

## When Nearby is Still Faraway

Susan Dobson's images of her Oakville surroundings derive from a photo-journalistic model in which she is fascinated at the same time with the instant of change, the harbinger of the new, and the prosaic qualities of contemporary suburban life. She documents transitional sites (that can sometimes appear like eye-sores or blights) that hook us into a narrative and remind us of the need to re-think radically the way our cities grow—particularly at their outer edges. This exhibition brings together several bodies of work that all deal in some way with the character of contemporary life as found in unbridled suburban expansion.

Since the late 1990s Dobson has been taking straightforward images of housing built on barren lands and of the roads that connect them. As a teacher who commutes, and a mother of young children living in north Oakville,<sup>1</sup> she is often in the car shuttling between various activities—her notebook always at the ready. She then returns as often as two or three times to the selected site to study the scene before finally committing the image to her large format camera. Her photographs are testimony to the ambiguous nether-world of the suburban perimeter, and capture the paving of Anywhere Canada—a place that is without a centre, neither here nor there.

Writer J.B. Jackson in his text *Landscapes* noted, “The road is a very powerful space, and unless it is handled very carefully and constantly watched, it can undermine and destroy the existing order... Roads no longer lead to places, they *are* places.”<sup>2</sup> He sees the road as the centre of a new kind of vernacular community that is no longer drawn together by shared space but is “based on shared uses of the street or road, and on shared routines.”<sup>3</sup> What he is describing, and what Dobson depicts, can be called ‘sprawl.’ As cities swallow up the closer suburbs, new ones are spawned. Streams and hills are obliterated, trees removed and vegetation imported. Uniformity reigns. Sprawl creates a disorienting

landscape that blurs the line between city and country, home and business. It is a car-dependent development that consumes land and resources, degrades watersheds and contributes to air pollution. As a result, Oakville is now notorious as the “gridlock capital” of Canada with the poorest air quality in the country.<sup>4</sup> Dobson's photographs stake out this troubled terrain.

Dobson has not been alone in turning a realist's eye on suburban sprawl. We first came to know views of everyday contemporary suburban culture through the work of American artist, Dan Graham. His now celebrated *Homes for America* (1966–67) sought to demonstrate suburban complexity on a formal and thematic level. This body of work not only documented the mass-produced homes of New Jersey subdivisions but also the individuals who lived in them. He classified types of serial housing on the basis of such features as style, colour and vestibule. *Homes for America* was produced to emulate the look and feel of magazine journalism and was eventually published in *Arts Magazine*.<sup>5</sup> Since his images served to instantiate an artistic idea or concept, he intentionally ignored certain techniques and used cheap colour prints. They represented the serial products of a post-war economic expansion.

Dobson's photos, however, are perfectly elaborated in formal terms and are much larger in scale. They have also been guided by an awareness of Canadian west coast artists who emerged in the 1970s—such as Jeff Wall and, later on, Roy Arden in the 1980s. The works of these internationally recognized artists make visible the conflicted aspects of urban and suburban life in Vancouver. They document the industrialized margins that separate city and countryside and demonstrate how socio-economic forces leave their mark on the everyday. Dobson's approach hovers somewhere between the rigid architectural geometries and sequencing of Graham's postwar suburban housing and those west coast precursors who have elaborated on the contradictions of modern life itself.

Dobson's father was a developer, so the shapes and textures of brick, vinyl siding, chipboard and insulation are familiar to her. They are the main building materials for the identical tract housing on narrow treeless lots that are featured in *Home Invasion* (1998–1999). This series of panoramic colour photographs documents the disorienting character of sprawl—diffuse, extended and without centre. It shows haphazard ‘cluster’ developments either on the edge of abandoned farmland or with “their backs to the Wal-[mart],” raising the question—who is invading whom? Many images take on massive spatial depth, which Dobson



Susan Dobson

*Untitled* (from *Natural Law* series), 2000–2001

C- print

55.9 x 147.3 cm

Courtesy of the artist

achieves by skillfully composing objects in the foreground to provide links with the background. Facades of housing construction dominate, giving the shots the quality of theatrical stage sets. Images such as *Lot 27–30* also demonstrate the artist's love of positive and negative shapes, emphasizing the stacked forms reminiscent of a Carl André sculpture. In *Lots #2–5* we swing between foreground and background and are left with the distinct impression that the homes themselves form an endless battalion invading the land. Windowless and without cladding, the foreground homes appear to have vacant eyes and toothless grins. The implication is that even at this embryonic stage the housing will soon look like the finished, homogenized cluster belonging to the background, and thus perpetuate the on-going invasion.

It would seem that in designing these images Dobson is increasingly putting her trust in the natural order of things themselves. This becomes more evident in the series that is accorded the title *Natural Law* (2000–2001). She recognizes that—once lands have been disturbed, worked

on, meddled with, developed—they require human upkeep and care, or else nature reclaims the landscape. These images suggest that nature can never be permanently suppressed. For example, an abandoned sofa in the woods is further re-upholstered by falling leaves, or a tree extends its branches to obscure a Schneider's billboard, all as if to restore or heal the wounds of human interference. In these formally perfect photographs, it seems as though Dobson withdraws her authorship completely. Although the pictures have a sophisticated pictorial structure, we get the feeling that the objects are being photographed on their own terms, literally revealing their true natures.

Returning to the site of human habitation (which is never far away), another series, titled *No Fixed Address*, (2001–2002) examines how front doors—in all their cookie-cutter sameness—can delineate space and assert a personal autonomy. The photographs were taken over a period of time, in all four seasons, on the same street, 40 homes in a row.<sup>6</sup> They are the same size, cropped to the same specifications

and placed in sequence. In a visually complex system of references, and with cumulative effect, the photographer allows the viewer to speculate on differences and commonalities. She has noted that she “wanted to offset the architectural sameness and the variety of superficial changes.”<sup>7</sup> For example, some front entrances have been renovated; others are replete with flower pots, or elaborate entrance hardware; still others show a wide range of concrete and flagstone steps, wreaths, seasonal ornaments and decorative mailboxes. It is fascinating to read these pictures and to discover more in them than our conditioned ‘drive-by’ way of looking would normally permit. And while their bland monotony is striking, the subtle home improvements are important signifiers in staking out a claim for autonomy. Like an anthropologist, Dobson gives us insight into the social and behavioral properties of the new suburban realm without actually showing us the inhabitants who live within; in effect their presence is felt by their absence. And yet this lack of human activity in Dobson’s photographs could also very well be a reality, as the repetition from lot to lot surely detracts from the pleasure of walking. As Jane Jacobs put it: “Almost nobody travels willingly from sameness to sameness and repetition to repetition, even if the physical effort required is unrewarding.”<sup>8</sup>

In another series, *Paint Palette* (2002), Dobson again turns to road culture and car-centred development for subject matter. She demonstrates how our most basic public spaces are given over to the car and its charmless accommodation. Since multiple car ownership is now nearly mandatory in suburbia, garage doors can occupy up to two thirds of a home’s facade. Narrower lots exacerbate the situation. By depicting the double garage door blight, the artist underscores their banality. Each ‘palette’ in this series has a title, such as *The Heritage Collection*, and is presented in paint sampler fashion. They depict 65 identical garage doors, each presented with the name of a particular paint chip. *Powder Puff*, *Orchid Blush* and *Quartz Moon* are just a few of the shades that attempt to give a touch of dignity, grace—even levity—to an otherwise mundane architectural feature. While some would say that it is easy to be cynical about urban sprawl, Dobson interjects a sense of fun into her work. Her method of presentation also suggests an irony: how is it possible to achieve any sense of autonomy in mass-produced housing when the very tools that make it possible are also mass-produced?

Dobson’s exhibition is, finally, a marvelously detailed look at the current ‘sprawlscape’ with which most of us are familiar but to which

few of us have given much thought. And while the photographer is full of insider observations—sometimes critical and at other times ludic—her work studiously avoids being prescriptive. Indeed, the artist’s images attain an emotional and aesthetic weight precisely because her stance is an ambiguous one. What she is after is not so much to provide ‘insight’ or ‘correctness,’ as to present us with different interrogations of our relation to contemporary suburban reality.

—Marnie Fleming, Curator of Contemporary Art

#### Notes

1 “In the late 1970s most of Oakville’s population of 77,000 lived south of the QEW. In 1978, after bitter debate, council passed an amendment to rezone the rural lands north of the QEW and south to Dundas to residential/commercial. Since then the population has grown to 146,000 with almost all new development taking place north of the QEW.” As cited in: [http://www.oakvillegreen.com/new\\_page\\_9.htm](http://www.oakvillegreen.com/new_page_9.htm)

2 J.B. Jackson, *Landscapes*, Bath City Council: TR, August 8, 1996, as quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, (New York: The New Press, 1997) p. 239.

3 Ibid.

4 [http://www.oakvillegreen.com/new\\_page\\_9.htm](http://www.oakvillegreen.com/new_page_9.htm)

5 In the sixties Graham saw the medium of the magazine as an appropriate forum for the presentation of those of his works which were situated outside the established art institutions.

6 While Dobson photographed 40 front doors, she has edited the series down to 35. For the purposes of the exhibition *Sprawl*, 27 doors will be shown—all photographed in the winter.

7 From the artist’s statement, 2002.

8 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 129.