image of the destruction of a suburban house and then prolongs it like a bad dream in which the bad thing doesn't end, but becomes a permanent part of viewers' psychic landscapes. Koss' other images of a hotel pool and smiling woman accomplish this process in reverse. These tropical images, which at first appear to have little to do with the suburbs, are images of exemption. The hotel pool is heaven. Its waves ripple endlessly against the rich blue sky, prolonged to the point of becoming fairly sinister. The whole point of visiting a tropical resort is that your visit is brief. You're just there long enough to enjoy the sand and warm white surf, and to miss the possibly armed guards lounging on the periphery of your vision, the hidden signs that segregate the resort beach from the public beach; the poverty visible on the road from the airport; the shantytowns all up and down the forested hills, evidence of another kind of life which you, as a visitor, are comfortably insulated from. Dwight's pieces take this touristic non-recognition, presented back at home in the form of a home movie or slideshow, and extend it, invoking the boredom that inevitably accompanies these basement travelogues. Meanwhile back at home, the house is still burning. Here an image of real suburban rebellion—something more serious than violating the boom car bylaw on the White Rock strip—is articulated as a permanent fear in the minds of the suburban middle class. By prolonging images meant to be seen only briefly in the context of a suburban slideshow or vacation travelogue, Koss' photographs articulate beliefs previously present only "as a subtext," ones which, though



Dwight Koss,
*Burning Down the House.*
Photo: Trevor Mills.

Dwight Koss,
*Woman, 1998.*
Photo: Trevor Mills.

compelling, are ones which the culture at large does not want to officially acknowledge. By re-presenting these images, Koss gently provokes the culture to accept ownership of these common dreams and anxieties, and to acknowledge their previously hidden economic and social subtexts.

Arni Haraldsson's photographic project, *Woodlands, New Westminster, BC*, considers a previously unexplored suburban landscape containing several different kinds of regional history, simultaneously provoking a renewed appreciation for the hybrid character of Haraldsson's artistic practice. Although he is probably best known as a photographer of suburban landscapes and architecture, Haraldsson began his career by employing appropriated photography and text, a practice which has continued into his most recent work, though largely unacknowledged by critics and reviewers. For example, Haraldsson's 1994 exhibition at Presentation House Gallery was repeatedly described as an exhibition of photographs, despite the presence of a series of lithographs featuring "found" texts and photographs appropriated from condominium advertisements in *The Vancouver Sun*.

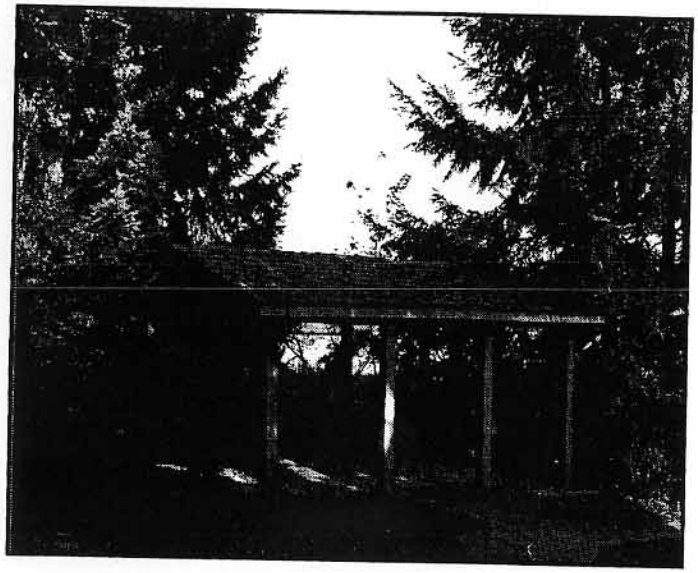
Haraldsson's *Woodlands* project takes as its subject a former asylum located in New Westminster, overlooking the Fraser River and Surrey[20], which, in more recent years, has been used as a set for the filming of television shows like, The *X-Files*, and *Police Academy*. His photographs consider both images of the asylum's past, still visible on the present day grounds, and imaginative "additions" made to the site by television crews, including "false fronts" bolted onto buildings, the erection of fake target ranges and "police cars," and the building of several hastily-constructed exterior sets. These images of the TV crews' additions are particularly interesting, emphasizing the extent to which television's dramatic effect depends on the rote evocation of clichés and racist stereotypes. For example, a 'corner market' set consists of some boxy-looking vegetable stalls, a fake storefront, and an awning lettered with a Chinese name. In Haraldsson's photograph, this broken-down set looks patently unreal. Its ability to successfully evoke the impression of a 'corner market' is shown to reside in its racist conjunction of a Chinese name with a certain building style. Similarly, the Styrofoam "false front" of an asylum building temporarily recommissioned as the "Los Angeles Police Academy" is transformed by the decorators' addition of a false LAPD shield to its roof. In each case, television viewers' identification of architectural features is

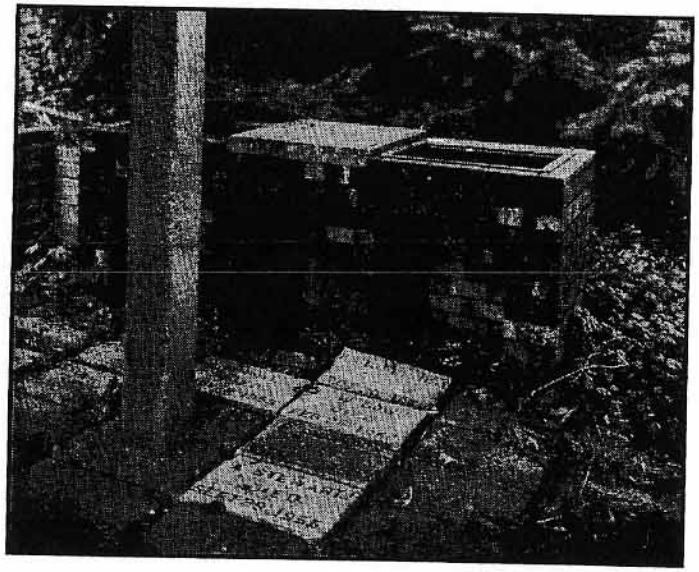
20 "Woodlands in New Westminster is a piece of Crown Reserve land about a mile in length and with a view toward the Fraser River and Surrey. Originally set aside in 1858 for the building of the capital of the province, until the seat of government was moved to Victoria, the land then became the site for a penitentiary and a hospital for the mentally ill, named the Provincial Lunatic Asylum. The two story structure resembled a gracious country mansion set in the English countryside, while the hospital's make-shift staff reflected the frontier population of the province itself." Arni Haraldsson, artist's statement, *Woodlands, New Westminster, BC*, 1998.

enabled by the addition of simplistic visual signs that function as symbolic cues for viewers' brief attention spans.

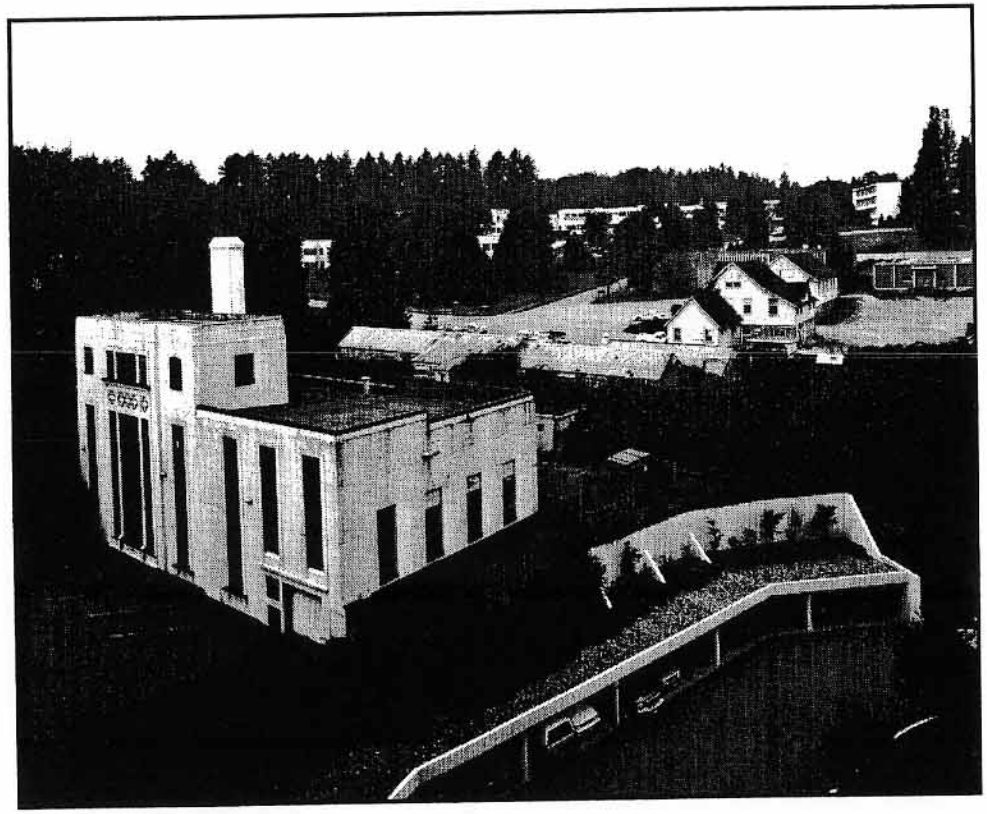
While *Woodlands'* "TV sets" patently declare themselves to be transparent, Haraldsson demonstrates that real history is considerably more opaque. A diptych of photographs depicts a small shelter, built by asylum employees and used as a picnic shelter and barbecue pit. Closer inspection shows the barbecue pit is built from the tombstones of former asylum residents who died while in institutional care. The picnic shelter seems like another imaginative addition to the site, something better suited to an *X-Files* episode than to real life. But it's not, and it's in this confusion of historical reality with fabricated reality that Haraldsson's Woodlands project really shows its strength. The series continually presents images which at first seem familiar, but which, upon more detailed consideration, turn out to be very different from what they first appear to be. The same reality seen in one of the series' richest images—a lush landscape view in which late afternoon light illuminates an old tree, a new apartment tower, and a partial view of the Fraser River's log booms and barges—is also a reality in which institutional residents must cope with film crews' frequent intrusions, with sets that appear and reappear, creating the impression of a fluid reality where nothing is stable for long, and appearances threaten to break down at any time. Haraldsson creates this disorienting effect through his close adherence to a model of photographic naturalism. Without exception, Haraldsson's compositions present mid to long range views of the *Woodlands* grounds, always framing his subjects in relation to their surroundings. His framing choices are dispassionate, almost aloof, suggesting productive comparisons with the work of contemporary photographers like Thomas Struth or Stephen Shore. As Haraldsson's views are slightly removed from the subjects they depict, they provide his with an objective character that grounds the historical and fictional excesses depicted elsewhere in the individual images. The fantastic inventions of time-pressed television crews are shown as gimmicky and sad, props that simulate, but don't adequately convey, the visual richness of the site itself.

Here, in what is possibly a first in his work, Haraldsson contrasts two versions of visual reality: his photographs, and an appropriated opening sequence from the *Police Academy* TV show, which quickly





Arni Haraldsson, *Patio and Barbeque Pit*, 1998, Photos courtesy of the artist.



Arni Haraldsson,
*Boiler House*, 1998,
Photo courtesy
of the artist.

depicts a number of the sites visible in his photographs. The still, almost meditative gaze of Haraldsson's camera is contrasted with the manic pace of the television show's cascade of images, which animates and deploys all the theatrical gimmickry present on the Woodlands site. Thus, Haraldsson's project is not strictly "photography," or "appropriation art," but a hybrid of both, which uses formal properties of video and photography to critique each other. The TV loop enlivens Haraldsson's still photographs with its dumb energy, providing a kind of thematic counterpoint to the photographs' quiet earnestness, while the quality of attention brought to bear on the Woodlands site by Haraldsson reveals subtle, almost poetic aspects of the historical landscape elided by the landscape's appropriation and re-presentation as "Los Angeles" or anywhere but New Westminster, BC. The historical specificity of the regional is always required to elide its uniqueness to assist its re-presentation elsewhere.

Something to think about, at any rate, on your next commute or Sunday drive. Art that denies this old formulation. Works that talk back. Listen carefully, and you can almost hear them: Warren Murfitt's guitar, the *Police Academy* theme song, and the sound of the Vancouver Expeditionary Painters on the road, blending with the silent crackle of Dwight Koss' illuminated fire; the rumble of boom cars on the White Rock strip; the sizzle of high tension powerlines; people in a park; lunchtime crowds on an office plaza. Art dispersing into the world, patiently waiting to be found among the warehouses and storage yards, office parks and motels, farm fields and new detached homes. Seen from the air—how we began, remember? With the mountain slopes, the late fall light?—the suburbs' hieroglyphic sprawl almost seems transparent. Boundaries collapsing. Edges meeting and merging. New meaning in between.

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