SUBURBIA

REDCLIFFE

2010

Catalogue sponsored by Queensland College of Art, Griffith University

THE MAKING OF SUBURBIA:

As a child in the 1970s I'd play in my street from dusk till dawn, no adults in sight until the call at 8pm for bedtime. Most of the people in my suburb were white, middle class, living in small housing estate shoebox houses with no front fences and big backyards. Everyone looked the same, until the day I met an immigrant Indian girl with long braided hair out riding her bike. Her mother's kitchen introduced me to the sensory delights of fresh cooked chapati, spicy potato shak, and cardamom sweets. For my Indian friend, an exotic treat was one of my mothers' old-fashioned Sunday baked dinners with pork crackling, roasted potatoes, and homemade gravy. Her father, a surgeon and melanoma specialist, would later save my life. In later adulthood, I was shocked to learn of the racism she suffered in silence through our suburban school years. She was my best friend, and yet our experiences of suburban life were miles apart.

Australian Suburbia in 2010 is a far more complex place than the myth of the white picket fence. It is able to be both ordinary and exotic, familiar and foreign. It remains a hard-won dream and haven for many suburban dwellers, whilst representing a battleground for others. Suburbia has traditionally been seen as a cultural landscape that typically reflects the community standards and values of the average citizen. But the ideal of a 'typical' or 'average' suburb no longer exists. Suburban houses in well planned rows may reflect a particular uniform facade we associate a commonly held 'suburban dream', but the lives of those who live within these structures are anything but uniform. Suburban demographics have changed dramatically in the last 30 years. In my suburban street today, children are rarely seen playing unsupervised from dusk till dawn.

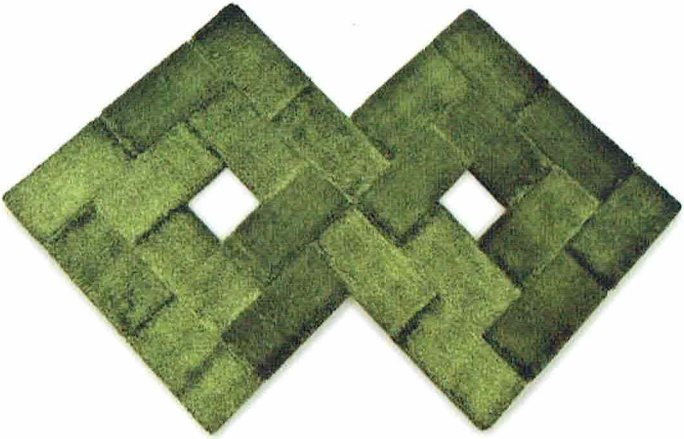
For this exhibition, I invited a number of emerging and prominent Australian artists, of Indigenous, immigrant, and Australian-born descent, to show their experience of contemporary suburban reality. The work of these artists offers a multi-faceted range of responses, encouraging us to celebrate, question, critique, or reconsider our views and assumptions of Australian suburban life, past and present.

My thanks must go to all the people who made this exhibition and catalogue possible: Sue Beyer; Karen Tyler, Maree Nipperess and the volunteers at the Redcliffe Art Gallery; Moreton Bay Regional Council; Simon Wright, Paul Cleveland, Craig Douglas, Griffith Art Works and the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University; Greg and Cy Lindsay; Philip Bacon Gallery, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Milani Gallery, and the Paul Eliadis Collection of Contemporary Art; and to all of the artists who agreed to participate.

Emma Lindsay
Artist & freelance curator

SEBASTIAN DI MAURO

Suburban Abstractions 5, 2010
Timber, artificial grass
Courtesy of the Artist, Dianne Tanzer Gallery, and Sullivan+Strumpf Gallery



THE MORAL ORDER OF THE SUBURB

The setting of this curatorial investigation is the construct that we name suburb. The central theme or enquiry, albeit slightly submerged from our immediate view, is the moral order of a suburb, the product of a distinctive and particular social environment. Perhaps one of the most striking features of most Australian suburbs is that conflict in suburbia is a rarity. Grievances certainly arise, but in most cases they are contained. Mostly tolerance, avoidance and restraint are in evidence. As Baumgartner (1988:3) states, "a kind of moral minimalism pervades the suburbs, in which people prefer the least extreme reactions to offences and are reluctant to exercise any social control against one another at all. A result is the widespread tranquility so often noted in suburbia".

Suburbs have become central locations in the contemporary world. They are both a consequence of industrialisation and a characteristic feature of the modern city that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in all capitalist economies. Seventeenth and eighteenth century writers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were preoccupied with question about how human societies manage to prevent and neutralise destructive behaviours by their members and how social order was maintained. Almost one hundred years ago Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber continued this enquiry also considering the patterns by which people exert social control against one another. Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engles advanced a view of moral systems – consequences of competition and conflict .

More recently social scientists have devised a number of research strategies and systems to analyze social control within western industralised societies. To explore the entire range means to acknowledge that contemporary life is not

monolithic, but divided into numerous subcultures defined by occupation, social class, gender, income, ethnicities, indigeneity, lifestyles, organisational memberships, age groups and many other factors. The visual artists, whose work is represented in Suburbia, and similar to their social scientist counterparts, have also devised individual strategies, specific visual texts, which illuminate and interrogate distinctive and particular social environments and numerous subcultures.

Tracey Moffatt, Destiny Deacon, Judy Watson, Bianca Beetson and Gordon Bennett offer, through their various works, multiple post-colonial perspectives on contemporary Australian indigeneity. Their individual visual texts evidence a particular social ordering that suppressed Indigenous voices, commodified and marginalised their societies and relegated their birth right status of Australia's 'first people' to that of a subculture. But while these works may speak loudly about indignation, and malevolence tinged with irony, they offer through metaphoric imagery, a perverse stoicism that defines aspects of contemporary Indigenous urban lives and their proud heritage.

Real estate agents often employ the standard measurement of kilometers from the CBD (central business district) to identify, and by default, characterise the physical location of particular Australian suburbs. This marketing strategy reinforces suburbia as peripheral to the metro zone. This apparent beguine yet insidious way of shaping a particular understanding of what a suburb is or could be establishes it as marginal. Yet suburbia is the city once removed. It is the physical, social and spiritual realm of citizenship. *Collins Street, 5pm* John Brack's 1955 painting with its muted monochromatic figures acknowledges the daily exodus of city workers to the suburbs. In this painting the figures appear automated, socially controlled and compliant. The moral minimalism identified by Baumgartner is present in this picture. There is fluidity in the social relations here, a relative indifference between each figure walking to the edge of the picture plain and onto suburbia.

Brack's Collins Street people while painted a half century ago manifest in this exhibition in a number of guises. Maybe they become a hair-suited naked football supporter captured in full-frontal pose by Emma Lindsay's probing camera lens. Or could one of them appear in Michael Zavros's painting as a young man languishing in an indifferent pose - the subject of a framed picture on the wall of a metro-sexualised interior complete with touches of restrained elegance and a hint of nostalgia.

The twentieth century saw a phenomenal growth in the number of Australian suburbs, especially after World War II. Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century was one of the most urbanised countries in the world. By the early 1950s the Australian dream of home ownership was becoming a green fields reality. Home ownership for many white Australians was understood as the brick and tile bungalow. With sentimental precision the façade of the bungalow in Jenny Watson's painting offers up, through its window and entry porch, a moral order understood in this picture as both family and home. On the other hand Howard Arkley's painting speaks of a different circumstance. Here the house stands in for a cool modernity complete vinyl decor and sunny days.

The tranquility of suburban live is evoked in Thom Kotis work entitled *Afternoon* 2008/9. Here the potted plants afford the viewer a scene to contemplate. To know the promise of these fecund objects is to see a backyard and a veggie patch

replete with the noise of motor mowers. Sebastian Di Mauro artificial grass sculpture piece entitled - *Suburban Abstractions 5*, unnervingly reinforces both the moral and social order of the suburbs while evoking the possibilities of children at play on manicured lawns.

A white sheet flutters emblematically in the breeze in Chris Bennie's clothesline photograph. Like a stage curtain the sheet, while irrepressibly banal, could be swept aside offering the viewer a chance to consider a domestic interior, a place of family histories, married bliss or a battleground. Memory, gentility, civility and order are present in Marion Drew's photographed assembles. Here the frivolousness of the 'kept for best' doily replete with its 'nature nurture' blue bird motifs and trivets imply a woman in the home and the role she plays as mother wife and worker.

In their work entitled *Bahay* 2010, Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan poetically and convincingly consider the 'stuff' that people collect and what remains of lives. Apparel, household objects and other items are classified, commodified and sorted into this cubic sculptural form that speaks about loss, identity, forbearance, and the misplacement of home. For many migrants, some Indigenous persons and others 'down and out of luck' home is not a place in the suburbs but an illusion. In Mostyn Bramley-Moore's expressive works the abstraction of streets, houses and their quarter acre lots emerge and submerge across the white picture plains. Here loneliness and the indifference of life in the suburbs are called into question. Could the white picket fences referred to in the title of Sangeeta Sandragesar's sculptural installation and a characteristic feature of suburbs just define territorial boundaries, or do they set up barriers of racism and intolerance?

Can urban diversity and growth continue to service the Australian dream? While Sue Beyer's work entitled - *The Lawns Ran Down To The Waters Edge* conjures up Arcadian vistas and dreams of verdant possibilities, the economic reality of mortgaged lives is ever-present and living in the suburbs. Laini Burton's sinister picture of a bird pecking at a young woman's forehead could be read as an omen. Is the bird pecking at the Australian dream? In a climate of change can suburbia retain its implied tranquility and moral order? Anika Wilkins's *Recliner And Stack* 2008, together with Paul McCann's photograph of a Queenslander in the shadow of an impending storm imply other ways to think about and know Suburbia. In these works the fragility of these socially ordered communities is deconstructed and left somewhat exposed. A foreboding emerges making us realise that what the suburbs of the future may be will be anything other than tranquil and indifferent.

Dr Craig Douglas
Queensland College of Art, Griffith University

Baumgarten M. P. (1988) *The Moral Order of a Suburb* New York: Oxford University Press.

COUNCIL MESSAGE

The Redcliffe City Gallery is now part of a growing network of museums around Moreton Bay Regional Council area.

The Redcliffe City Gallery exhibition programs are comprised of work by local and emerging artists, exhibitions which highlight significant artworks in the Moreton Bay Region Art Collection, and touring exhibitions. In conjunction with the exhibition program we present a varied public program of floor talks, practical workshops and educational opportunities for visiting groups.

Redcliffe City first acquired artwork in 1957 and many of artists acquired in the early years such as Ray Crook and Margaret Olley have now developed national and international reputations.Recent acquisitions include works by both emerging and established contemporary artists.

The Moreton Bay Region art collection is a combination of the works collected by the amalgamated Redcliffe City Council, Caboolture Shire Council and Pine Rivers Shire Council.The strengths of the collection include portraiture, abstract artworks, new media works, artworks focussing on children's activities, non functional/sculptural ceramics and glass, works on paper, the 'Art of Wood', contemporary works and internationally significant artists with a connection to the region such as Ian Fairweather.

The region has two annual competitions through which works are acquired.The Moreton Bay Region Art Awards and the 15 Artists program.

The Redcliffe City Gallery is proud to be developing a role in the promotion and encouragement of emerging and established contemporary artists through exhibitions and acquisitions.

Karen Tyler
Curator, Redcliffe City Gallery

Exhibition
26 May - 26 June, 2010

Redcliffe City Gallery
Monday - Saturday 10am - 4pm
Library/Gallery Complex, Oxley Avenue, Redcliffe, Qld
07 3283 0415

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Regional Council