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The purpose of this thesis paper is to describe the photographic series *Southeastern Suburban*. My interest in the project was sparked by my move to this particular region. This series of images, which portrays people and places particular to the demographic, is the direct result of my endeavor to deepen my own sense of identification with the place that I now call home.

SOUTHEASTERN SUBURBAN

by

Melissa Sullivan

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Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

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SOUTHEASTERN SUBURBAN

I grew up in the suburbs. They all have a certain amount of predictability. There is a certain style of home that one can surely find. There are cats and dogs, and dads coming home from work. There are cars, manicured lawns, and fences and flags. I know these things well. It has been years now that I have lived in the southeast, but I grew up in a suburb outside of Seattle. Despite having found my way back to the familiarity of the suburbs, I still find myself continually noticing regional differences. The experience of relocation sparked my interest in creating a series of formal photographic images that document people and places in the suburban southeast. My observation of this location and the people in it, is an effort to recognize both sameness and difference and in doing so, deepen my own sense of identification with the place I now call home.

This series evolved over the course of several months during which I photographed the people and places that are a part of my experience living here. I took pictures during walks through my neighborhood, while driving on frequented routes, and while visiting with friends and family.

Sometimes visits were scheduled and a set amount of time for taking pictures was planned. I also allowed for spontaneity by developing the habit of taking my camera with me everywhere I went. Having my camera with me all of the time

widened the breadth of the series and allowed me to take advantage of unexpected moments in addition to the planned photo shoots. This is a habit that I will continue to practice since on several occasions, photographing during a scheduled shoot would yield nothing, while taking a few minutes to grab an unplanned shot communicated much more effectively.

The images in this series are part of a modernist photographic tradition. My aim is to document and bear witness to the subject at hand (as opposed to a post-modern attempt to re-contextualize, or deconstruct the world). To this end, I am shooting in natural and available light using a high-resolution camera with a portrait lens in an attempt to present an as true-to-life image as possible. The suburban topography I have chosen for myself gives me an arena within which I seek out visually pleasing, formally elegant images.

The series is comprised of portraits, and of the suburban setting (both with and without the figure.) In the portrait images I have deliberately chosen to use a shallow depth of field. In these photographs, since there is less readable information about the setting the subject does not compete with the rest of the image. Since I am interested in focusing on the subject in these portraits, the shallow depth of field was an important device. I am drawn to the ambiguity of the emotion in these images and I am interested in the subtle ways in which the subjects display themselves through adornment and gestures.

I have included photographs explicitly showing the suburban setting since I am interested in communicating the specificity of this location. In some of these images a

figure appears, but in these instances, the figure is of equal importance as the setting. Even in the images without a figure, the human presence is still implied. In the photograph “Mission Road”, an unruly sprig grows out of the top of a shrub. One cannot look at the image without thinking about the person who repeatedly failed to trim it. On a metaphorical level the sprig itself, in its awkwardness, is the human element rejecting confinement.

Since I am interested in communicating about a particular location, it was important to include both portrait and place-specific photographs. This helps the images to inform each other. Alone, the image titled “Kiki”, of the figure with the colorful shoe, might not speak specifically about the suburbs. When viewed with the rest of the series, however, one starts to fill in the narrative. Since I am intentionally leaving a certain amount of ambiguity in many of the photographs, the actual details that a viewer might bring to an image are necessarily fictional. Because these photographs are part of a series, the constructed narrative around any single image is largely influenced by the rest of the group. This is not to say that these images do not also stand on their own. If these were to be viewed by themselves, the photos in the group would function as formal images and largely evade a narrative.

Within the theme of “Southeastern Suburban” there is also another undercurrent at work. There is a sense of unease found throughout the series, which is communicated through metaphor and formal photographic means. I did not originally set out to suggest a “trouble in paradise” undertone, but it soon became apparent that signs of this notion were making their way into the images.

The back-story to this series is not particularly dramatic or unique: when I was in college, my parents moved from the Northwest to Durham, NC. I was living out of the state anyway, but I still could not have been more surprised by the news. I remember how alien it felt at first coming home to visit them at their new location. The suburban neighborhood they moved into was much like the one we had lived in before, but it felt a world apart. Though this relocation was years ago, I still often feel that I am observing a place that is at the same time familiar, and unfamiliar to me. This became the perspective from which I photographed the series.

Terttu Uibopuu is a photographer who incorporates an experience of displacement in the suburban setting. Her 2008 series “Subtopia”, is about her first experiences moving to Cary, Illinois from Estonia, in Eastern Europe and finding herself in an unexpected place. The series depicts women in a homogenous environment and observes how some embrace, while others reject their surroundings. About her work, she writes: “I related to the women in my surroundings, but didn't know how to react to the dull and repetitive environment... I am portraying the displacement and loneliness while trying to integrate into a foreign land.”

While there are some similar themes and motivations, my experience is certainly nowhere near as much of a culture shock as hers. What I related to in her series was her interest in documenting her experience in the suburbs and her interest in learning how others operate in a similar environment.

The duality of feeling both at home, and not at home is part of the sense of uneasiness in some of the photographs in the series. In image titled “Backyard”, the

figure is contained in her yard by an overpowering fence. Two more fences enter the frame from either side creating a sense of a hyper-enclosed space. Another example exists in image titled “Barrier”. In this image there is a tension created because what seems like a pleasant and calm image actually conveys the opposite. Individually, the parts of the image are beautiful and serene. The frame is filled from top to bottom with pink blossoms. At the bottom of the frame is the back of a woman’s head, her long hair spilling down her back. Given these elements it is surprising that the image communicates so differently overall. When looked at as a whole, there is an overwhelming sense of awkwardness and even anxiety. The blossoms are overpowering and create a wall of enclosed space. The title “Barrier” is derived from this feeling of the enclosed space. Only a few tiny specks of blue sky peek through the branches emphasizing the sense of impermeability. “Blair’s Kitchen” functions in a similar way. The domestic space in this image is a cheery pink color filled with happy textile patterns, but these elements almost read as a costume; an attempt to cover up the emotions that the figure is actually experiencing. “Afternoon” conveys a sense of uneasiness through more subtle cues. The title itself plays a role in the reading of the image. Taken at 4:15, the image is titled “Afternoon”. In looking at clues in the image (the way the man is dressed) one can surmise that this child’s dad has just come home from work. The title offers just a bit of access into the life of the subjects. The figures are placed in front of an idyllic looking home, yet the expressions on the faces of both the man and his son are at odds with the setting.

Whenever I photograph, I try not to have any preconceived ideas about what I am going to find. I try to portray some sort of truth about the world into the image, but as we know, a photograph can never completely capture the real truth. Real documentary moments probably only happens with the camera is put away. I am proposing that these photographs do not have to be the whole truth and that even a sliver can be enough to permit access into a moment of reality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Terttu Uibopuu
<http://terttuphoto.com>

CATALOGUE

1. Backyard, 2010
Archival Photographic Print
15x22 inches

2. Mission Road, 2010
Archival Photographic Print
15x22 inches

3. Kiki, 2010
Archival Photographic Print
15x22 inches

4. Barrier, 2010
Archival Photographic Print
15x22 inches

5. Afternoon, 2010
Archival Photographic Print
15x22 inches

6. Blair's Kitchen, 2010
Archival Photographic Print
15x22 inches

7. Crape Myrtles, 2010
Archival Photographic Print
15x22 inches

8. Estelle Part, 2010
Archival Photographic Print
12x22 inches