The Suburban Nightmare: A Study of Atmosphere, Mood and Emotion

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THE SUBURBAN NIGHTMARE:
A STUDY OF ATMOSPHERE,
MOOD AND EMOTION

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis body of work, I focus on the implied human presence through the lack of actual human figures. I believe there is more to say in a landscape with the absence of the figure, allowing the dialogue to be read and interpreted by a larger audience. I am particularly satisfied with *White Knuckles*, shown in figure 3, because I collide reason with imagination, thus contradicting the context and interpretation of the subject matter. In *White Knuckles*, I deal with formal elements such as composition, atmosphere, lightness and darkness as well as nuances of color. I have also considered the emotive impact the painting could reflect to the viewer, specifically feelings of tension and unease. The placement of the viewer outside the picture plane was carefully considered to suggest the audience is a participant in the suggested narrative. I often strive to create an ambiguous moment, reflecting feelings of uncertainty and apprehension. Like *White Knuckles*, my body of work employs unexpected narratives to reveal some of the uncomfortable truths of our human experience. I am interested in exploring the relationship between the mundane and the abnormal in the paintings, a feeling that could be described as a “suburban nightmare.”
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I’m interested in exploring the darker sides of human experience in order to confront disturbing sentiments not often addressed in visual arts. My body of work strives to expand upon the continuum of traditional landscape painting by replacing rationality and harmony with instability and conflict. In my work, I want the landscape to become a stage for unexpected drama to play out for the viewer and *within* the viewer, exploring imagery that challenges their perception. In order to prompt these unsettling narratives, I often manipulate commonplace representations of suburbia and comfortable domestic settings. By reexamining traditional landscape painting and imposing an increased sense of mystery, I want viewers to investigate the imagery in my paintings. I'm attempting to elevate landscape painting into a psychologically interactive experience.
The American landscape painter Edward Hopper is an important influence on my work and studio art practice. Hopper portrayed suburban Americana using light, shadow and color in a sophisticated manner to provoke emotion, a sensation I’m interested in exploring in my own work. Hopper depicted plainer, private truths rather than grander statements; he focused on themes of solitude of the self, and the alienation and loneliness of modern life. He used light as a material object to deal with physical space and perceived time. By declining to populate his spaces with many specific objects, Hopper is interested in memory and the poetics of space in order to foster a reinterpretation of the landscape.
The spaces and landscapes that are common to Hopper’s work come from his immediate surroundings, specifically Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Similar to this notion of regional painting, I am sourcing my landscapes based on my upbringing and experiences of living in both mid-west Minnesota and in Floridian suburbs. In a way I’m attempting to create a hybrid of these two climates, becoming meditations on form, color and light. My reference material is often taken from environments I find to be charged with human presence and have a certain level of ambiguity allowing for repeated reinterpretation. I’m inspired by locations that can be translated into strong formal compositions and be distorted through the handling of light and color. I manipulate these environments through light and color because I’m not interested in embellishing or idealizing them. I am, however, interested in conveying a sensation of plausibility in the work – providing the façade of believability.
Interpretation

Although my work is partially informed by photorealism, I am not interested in re-creating a photo with paint. As Chuck Close states, “Sometimes people think that just because you use a photograph there is only one kind of painting that can be made; just as many different kinds of paintings can be made from a photograph as from life.” The use of photography in my work is a tool which serves to provide ingredients to use in my paintings and amplify the level of believability I mentioned before. In this case, that plausibility serves as a structure for exploration within the paintings. My approach to photo references is similar to what photorealist Robert Bechtle states; "I have to be careful to take lousy photographs that will allow the completion to take place in the painting."
George Shaw, a realist landscape painter, creates a sense of “controlled hallucination” in his work by using simplified forms juxtaposed with naturalistic elements. Like Shaw, I have recently been exploring the idea of selectively resolving different elements in the landscape. I’m interested in the readability of flat and simplified icons, like trees and road signs. By rendering certain forms with flat, local color, I believe it allows me to control how much visual information I’m offering through the paintings. Flatness within a realistic environment is psychologically compelling to me because flat local color and the implied minimal shapes disrupt perception, leaving us to decipher and question the environment and its parts.
The Laboratory

My initial compositions are based in photography and then more fully conceived using Photoshop, where I can orchestrate, combine and reconstruct photo fragments to create a digital study. I examine the formal aspects of color, composition and lighting within the digital realm, questioning how the aspects of the subject matter could be paired, manipulated and construed.

I gravitate towards specific formal aspects of compositional construction and design. For example, I often paint a low horizon, similar to the American Hudson River School painters of the mid-19th century.
However, unlike the Hudson River painters such as Thomas Cole, I have begun to omit the grandiose skyscape altogether while attempting to maintain the idea of atmospheric weight and tension within the space above the horizon. I am interested in how atmosphere, specifically areas of lightness and darkness, can act upon the mundane in the theoretical space of a painting.

**Scale and Application**

Once I am satisfied with both the digital composition and studies on paper, I translate the work onto a canvas or panel on varying scales. Working small suggests an intimate viewing experience, whereas the larger scale creates a different kind of presence. I am often interested in the presence of large paintings, where they can physically dominate a space and push the level of immersion. I often begin with a flat paint application as a base from which imagery is built with
subtleties of layers and glazes. By working thinly and flatly, as opposed to a highly impasto surface, I believe the imagery is more readable. I do not want the surface of my paintings to focus too much on the prowess of the painter or the flamboyance of material, instead on the plausibility and readability of the imagery itself.

**Viewer Engagement**

I want to direct the viewer’s experience by controlling elements throughout the layout of my compositions to consider how the audience would navigate the space. I often choose to imply shallow and restricted spaces for the participant to exist within, forcing a sensation of confinement. By populating the scene with environmental obstacles the viewer must confront the subject matter. I am exploring the idea of trapping the viewer. According to McAndrew, a social psychologist,

“We feel uncomfortable when our personal space is violated anywhere, but especially so in situations where we feel as if escape will become difficult. Such feelings of discomfort are symptomatic of the fact that we are constantly – even if unconsciously – scanning our surroundings and assessing our ability to flee if it should become necessary.”

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Conversely, I sometimes create a means of “escape” within my paintings, specifically by depicting doorways, pathways or windows. Formally I use these devices to suggest that the setting can be further navigated by both the viewer and whomever would exist in this scene. However, doorways are usually depicted as dark entrances or exits; I believe this suggests a false sense of security and foregrounds the sense of the unknown. For example, in *RV*, shown in figure 6, the gate in the chain link fence is left ajar allowing the audience to exit the scene, yet it leads into a dark and menacing environment that may or may not be occupied by a threat.

*Figure 6  “RV” Acrylic & Oil on Canvas (60” x 60”) Ericka Sobrak*
Figure 7 “Escape” Oil on Panel (15.5” x 24”) Ericka Sobrack

In another painting, *Escape*, shown in figure 7, I left the garage open for the viewer to potentially take shelter. By creating these doorways, I question whether they really could be a means of safety or escape from the scene, or perhaps they exist as portals to something even more sinister? What *does* exist in the beyond, and what is my relationship with it as a viewer?
I am highly intrigued by creating an ambiguous point of view that forces viewers into the role of voyeur or participant in the story. For example, in *White Knuckles* shown in figure 3, the light source suggests that the viewer is coming across the toy car with a flashlight outside the picture plane but in *Playground No. 2*, shown in figure 8, the viewer’s point of view is implied with car headlights as a light source and a very low to the ground point of view. Perhaps this point of view is that of someone innocent coming across the playground, a child, or worse, a perpetrator.
CHAPTER II: THE STORY

Memory

I believe my role as the creator and author of a painting is to present honest and truthful intentions; allowing my personal connotations to emerge, something that I hope can be reflected in viewers. I often project and reconstruct my own memories and emotional references. Memory is a tie between the past and the present, a recollection serving to revive something dormant, forgotten, or detached. I’m interested in investigating how memory along with form, light and color can transform a space; in a way suggesting a vague event, an experience or past interactions of people. According to Pierre Nora, the transformation of memory implies a
“decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to rememoration.”

The melancholic side of human experience and confronting these often disturbing sentiments often inspires me. I agree with the painter Enrique Martínez Celaya when he states that “art reconciles the conceptual and the sensible and makes connections between ideas and worlds that are difficult to make otherwise.” The paintings are “essentially sites where the human mind is laid bare and its complexities revealed, and nothing in the non-artistic realm is, in this respect remotely comparable.”

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For artists, painting “is a process of understanding oneself through the selection, description and depiction of the subject.” I want my paintings to be a place where I can inject psychological conflicts in the physical realm and create a space for introspection. I believe memory roots itself into tangible things that are invisible to others like strong emotional reactions. Therefore, I deconstruct the concept of nostalgia and memory, placing it into an ambiguous illusion that eludes to those strong emotions. These difficult emotions are often internalized and by confronting them through painting and trying to capture them through imagery, I want them to transcend a private phenomenon into a physical manifestation, in this case, a painting.

Figure 11 “Sidewalk Chalk” Oil on Panel (11” x 14”) Ericka Sobrack

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Many of these symbols come from domestic life, and by manipulating them through light and darkness, they begin to reconstruct traumatic experiences and grieve the loss of childhood and innocence. I always attempt to use recognizable elements, where perception is experienced by each individual and acts upon each individual in a unique way. Approaching domestic symbols in this manner brings focus to sensations of abandonment, vulnerability, isolation, seclusion, solitude, and aloneness.

![Figure 12 “Fight or Flight” Acrylic on Canvas (60” x 60") Ericka Sobrack](image)

**Presence in Absence**

In my undergraduate work, I frequently used the figure within the setting of a painting, acting within a cryptic narrative. In *Fight or Flight*, shown in figure 12, the figure is in an ambiguous state of entering or closing a doorway. However, as my perspective and practice as a
painter developed, I realized I did not need the actual figure to portray human drama; the absence of a figure created a new space of emotional charge and potential energy.

Because my work does not reference a distinct place or environment, I'm instead interested in landscape serving as a stage for drama to occur. For example, instead of painting a specific house where a specific person lived, they become all houses and none at the same time. I want these implied places to be vehicles for emotional contemplation and meditation. This relates to how I title many of the paintings as well, which often have ambiguous and cryptic titles that pose more questions than they could ever really answer; as opposed to titles like *Snoball Marble Falls, TX* by Rod Penner as seen in figure 13.

![Figure 13 “Snoball Marble Falls, TX” Acrylic on Canvas (8” x 8”) Rod Penner](http://www.artnet.com/artists/rod-penner/snoball-marble-falls-tx-a-7x0_SuEop_ukeY4b9HdA_g2)

Like the hyper-realist painter Rod Penner, who renders his paintings with a complete absence of people, I am interested in indirectly referring to the existence of people who are
almost never depicted.\textsuperscript{6} The props I inject within my work are artifacts of human existence and the interaction between the manmade and the natural elements suggest a dialogue of human presence.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{https://www.artsy.net/artwork/john-brosio-autopsy}
\caption{"Autopsy" Acrylic on Canvas (48" x 60") John Brosio}
\end{figure}

\section*{The Character}

John Brosio, a contemporary landscape painter, constructs a skewed representation of reality by injecting large characters within his work, creating unsettling yet playful scenes. Like Brosio, I am striving to create jarring relationships between landscapes and characters. However,

Brosio’s work approaches the unbelievable. In my paintings, I am interested in a subtler way to make images appear somewhere between believable and unbelievable.

Selective and conflicting imagery on opposite sides of the spectrum like bright imagery versus dark and melancholic settings is a dichotomy I am increasingly exploring in my paintings. For example, I am using children’s toys to pose as placeholders for characters acting within the scene, which are potentially a self-portrait, or a surrogate of myself. By placing these objects into a disquieting environment, I’m trying to understand my own past and relationship to childhood. By starting in a place of personal significance, and expanding outward, it is my hope that the paintings begin to speak universally. By juxtaposing mundane elements within a haunting scene, I want to embody the friction, surprise, and unexpected nature of my own domestic experiences. Mirroring my own struggle with understanding and meaning, the props are parts working together as a whole, becoming pieces of a larger puzzle, or an absurd equation.
For example, in *Frostbite*, shown in figure 15, I placed the child’s picnic table in a highly illuminated area within a dark and mysterious environment to enhance feelings of unease and instability. The vulnerability of the child’s table is encroached upon and encompassed by the landscape and its atmosphere.
The Still Image

In my studio practice, I question whether it's possible to create a narrative with a single, still image while retaining the accessibility of traditional storytelling. In the spirit of the still image, Gregory Crewdson, an established photographer, is a master of narrative implications in his singular images. Crewdson is known for his highly dramatic and orchestrated settings. He uses figures, props and light, to create a vague story and to amplify the idea of the unknown and mysterious. Like Crewdson, I consider and coordinate imagery within the setting, however I strive to imply specific narratives with selective symbols and signifiers. Ronald Barthes’ ideas surrounding semiotics conclude that the signifier and signified are mutually exclusive; one cannot exist without the other and retain meaning. With this theory in mind, I am attempting to explore the boundaries of representation and meaning in my work. A good example of this can be seen in the work White Knuckles, shown in figure 3, where the signifier of the highway guard
rail, something that can only be found on high-speed roadways, can be thought to signify the violence related to traveling at such high speeds. This symbol, along with that of the caution sign, work to enable a specific context when paired with the image of a child’s toy.

Even though film is sequential and time-based, I am inspired by Stanley Kubrick’s films, specifically the pacing and tension created within his cinematic universes, like in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He creates an increasing level of tension and anxiety in viewers, with the use of prolonged scenes of ambience and silence. I have often questioned how I can translate these cinematic devices into my own paintings, as I am limited to one specific moment within one single image. For this reason, implied time has become essential in my work. In which part of a story does the viewer encounter the subject, in the beginning, the middle, or the end? Leaving this question unanswered and ambiguous suggests a setting that is tense, with an underlying sensation of anticipation and unease. I often pose the possibility that the scene is in limbo, the moment before, or a moment after an event.

**Distorting the Mundane**

I am attempting to reveal emotional charge in the world around us; in the unassuming spaces of our day-to-day lives. A painting can offer viewers access into another dimension: one of intimacy, immensity, or psychological strangeness (sometimes called "the uncanny"). According to Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, “We encounter this strategy in paintings in which our sense of logic or scale becomes unmoored from its harbor in everyday expectations.”\(^7\) My intention is to expand on limited, mundane imagery to suggest powerful ideas. My art is as

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\(^7\) Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel. *Painting as a Language: Material, Technique, Form, Content.* (Australia: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 111.
much about what is not there as about what is there. I agree with the idea that the greatness of a work of art “depends more in what it holds back than in what it shows.”

To answer the question of my interests in surrealism I have considered my relationship to historical and contemporary surrealism by thinking about its relevance and irrelevance to my work. Early surrealists, like Rene Magritte and Salvador Dali, confused and challenged viewers by manipulating common, expected depictions of reality without completely rejecting the objective world. Like them, I question the relationship and compatibility of the real versus the imagined, however, while Magritte and Dali portrayed the illogical in an overstated and obvious manner, I attempt to project my ideas in more subtle and indirect ways.

Contemporarily my work may more closely resemble or parallel filmmaker David Lynch’s work, where the banal is subverted into a realm of the strange or the uncanny, twisting the everyday to create a space for psychological contemplation. In Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, he creates a hyper reality revealing the hidden layers of an American small town. In an early scene of the film, while the main character is walking in a banal environment that he has tread many times before, he discovers something grisly and visceral, a decomposing human ear. Lynch approaches reality in an unapologetic manner, both embracing and transcending pleasant narratives into uncomfortable circumstances.

Like Lynch, I am attempting to create a destabilized fantasy of reality where I can ask questions rather than pose answers. Rejecting the real and exploring the unknown allows me to subtly live out my illusions and delusions through visual metaphors.

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8 Celaya, 33.
CHAPTER III: ATMOSPHERE

Atmosphere may be described as a complex system that forms together to become a unit. Both light and color act as equal entities to describe atmosphere and mood operating to affect a viewer’s relationship with space. The careful articulation of atmosphere is essential to my work because it enforces the emotive climate of the scene, aiding the narratives suggested within the paintings.


Figure 17 “Untitled #2810, 2001 from Silver Meadows” Chromogenic print (38” x 48”) Todd Hido

Todd Hido, a contemporary American suburban landscape photographer, is known for his amalgamation of light and color to create atmosphere and mood within his suburban environments. But while Hido is interested in building ambience by referencing specific locations, I carefully construct imagined landscapes conceived from vague memories to suggest
mood. According to Taylor’s excerpt comparing photography and painting, “photography is an art of selection and manipulation; painting is one of creation from nothing to a totality.”⁹

https://www.artspan.com/art/2153149-12418/all-art/Painting/3-squares

Figure 18 “3 Squares” Oil on Canvas (48” x 48”) Trevor Young

**Illumination and Darkness**

Illumination and darkness can exhibit visual, emotional and psychological qualities that can be both compelling and repelling. In my work, light functions as an emotional language of its own. According to author and theorist Tim Edensor, “light conditions the ways in which we perceive – guiding what we are able to see, inflecting visible colors and informing our sense of

⁹Taylor, 13.
the shape of space.” The way we perceive light may also “spark evaluations and symbolic understandings.” Like contemporary painter Trevor Young, I am attempting to magnify discomfort with intense, sparse sources of light within a dark setting. I often use light as an element to represent the idea of safety and security, as a beacon or as an energy source. Like Crewdson, I combine artificial and natural light within my work, a “metamorphosis” of illumination. The manipulation of artificial light in a landscape provokes emotional response and assists in narrative interpretations of the scene. For this reason, I often portray the sky in a deep dusk state, where the scene and the viewer are in anticipation of night. Using low-key lighting and selective, available light, enhances feelings of suspense or uncertainty.

According to Edensor, “darkness is a key component in the qualities of ambience, and enhances the symbolic, affective and sensory experience of art, drama, and meditation.” In my nocturne paintings, darkness serves to heighten drama and theatrics and is intended to be foreboding, sinister, haunting and supernatural and it may also create a mysterious hostility of space. By restricting visual information such as shrouding subjects and spaces in shadow I want to create a sensation of ambiguity and hesitation. According to Frank McAndrew, “We become uneasy in environments that are dark and/or offer a lot of hiding places for potential predators.” In another journal by McAndrew, On the Nature of Creepiness, “creepiness is anxiety aroused by the ambiguity of whether there is something to fear or not and/or by the ambiguity of the precise nature of the threat.” As the influential writer of horror fiction H. P. Lovecraft states, "the

11 Ibid., 334.
12 Edensor, 334.
oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." By simplifying forms and pushing certain elements back into the darkness, legibility of the environment is hindered, and the ease in which a place can be recognized and recalled falls apart. In many of my recent paintings, such as in Figure 19, *Waterlogged*, darkness contributes to a sense of disorientation and unease.

*Figure 19 “Waterlogged” Oil on Panel (12” x 15”) Ericka Sobrack*
Color

Ricard Moral states that the expression of color “transforms moods, sensation, feelings, stimulation and sentiment of an observers’ consciousness.”\textsuperscript{15} Color can be considered as a language in itself, yet it is without form, syntax and pragmatics. “Color is a combination of pigment, light, sensation, and information.”\textsuperscript{16} Color not only modifies form, but it also serves as a transcendental element that may connect content and the perceptive emotions of the viewer. “Color can be understood as part of a larger theory of aesthetic experience, involving not only purely physical aspects but also stylistic, psychological, and philosophical matters.”\textsuperscript{17}

When I use dark, melancholic palettes in conjunction with primary colors I am attempting to create jarring imagery and visual conflict. Bright primary colors are powerful and evoke a connection with childhood. But combining this with another palette of brooding imagery may arouse concern and inquiry. Technically these two color palettes should not exist together in a realistic space, which suggests that their conjunction signifies some sort of tension.

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\textsuperscript{15} Moral, Ricardo Piñero and Yvonne Dohna. “Iconosophy: The Relationship Between Colour Theory And Iconography (Goethe And Turner. The Labyrinth Of Word And Light).” \textit{Ars} 44.2 (2011): 222-251.
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\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 225.
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\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 225.
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CONCLUSION

In this thesis body of work, I focus on an implied human presence without actual human figures. I believe there is more to say in a landscape with the absence of the figure, allowing the dialogue to be read and interpreted in various ways by a diversity of viewers. I am particularly satisfied with *White Knuckles*, shown in figure 3, because I collide reason with imagination, thus contradicting the context and interpretation of the subject matter. In *White Knuckles*, I deal with formal elements such as composition, atmosphere, lightness and darkness as well as nuances of color. I have also considered the emotive impact the painting could reflect to the viewer, specifically feelings of tension and unease. The placement of the viewer outside the picture plane was carefully considered to suggest the audience is a participant in the suggested narrative. I often strive to create an ambiguous moment, reflecting feelings of uncertainty and apprehension. Like *White Knuckles*, my body of work employs unexpected narratives to reveal some of the uncomfortable truths of our human experiences. I continue to be interested in exploring relationships between the mundane and the abnormal in my paintings, feelings that could be described as a “suburban nightmare.”


