

photograph

SUBURBIA

By Felicia Feaster

REVIEW

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Sarah Malakoff, courtesy Hagedorn Foundation Gallery

The split between sprawl and city remains a powerful dividing line panned for curatorial gold again and again in galleries and museums aware of the instant associations summoned up with that loaded and powerful term “suburbia.” Atlanta’s [Hagedorn Gallery](#) enters into the fray with its own treatise on the world’s oft-vilified planned communities, *Suburbia* (on view through March 16).

Viewers know, to some extent, exactly what they will see when they amble into a group show titled *Suburbia*. And this show doesn’t fail to deliver on that unspoken promise. There are Martin Adolfsson’s shots of generic suburban living rooms and bedrooms in planned communities from Moscow to Brazil to South Africa. With their shockingly uniform arrangements of pillows, nightstands and bedroom art or the ubiquitous presence of a television dead center in these suburban living rooms, the expected touchstones of uniformity, sterility and complacent wealth are all present. Just as primitive humans could parse subtle variations in the natural world, modern humans have an equally advanced understanding of the differences between Walmarts and Targets, Costcos and Sam’s Clubs. Jonathan Lewis’s clever pixilated color images of the groaning shelves, colorfully arranged products and fluorescent-lit aisles of big box stores are a familiar visual architecture to residents of the 21st century. Though the consumer experience isn’t unique to suburbia, the assumption of shows such as this one is that the two are inextricable.



Martin Adolfsson *Parkway Chalet, Bangkok, Thailand* 2006 Archival Pigment Print 21 x 14 inches

Martin Adolfsson, courtesy Hagedorn Foundation Gallery

The downstairs gallery at Hagedorn is given over to Sarah Malakoff's variation on Adolfsson's theme of depopulated suburban interiors, albeit with a twist. In Malakoff's images suburbia is far from uniform: the quirky wallpapers, paint colors and design features of her home interiors seem to convey something of the idiosyncratic nature of their unseen occupants, who may or may not be residents of the suburbia in question. Atlanta photographer Christina Price Washington offers the most unexpected studies of suburbia in the show, although also the most oblique. Her extreme close-ups of the fissured bark of a tree seen from multiple vantages *Four Sides of the Tree*, individual blades of grass in a suburban lawn or the play of light and shadow through a window suggest uniqueness and individuality in the domestic realm even where other photographers have seen lockstep conformity.

Perhaps the most arresting images in *Suburbia*, are Brian Ulrich's rephotographed black-and-white images from the 1940s, '50s and '60s. These reconceptualized vintage photographs of grocery and department stores capture an era when suburbia was more a promise and a hoped-for state rather than the compromised cop-out contemporary viewers assume it to be. Ulrich has often charted big box architecture and consumer culture in his work and in these historic images he essentially records wildfire consumption's baby steps.

The photographers don't necessarily cohere as a group, nor do they, en masse, bring some new understanding of suburbia to the fore, though individually they offer moments of enlightenment beyond the constrictive parameters of this themed show.

Review: Suburbia at Hagedorn Foundation Gallery

by *Stephanie Dowda* / May 2, 2013



Installation image, *Suburbia*, Hagedorn Foundation Gallery, February 1-March 16, 2013.

Hagedorn Foundation Gallery recently presented *Suburbia*, featuring work from Martin Adolfsson, Jonathan Lewis, Sarah Malakloff, Brian Ulrich and Christina Price Washington [February 1st – March 16th 2013]. The exhibition features a cast of photographers who aim to reveal a malaise of suburban life with distant, eery and pensive work. Spread throughout the two floors of the Hagedorn Foundation Gallery,

the photographs guide the viewer through a well-developed tour of the ideals of suburbia and the psychological impact of conformity.

Brian Ulrich traces the idealism of suburbia back to its roots by enlarging vintage negatives from the 1950s of department store mock-ups, grocery store grand opening celebrations, and advertisements. This is a drastic departure from his best-known and decade-long project, *Copia*, which captures architectural giants such as malls and other defunct commercial buildings. Through *Copia*—which is a body of work mostly void of people—Ulrich reveals a sadness about the massive weight of waste American spending culture has landed on our souls. Ulrich's work on view then almost reads as simultaneous root and parody of said commercial culture.



Installation image, *Suburbia*, Hagedorn Foundation Gallery, February 1-March 16, 2013.

Where Brian Ulrich focuses on the failure of society, Martin Adolfsson focuses on the failure to sustain the personal. In his large color photographs, Adolfsson reveals the staged interiors from homes for sale in countries outside the USA. Oddly, these scenes feel like outdated catalogue images or some perverse physiological joke played on the viewer, but quite distinctly, read nothing like a home. The realization gained from Adolfsson's work is that in societies based on commerce, the unique has no market because supply and demand is rendered obsolete. So, in order for homes to sell, they have to appear reproducible, ordinary and void of imperfections. This conceptual point is driven to climax in one of Adolfsson's photographs: On a bedside table there are two frames containing the exact same family portrait.



Christina Price Washington, *Window*, 2009, lamda prints, 40×30 inches each, courtesy the artist and Hagedorn Foundation Gallery.

Though the exhibition starts on the ground floor with Christina Price Washington's photographs, it feels like her works would better serve as exhibition endnote due to the contemplative space they create. In Washington's exquisite color prints, texture and light are examined as pensive and heartfelt moments of the psyche. Three groupings echo along the walls of the gallery: *Grass* appears to be a photographic examination of the wave-like patterns in grass, which fill the frame and transpire to meditative moments; In *Window*, sunlight appears like ghosts on the walls of an anonymous home. Through Washington's work, viewers are confronted with emptiness with hints of something deeper that's beyond the surface; one can feel the transformation of the suburban malaise into a dream from which to wake.

Suburbia was smartly curated and inclusive of refreshed ideas that discuss the discord of suburban life. From a historic document provided by Brian Ulrich to the psychological impact captured in Christina Price Washington's work we are guided through time to see the consistent goals of consumer culture and the contemporary boredom that is the result of such social passivity.