

Introduction
to the
exhibition

Bill Owens

Suburbia Revisited

2 February – 30 March 2008

Gallery 1

Bill Owens's photographs document aspects of American society from the 1970s to today. He is best known for his series of black and white photographs titled **SUBURBIA** which depict the birth of newly-built suburban neighbourhoods in California during the early 1970s. This series is the first within the exhibition.

Owens's interest in his subject matter grew out of his work as a photographer in the 1960s and 70s for the *Livermore Independent*, a San Francisco Bay area local newspaper. His daily routine took him into the homes of hundreds of these families and into contact with the social life of suburban communities. Most of them appear proud to be living where they are.

A newcomer himself to one of these suburban districts at the time, he was

not a visiting outsider, but someone who saw, and was part of, the everyday developments, aspirations and incidents in these places.

In the late 1960s and 70s the American suburbs expanded at a rapid rate. 1970 was the first time that more people lived in the suburbs than in the city or country. The images show what have become icons of the suburbs: bungalows, family cars, social gatherings, office and retail work, lawns and Tupperware parties.

Owens shows life inside the home and in social spaces, as well as outside, but the emphasis is always on people. Even when photographing the Yosemite landscape, his eye is drawn to the slowly crawling line of daytrippers' cars.

Presented first in a series of books accompanied by quotes from the people in the pictures, the images are exhibited here in a similar way. In his attempt to not just represent these people visually, but also in their own words, there is a wide range of statements. Some confirm what is depicted in the photograph, others suggest a story different from the one shown. Many refer to hopes and aspirations for the future.

Following on from the SUBURBIA series are two sets of pictures showing another side of American life at the time: political protests and the free concert at Altamont. Although not taken far from Livermore, they depict a different kind of social gathering and set of values than those present in the SUBURBIA series. Just as American suburban life can be seen to symbolise new wealth, conformity and aspirational values, anti-war protests and other scenes in the **RIOTS** series can be seen to symbolise a different struggle.

The free concert recorded by Owens in the **ALTAMONT** series was headlined by The Rolling Stones. Organised with the expectation of it being a 'West Coast Woodstock', the event turned out very differently and, like the Vietnam War, is often associated with the end of the hippie era. This is due mainly to the death of four people at the event. The most notorious of these happened in front of the stage when a Hell's Angel who had

been hired as security, stabbed someone in self defence.

The final section in the exhibition contains colour photographs. One set of images were taken during Owens's road trip across America. The other series results from the artists recent return to the suburbs. 30 years on, he focuses less on people and more on architectural details.

At the conclusion of the exhibition there is an image of Richie, who was also seen as a young boy on his bike at the beginning of the exhibition. He is now posed on a motobike. Another picture nearby is of a plan for a gated community development. These two images can be seen to represent how much, or how little, has changed since Bill Owens took his first pictures in the suburbs.

This guide is intended as an introduction to the exhibition. Please ask a Steward if you have any questions. There is more information about Bill Owens's work in the Reading Room. Open 12.00 - 6.00pm.

A new book about Bill Owens is available in Arnolfini Bookshop.

ART/FUN, an activity pack for the exhibitions is available from Arnolfini Bookshop price £1.

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