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ART REVIEW | 'YARD'

Impressions of the Yard, Visual and Olfactory

By ROBERTA SMITH

The medium of sculpture started getting fuzzy around the edges in the early 1960's and has never stopped. It has borrowed from all kinds of adjacent mediums — including video, ceramics, architecture, design and performance art — and has at times merged with the environment, whether geological or social.

Socrates Sculpture Park is doing its bit for sculptural fuzziness by including photography, video and even a large-scale derivative of painting in its summer exhibition, titled "Yard." But if message takes precedent over medium, an unusual coherence reigns in the works by 14 artists, selected by Alyson Baker, Socrates's director, and Robyn Donohue, its exhibition coordinator, to explore the emotional, sociological and visual connotations of the show's theme. Yard, not surprisingly, is a highly evocative four-letter word.

Historically, yard has had powerful attachments: courtyard, stockyard, railroad yard, Scotland Yard. But for many Americans, especially from suburbia, the prefixes that matter most may be front and back. The yard of "Yard" is the privately owned, publicly visible domestic variety, although its implications reach beyond its borders.

As with much contemporary art, the approaches here alternate between Realist and Surrealist and sometimes merge. One merger is an uncharacteristically straightforward photograph by Gregory Crewdson that is displayed as a small billboard above the Socrates entrance, opening the show. The image surveys a housing development, centering on a newly built split-level domicile (blue) whose unsodded yard is snaked with bulldozer tracks. The windows and partly open front door of the house glow with a yellow light that is comforting yet exaggerated in its tone, evenness and intensity. It suggests a sugary storybook ending, the kind that housing developers promote, as well as the possibility that the new owners have just arrived from Mars.

Tract housing, whose cookie-cutter structures and treeless vistas are perhaps the most deleterious realities of American domestic architecture, is a recurring motif here. Adam Cvijanovic's "New City" pays panoramic tribute with a 39-foot-wide, ink-jet-on-vinyl replica of one of his painted wallpaper murals. It depicts a burgeoning housing development in a bright, almost Impressionist palette. Erin Shirreff's "Plots" further elaborates: available from six newspaper dispensers around the park, it is a newsprint compilation of photographs of empty lots that live up to the title's funereal wordplay.

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Back in three dimensions, Maximilian Goldfarb's prophetically titled "Ruin I (There Will Come Soft Rains)" depicts the footprint of a tract house in crumbling black glazed brick. Nearby, the family deck, perhaps the most intimate sector of the yard, is highlighted in "Angry Lamb," by an artist who goes by the name Weinthaler. Its floor and benches are carved and branded with mysterious symbols, as if it were a site of ancient, tumultuous rituals.

Jason Middlebrook wryly balances Realism and Surrealism in "Beneath the Gnomes," a suite of painted concrete lawn figures installed on narrow pedestals of sediment (painted fiberglass) embedded with fossils, shells and detritus. Beneath the old clichés of culture, the even older truths of nature await excavation.

Surrealism is amusingly familiar in works like "Yard," a crisp rectangle of bright green lawn and driveway that tilts inexplicably upward in the air, by Venske & Spänle; "Patio Roll," a curling slope of flagstones made of silicone, by Martine Kaczynski; and "Two Pools," by Lisa Hein and Bob Seng. One kidney-shaped pool conflates swimming pool and patio; the other, less clear-cut but funny to look at, floats offshore in the East River, discarded bottles corralled within its clean white loop.

Elise Ferguson provides a more lasting visual startlement with a long, prominent retaining wall covered with linoleum painstakingly pieced into a floral pattern, suggesting a cheerful kitchen run amok. Rosemarie Fiore comments mordantly on the collision of nature and hygiene in "Royal Pine Tree," a telephone pole heavily branched with hundreds of pine-scented car fresheners, which can be smelled from the street. Pia Lindman tried to subvert normality with "Inu-Do, The Way of the Dog," which began the exhibition as a sandbox full of sand next to one full of brightly colored tennis balls. Both were prominently reserved for canines rather than children, but on a recent visit the balls were gone, and children were in clear possession of the sandbox.

The show's most memorable works define the extremes of Realism and Surrealism. Alyson Sholtz's "Mirror Fence," a shimmering 130-foot-long picket fence completely faced in mirror, has a dazzling, prismatic transparency; it disappears and reappears in the surrounding green as effectively as any Magritte painting, and it's a sculpture.

I suggest ending the show not exactly with art, but with Andrea Bowers's 45-minute documentary, "Viega Gloria." It concerns John Quigley, who made national news when he lived for 70 days in a 400-year-old oak tree near Santa Clarita, Calif., trying to save it from an oncoming thruway. Old Glory, as he named the tree, was the last of many ancient oaks destroyed by the housing development that the road was cutting through. Mr. Quigley tells his tale with dignity, succinctness and full consciousness of the complex issues involved. One of the saddest statements about the American way of building you're likely to see, Ms. Bowers's documentary gives this show a focus that is all too real.