



Alyson Shotz, *Mirror Fence*, 2003,
acrylic, mirror acrylic, and wood, 36" x 130" x 3½". From "Yard."

"YARD"
SOCRATES SCULPTURE
PARK

Robert Smithson was one of the first artists to think about suburbia in geological terms. His insight that the structure of the suburban landscape is inherently crystalline—the result of mineral processes unfolding at the limits of human perception—remains a relevant counterpoint to the sociohistorical narrative that's much more often used to understand the sprawl that surrounds our cities. Defining suburbia as a synthesis of the urban and the pastoral—as a kind of intermediary condition dependent on antecedent forms of man-made landscape—leads artists into familiar postmodern terrain, where they deploy historical references and ironic juxtapositions in an attempt to reveal unrecognized or underlying meanings. But while this methodology has gotten a workout over the last three decades—Sculpture in the Environment (S.I.T.E.) started skinning suburban clichés back in the '70s—it skirts Smithson's essential question: What is this place we call "suburbia," and why have its particular physical qualities proven both inevitable and alienating?

In "Yard," a group show of outdoor sculpture at the Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, artists (with perhaps a few exceptions) preferred the sociohistorical framework as a means to express their ambivalence toward the suburban experience. Jason Middlebrook installed garden gnomes sprouting out of an irregular tumulus, inviting us to wonder just what might be buried underneath. Elise Ferguson mined a similar vein with a long retaining wall covered in handmade urethane tiles that aped the linoleum that covers far too many suburban kitchen floors. While the deft material inversion drove home the installation's artificiality, the work produced only a flurry of connotative impressions that failed to coalesce into any kind of distinctive effect. Adam Cvijanovic's *New City*, 2001–2003, wore its intentions on its sleeve: Mounted on a wooden armature was a giant ink-jet print of a typical suburban development under construction. Behind the backdroplike panels, actual urban housing projects were visible in the distance. Point taken. Other artists in the show re-created pools, sandboxes (for dogs only), and a cedar deck.

The most striking piece in "Yard" was Alyson Shotz's mirror-acrylic picket fence. It slipped through a thin copse of cottonwood trees and tall grasses, neatly dividing a portion of the park. While clearly visible from a distance or when observed obliquely, the slats disintegrated as one approached, melting into doubled foliage. Although it relied, like many of the other works, on the easy subversion of a common suburban trope, the fence had material (or perhaps immaterial) presence enough to generate a distinctive sculptural energy, becoming all the more real as it slid away from optical certainty.

If Shotz's polished surfaces hinted at mineral underpinnings, the German artists Venske & Spänle made the association explicit. Having re-created a patch of suburban lawn and driveway, they—in a simple chthonic gesture—tilted a chunk of it a few degrees along a horizontal axis, revealing it as a massive concrete slab with a bit of plastic green stuff glued to its surface. This brings us back to Smithson and the notion that despite its organic veneer, suburbia remains a hard, impenetrable lattice-work, the product of forces moving in unfamiliar time. For while the yard—in the context of this particular show and throughout American culture—often serves as a proxy for the mnemonic space of middle-class childhood, it remains a real space bounded by rock, metal, and asphalt. Smithson and Earth artists like Michael Heizer often managed to exploit the inherent impenetrability of geological form and scale to define a sort of limit function of human understanding. None of the artists in "Yard" have used the suburban topos to achieve anything quite so profound—hardly a failing but still an opportunity missed.

—Kevin Pratt