Ross RACINE

Interview by Josh O'Connor, posted in *THE URBAN TIMES* (London), December 1, 2010

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*You've explained your technique many times before, but I think your methods add to the abstraction of the suburban forms which you represent. Can you explain how the built environments that you depict are inspired as well as how you create the imagery?*

Sources of inspiration:

I came to this particular subject matter because of a fascination, which I have had since childhood, with aerial views and maps. I get inspiration from a variety of sources. From the domain of urban planning, as in contemporary, historical or utopian city design. More specifically, I chose suburbia because it seemed to offer the most visual appeal and artistic possibilities, for creating personal images and for exploring formal and conceptual themes. Formally, among the various types of subject matter visible from the air, I was spontaneously attracted to suburbs because I find an analogy between their linear design and the lines of an artist's drawing on paper. One may consider a suburb viewed from above as a large drawing. And in terms of content, suburbs are to me a particularly relevant subject, symbolic of our global society, as they are the urban constructions that most clearly illustrate population growth, extensive land occupation, and wasteful overconsumption.

On the other hand, some of my sources of inspiration are very far from city planning or aerials. Your question mentions abstractness. I am actually inspired by abstract painting, which fuels my interest in the links between the macro and micro views of the world, and between very large and very small phenomena. The observable world has many examples of organizations that are similar at both scales, for example the concentric structure. In this respect, diagrams in particular inspire me, by their way of translating information into visual form. I use the vocabulary of diagrams, which can be very straightforward and powerful, for composition and also to imply that the suburbs' contents, material and human, seen from a high viewpoint, can be also considered information. I am also interested in the implications of living within specific structures, for example what would it be like to live in an endless accumulation of haphazardly connected streets.

Creation of the drawings:

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

The process then involves creating the artwork in two steps: the first and main one is drawing freehand directly with the computer, and the second one is printing the image on paper with an inkjet printer. The drawing phase involves working with Photoshop with a pen and a tablet, starting from a blank ground with nothing but the streets, and building up the image with a relatively small set of basic tools, such as selection, painting and cloning tools, copying and pasting, layers, luminosity and contrast controls, grain and smoothness modifications, and automation. In short, the method is a combination of digitally drawn material and various transformations done to this material.

One of the main properties of digital drawing is a virtual, non-material working environment. The fact that the image is not bound to a physical base has several advantages. It allows various combinations of techniques and treatments, an ease in modifying the whole image at once, an ease in copying and cutting, moving and pasting parts of the work, the blending of layers of variable translucency, and the creation of copies of the image in progress (to save steps in the generation of the work and to create different versions of a work). Working in the virtual world also means the image can be altered at any time, even after a final version is established, thus creating a new, different image from a "final" one. Another property of the medium is its very fast speed compared to most physical media. This allows a very short delay between intention and result, as little time is needed to try out various options.

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*Are there any new or evolving technologies that you find particularly useful in creating your work (such as Google Maps)?*

I actually use Google Earth and other satellite imagery as references and inspiration, since aerial photography is closer to my images than maps are. The general public's increasing familiarity with aerial photography, thanks to its instant availability, makes the aerial view a vantage point more common than

before in the popular imagination. Looking at things from above is now second nature to many people. The view from above facilitates a more synthetic idea of the world and the distance required for a reflective attitude. I remember the impact in the 1960s of the first photo of our entire planet taken from space; how it helped people realize our planet is a whole.

On the other hand, I don't use aerial photography as much as many people think. In the last few years, I have developed my own basic visual vocabulary and I use it for thinking in pictures and creating the drawings, without going back to aerial references that often.

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*The types of visualizations envisioned through your work provide a vantage point not commonly found in the renderings used by planners. Do you think aerial conceptual renderings similar to those found in your work might be useful in changing land consumption patterns and the aesthetics of development?*

Unlike photographs, my drawings are free of the burden of depicting observable reality and lie outside the realm of direct practical application. My suburbs are unconcerned about the consequences of living in them. On the other hand, my images could be used as brainstorming and mind-expanding aids for planners and other interested people, because of their surreal aspect. They are often dystopian exaggerations of existing observable situations. In this way they can draw attention to critical aspects of contemporary suburbia. And those of my prints that are rather close to existing conditions can be used as reminders of current environmental predicaments.

4
*As a planner, I am transfixed by the juxtaposition of suburban reality and surrealism that you create in your artwork. Are there any particular developments or areas of the country that you find yourself pulling from more than others?*

I am particularly attracted by aerial photographs of the American West, either in desert or semi-arid areas, in suburban or non-urban areas. Midwestern conditions are often similar.

The West's flat, barren, open, dry ground appears to me analogous to a blank sheet of paper. Also, compared to their eastern counterparts, western suburban developments appear to have been dropped from above onto the land; thus highlighting the disconnect between the human constructions and the

natural landscape. For those two reasons, I find suburbia in the American West similar to an artist's drawing on a sheet of paper; the suburb may be read as a construction resting on a support.

Another factor in my attraction to the West is that suburbs, offset by the arid plain, have the appearance of gigantic works of land art. Again, making the human constructions stand out as aggressive interventions in the landscape.

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*Is there a particular direction that you would wish to push conversations about suburban development? What is the overall concept that you would like people to take away from your work?*

I don't have a single overall concept, as I consider my prints open to different readings, like most images. I would like viewers to be receptive to the various aspects of the work: from its topical considerations about actual suburbia to its science-fictional, hopefully sometimes humorous, exploration of urban organizations, and onto more evocative encounters resting on the viewers own experience of looking and living.

I hope viewers are sensitive to the mood of my images. The mood of an image is something very difficult to put into words, but nevertheless remains a critical aspect of the experience of a work of art. An image is first of all based on form, that's why it's an image and not a paragraph of text. What the image looks like, its appearance, is very important. It influences the artist during the creation of the work and is essential to the viewer's experience of the work. An image remains an image, before becoming a vehicle for content and a trigger for various interpretations. In this sense, an image is always more than its potential meanings.

6

*How has your work changed the way that you see urban/suburban development in its reality? How so?*

Since starting this series a few years ago, I have effectively become more aware of the phenomena of suburbia and exurbia and their attendant problems. Although I would not live there, I find them fascinating subject matter, as suburbs are the fastest-growing sector in urban development, not only in the West, but also in most of the developing world.

I have read that the suburbs are the urban manifestation most loathed by planners and architects, but on the other hand are the favorite of the general population, being the most visible manifestation of middle-class desires (a detached house on a lawn, a backyard, a garage and driveway, a wide and quiet street, open space). I admit those desires are legitimate. It's the fact that so many people want the same things at the same time in the same place that create the negative consequences for the environment that we all know about.

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*Do you hold any type of idealized version of future development patterns? What does it look like?*

This is a very challenging question. I admit that I don't often think of the ideal suburb, at least in clear terms. My work is not about offering thoughtful proposals for the future. That's the work of the planners!

That said, my ideal version of any large urban development rests mainly on density, public transit and integration of the residential, commercial and workplace sectors, such as we find in most of the world outside North America. Density facilitates encounters between people, a more active physical life and a more diverse cultural environment, readily accessible because of the proximity. In short, I find any car-dependent environment a disaster.