

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

While Dan Graham's *Homes for America*, 1966, addressed mass production and consumption through deadpan parody, Racine amplifies the city planner's logic with madcap humor. In *Elmwood and Oaklawn*, 2009, he places industrial buildings and garbage dumps next to homes and ball fields, and the beach is nowhere to be found in *Goldenwood Shores*, 2009. In other works, swimming pools jump from front yard to back—if proper orientation can even be identified—and carless roads loop irrationally, lead nowhere, or never intersect. Dizzying but never oppressive, Racine's fictive neighborhoods come to suggest that urban designers today, devoted to sustainability and smart growth, have learned lessons from the past. Even residents are repurposing abandoned strip malls and big-box stores. There's life once again in the suburbs.

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

An incredible hybrid of drawing, digital art and improvisational urban planning, Racine sketches forms on a computer that generate aerial views of fictional, often-absurd suburban subdivisions based on the lines. The bizarre landscapes that result meld a quasi-abstract flattening of perspective, the maddening sameness of suburbia and the disquieting gaze of surveillance satellite imagery.

*L Magazine (online, New York), Ross Racine: North of Piney Acres, The Front Room Gallery, May 2011*

Aerial views by Ross Racine reveal the labyrinthine complexity of suburban neighborhoods that are both quaint in their manicured neatness and unnerving in their endless repetition.

*Tim Parsley, BURB: Zones of Living (exhibition catalog), Manifest Creative Research and Drawing Center (Cincinnati), 2010*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What's eerie is that the images often seem entirely realistic, capturing that odd mix of uninspired marketing whimsy and impracticality that characterizes so many suburban developments. For example, there's cloud-shaped Walnut Village—a community that's both absurd and believable. One has the sense that if we haven't built a place like that yet, we will very soon.

*Jebediah Reed, The Infrastructurist (online, New York), September 2009*

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

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

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

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

*Architecture For Guerillas (online), August 2009*

At first glance, Ross's work appears to be very straightforward. Upon closer inspection, roads don't make sense and the humor in the patterns begins to show. Roads would never function like that, and what seemed to be unambiguous becomes a caricature of the endless miles of suburban sprawl. I love work that has humor and depth that unfolds as you view.

*Ms. Jen Bekman (online, New York), July 2010*

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

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

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

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

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

*Lebbeus Woods (online, New York), Mystery of the Normal, March 2011*