

**art**



photo by Darrol Hofmeister

## **Nature, My Grass**

**Artists ponder the psychotic wonders of suburbia**

By Gregory Beatty  
**NATURAL FORMS**  
NEUTRAL GROUND  
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If you look up “natural” in the dictionary, you’ll find a dozen definitions. Most relate to the idea of something created by nature as opposed to humanity, or something that exists in the wild. But “natural” can also refer to something that’s “normal” or “usual.” Before seeing *Natural Forms* you might assume, based on its title, that it’s a show about nature — its beauty, perhaps, and how we’re despoiling it through ignorance and greed.

To be fair, curator JG Hampton has included a bit of that. But it’s far from the main focus. Rather, the “natural forms” that he and the five participating artists are intent on exploring are largely urban. Based on demographic trends, urban living is the reality for a growing majority of Canadians. In Saskatchewan we’re a bit behind the curve, but even here our urban population is creeping up.

We don’t necessarily see ourselves that way, and structural biases continue to exist that prop up the outmoded notion of Canada (and Saskatchewan) as rural. Probably the biggest is the distribution of Parliamentary and Legislative seats that skews political representation in favour of rural voters. But in myriad other ways — literature, poetry, tourist promotion, economic development — we’re still pretty wedded to the rural ideal... “rural” being equated somehow with purity, and a primal authenticity that simply doesn’t exist in our urban jungles of concrete and steel with only the odd patch of green space like a park or lawn.

As a Regina, I happen to like Wascana Centre and Victoria Park. Lawns, I must admit, I'm not crazy about. In Regina and other relatively arid locales, the natural ground cover is Prairie grass. Lawns need a lot of watering to be lush, and plenty of fertilizer too — not to mention herbicides and pesticides, all of which strains the environment.

Despite the toll that they exact, lawns remain a powerful status symbol — in middle and upper income neighbourhoods, anyway. That's a subject Robert Hengeveld explores in *Kentucky Perfect*. It consists of a patch of grass that he's installed in the gallery that's tended by an automatic mechanism providing light and water, and periodic mowing.

There's some ambivalence seeping out of *Kentucky Perfect*. On one level, the ludicrous extent to which he's gone to grow grass indoors highlights the absurdity of our obsession. But this work is not without some affection. And during an opening night panel Hengeveld confessed to being ambivalent about lawns. Yeah, they're a huge urban indulgence. But as the father of two young kids, he added, he lives in a house with a lawn.

Nowhere does lawn obsession play out more vigorously than the suburbs. Following WWII, most North American cities went through an expansion phase where middle-class families moved out of crowded inner cities and, with the aid of cars for commuting, settled in spacious new neighbourhoods with big houses and plenty of room for lawns.

In *65-Point Plan for Sustainability*, Jeremy Drummond comments on this development through a pile of satellite photos of existing suburbs arranged in the rough outline of North America (there's even one representing Hawaii). He's also altered the images to isolate the suburbs. Ordinarily, of course, they'd be connected to the host city by expressways, bridges and the like. So, no, they're not as insular and inaccessible in real-life as he depicts here. Unless you happen to be stuck in one without a car. Then, the visual metaphor that he's crafted definitely rings true.

And with energy costs rising, and cities facing skyrocketing infrastructure deficits, suburban sprawl is increasingly seen as unsustainable. Will 'burbs one day be abandoned? Through his doctored photos, Drummond suggests they might be. That is, if we can ever gain a true appreciation for their failings. But that's not easy to do in our heavily mediated world.

That's a reality Crystal Mowry touches on in *Precipice*. It's a scale reconstruction of 19th century American poet Henry David Thoreau's cabin as described in his book *Walden*, where Thoreau extols the virtues of living in simple harmony with nature. Even in his day, Thoreau was a radical. Mowry took inspiration for her cabin from the secluded refuge of another radical — Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, whose rambling writings on the evils of modern technological society were informed by Thoreau's ideas.

As far as models go, Mowry's is pretty rudimentary. Positioned inside the cabin's open front door is a mini-video camera that transmits a breathtaking view from the edge of a mountain cliff. Breathtaking, that is, as seen through the camera. In person... not so much.

Mediation is also at the heart of two large-scale photos of apple and pear trees that Jocelyn Philibert presents. Each is composed of dozens of detail images taken by her at night and then digitally assembled to recreate the tree in all its sparkling glory.

Trees, or at least their architectural equivalent, figure prominently in Barbara Meneley's delicate installation "The Whispering City". Installed inside three sets of four rectangular paper columns hung mobile-style from the ceiling are strips taken from plans drafted under the "City Beautiful" model that swept North America at the turn of the 20th-century when factors like widespread immigration and industrialization were pushing cities to the fore.

Fed by dreams of future prosperity, the plans were suitably utopian — aiming to create cities that privileged beauty above all else. Considering the diversity of land formations where cities were founded, their climates, economies and whatnot, the idea of taking a single urban design plan and trying to apply it across the board epitomizes our relentless determination to impose our will on nature. Not to diss planning, but it has to be sensitive to local conditions. And it should always have an organic element where people can change the nature of the space by inhabiting it — like we can with Meneley's mobiles by moving around them.

You could, in the final analysis, look at *Natural Forms* as a scathing critique of our constructed urban realities that strips away artifice. But that's too simple. The romantic idea of returning to some kind of fantasy pastoral ideal is every bit as demented as watering alien lawn-plants every day to keep them alive.

*Natural Forms* isn't a lecture; it's a mirror. What we make of the reflection is up to us.