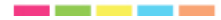


NEW



Artist Lisa Dahl Talks 'Sprawl'

Jon Whiten | Monday, June 23, 2008 at 05:09PM



Lisa Dahl is one of the many featured artists in the Jersey City Museum's current exhibition, SPRAWL (which runs through Aug. 24). On Thursday evening, she will be appearing at the Museum for a talk with Jersey City-based architect Brian Loughlin for the latest in the "Introducing" discussion series, "Little Pink Houses to McMansions." The two will "discuss the themes of sprawl and the American suburb in their work as well as the intersection and interplay between art and architecture."

NEW recently caught up with Dahl via email to learn a little more about her work and her thoughts on our suburban nation.

So what kind of work do you have in the exhibition?

I have three small works from my "There Goes the Neighborhood" series where I block out the form of a house in a color photograph with a single color of glitter. The series has many sub-series to it – some are mixed media, others are paintings on actual real estate magazine images, and some use photographs I took myself in the same style used by the magazines – houses front and center with no neighbors, or clutter. All of them use the same method: transform the house by covering it over and turning it into a single, solid form.

You mention that the suburban home that has become a focus of your work was your childhood home. Where did you grow up, when did you leave the 'burbs, and how do you think the suburban childhood helps inform your critique?

My family moved around a few times growing up and I lived in several different states – Minnesota, Tennessee, Indiana. So, my childhood was spent in a variety of suburban areas. I went to college in a small New England town, but afterwards as my seriousness in art grew, I gravitated to New York City. Even as a kid, something to the suburban way of life always felt off for me; its underlying ennui. It could also be that's just part of what childhood is no matter where you grow up, but now that sensation is what I associate with the suburbs, fairly or unfairly.



Speaking of critique -- maybe that's just my bias coming into the picture that I even mention it -- is this work supposed to be a critique? Or were you going for something more nuanced?

There is both cultural critique and personal history in my art as well as interests in general current events. The suburbs are such a large part of this country that their growth also pertains to larger concerns of national development and how it has impacted our lifestyles, politics and culture.

On a similar note, what inspired -- or continues to inspire -- your work in this area? When did you start working on this theme?

I began working with the idea of the home about five years ago when I started making paintings of the houses I had grown up in. The single family home has become a cultural icon of sorts, and the suburban home in general seemed like the perfect metaphor to talk about the successes and failures of the "American Dream" and its associated accoutrements.

I know you've spent some time in New Jersey -- I'm curious if you have any impression of New Jersey -- and Jersey City specifically -- in regards to sprawl and suburbanization.

To me, Jersey City feels more like a small town than a suburb. It has the mixed-use zoning of commercial and residential right next to each other that gives it a city feel. The brownstones are densely packed and there are no superfluous lawns. I've come to the determination that the lawn (at least one that takes more than five-minutes to cut) is a defining feature of suburbia.

I lived in New Jersey for two years as I went to Rutgers for grad school, and what I've always found most surprising about New Jersey -- the hidden truth -- is there really is a reason it is called the Garden State. The national joke is it's just a stinky, polluted wasteland but most of it is actually lush and green even in areas where it has been over-developed and highways cut through the landscape. If you'll pardon the seemingly sophomoric reference, I think the movie "Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle" quite accurately portrays what I'm trying to describe. In New Jersey, you have to travel via highways to go almost anywhere, but the landscape off to the sides of the road almost seems like a jungle with untold wildlife, and in some ways it really is. I also have to mention that the right-hand cloverleaf turn to make a left off of a highway is an urban planning design feature that will forever live in my mind as pure New Jersey -- and pure genius.

The argument has been made recently that Manhattan is itself becoming a suburb, as recognizable national chain stores seem to take over more space each week. In your work, you say you're stripping the suburban home of its comfort by removing all distinguishing characteristics. An argument could certainly be made that by now, suburbs are more defined by their omnipresent brands than by their actual homes. Have you ever considered doing similar work relating to commercial, rather than residential, entities?

Unfortunately, the massive chain stores moving into New York seems to be more of a sign that real estate prices are skyrocketing in Manhattan (despite the national reverse trend) and the only places that can afford to lease large spaces are national retailers. While there is an overlap between the homogenization of America with the sprawl of suburbia, I don't feel like one necessarily creates or indicates the other. In some ways, the fact that you can find a sushi restaurant and good coffee in middle America shows that our tastes and interests have expanded in the last 25 years. While I am interested in how our country develops, in my art I am still focused on investigating the idea of the home. I try to trust that I am speaking to many elements at once through my work even if I'm not overtly addressing them head on. Though I do wonder when we'll be selling advertising space on the sides of our houses.

Over the past decade or so, much of American society has undergone a massive "reurbanization," with cities getting an influx of residents and money. Many environmental scholars argue that this reurbanization will only accelerate as oil gets pricier and people start having to adjust their choices about where to live. Of course, there is only so much room in cities for these new people, and many others are then forced to leave. The suburbs -- especially first-ring suburbs -- have become in many areas new centers of poverty, since many low-income folks are being pushed out of the cities. Do you think this changes -- or will change in the future -- the nature of the cultural critique of suburbia? Or will the same afflictions remain?

That's a subject that would require me to do more reading to be able to give an educated answer. I don't know what the national trends are at this point past what I can see from my personal experience, which is skewed since I live in New York City, or what is covered by the news in really hard hit areas like Detroit. Each city's situation is unique and I don't claim to be an urban planning expert, even if I do have ideas on what I think works and what doesn't. I do think the prototypical suburb that requires travel by car for its inhabitants to do anything (including even going on a walk) creates a culture of isolation and emptiness that can't help but be damaging in many ways -- personally, environmentally, culturally, you name it.

How would you say your "Discarded Dreams" project -- a year-long photography project of discarded mattresses -- relates to other projects of yours, like "There Goes the Neighborhood"?

"Discarded Dreams" actually resulted from an earlier series of paintings called "Home Sweet Home" where I was painting houses on bed sheets and wallpaper. I was thinking quilted mattress fabric might be a nice addition to the mix, but quickly realized that to obtain that fabric, I would need to cut up mattresses out on the streets – an undertaking that is both potentially gross and requires wielding a razor blade in public, so I nixed that plan. But my interest in the unique mattress fabric remained, so I decided to start photographing mattresses I found on the street in my daily travels. Because the mattresses were trash, my accumulation of them also began to speak to consumption levels in this country, which once again relates back to my larger interests in the home and domestic behavior. The project resulted in my first ever book, which was a great finale to what ended up being an almost daily, two-year project. And I also now have a very healthy fear of bedbugs.

Where are you located and working from now?

I have lived in Manhattan for the last decade and have a studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

And what's next for you?

I try not to predict future projects even when I have an idea of what I'd like to do because I want to stay open to the unexpected, but I continue to enjoy investigating and using the home as a springboard and think it's safe to say I will continue working with it, at least for the near future.

INTRODUCING: From Little Pink Houses to McMansions

June 26; 7pm

Jersey City Museum

350 Montgomery St.

FREE

On the Web:

Lisa Dahl Studio