

***Inhabiting: the works of Isabelle Hayeur*¹**

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Each photographic work by Isabelle Hayeur incorporates several images, using Adobe® Photoshop® software to form an apparently seamless representation. The smoothness with which she integrates views of sometimes widely differing perspectives and scales is such that it takes a moment to realize that what she is offering is an elaborate, artificial construction, not just a natural scene.

Hayeur's type of representation could be categorized as an ecological critique of the effect of urbanization on the environment. This exhibition concentrates on her analysis of the impact *suburbs* have had on nature, and is a selection of photographic works from three series: 'Model Homes', a succession of frontal portraits of suburban homes; 'Excavations', ground-level views of suburban groupings and the soil surrounding them; and 'Destinations', large-scale depictions of the coexistence of human habitats and their natural surroundings.

The 'Model Homes' series

This series consists of photographs of suburban houses, most of which are prefabricated. Some of the houses were photographed in the parking lot of one of the biggest prefab manufacturers in Quebec,² where they were truly 'model homes'. *Nadia* (2004), for instance, even has her 'name' pinned right beside the front door. In fact all the houses have been labelled by the artist, who followed the builder's habit of using feminine names. Five model homes are presented including, for the wealthier among us, a facsimile of the ancient stone manor, *Tiffany* (2005) — not exactly a prefab, but mass-produced as well. Each one of these houses has to be interpreted. They are studies in character. Each carries a text of its own. No two are alike, which is paradoxical given their standardized mode of production. Come to think of it, it is a characteristic of prefab homes that is always desirable: you can customize them to your need. Through computerized modifications, this is exactly what Hayeur has done.

Two of the houses from the 'Model Homes' series, *Ellen* and *Renée*, both from 2005, are only partially finished and are shown blanketed in a thin white sheet ordinarily seen but for a fleeting moment, when the house is being built and before it receives its outer shell.

¹ I have written two different commentaries on the works of the artist, one in English, the other in French. I thought in one language, then in the other, knowing that each of them would be doing some of the thinking for me. The works themselves, however, are discussed in the same order and the interpretation is more or less the same for both texts.

² Les Industries Bonneville.

*The suburban home has become quite a sophisticated little enclosure, and one of its most advanced features is a sheet of polyethylene, a new product from the petrochemical industry, which does for the house what Gore-tex® did for clothes: wrapped tightly around the wooden frame of the house, it repels water and wind while letting steam escape. Like Gore-tex®, Tyvek®, as the product from Dupont is called, is a heat exchange system, and we all know what profound consequences another such heat exchange system, the steam engine, has had for humanity. Will this one make a deep impact as well? Gore-tex®, it is true, revolutionized outerwear. It was, you may remember, famously associated with the space age as it was used in making space suits for astronauts. In a way, because of their Tyvek® robes, we can say that these modest suburban houses of traditional design are space-age dwellings, but we cannot speak of a revolution. In fact not one of the petrochemical products that come out of the heavy investment in science and technology by the giants of the petrochemical industry like Dow Chemical and DuPont, taken individually, is apt to make a revolution in our living conditions. But taken as a whole, they come close. They made domesticity easier with Saran™ Wrap pellicles, Tupperware® containers and, a close relative of Gore-tex® and Tyvek®, Teflon®, whose ultimate goal is to repel fat from the human body. Products to seal everything, food (Saran™, Tupperware®), the human body (Gore-tex®), the domestic environment as a whole (Tyvek®). But this is only the tip of the iceberg. In their quest to exploit financially all the stages of the distillation of crude petroleum and the most advanced research in molecular chemistry, those companies have produced a dizzying array of products. Just one of these petrochemical giants lists the following **categories** of products: adhesives and sealants, agricultural, appliances, automotives, building and construction, chemical processing, cleaners, cleaning and dry-cleaning, composites, craft and floral, electronics and telecommunications, food, imaging and photography, medical, oil, gas and mining, packaging, paints, coating and inks, paper, personal care, pharmaceuticals, plastic and rubber products, textiles and, finally, water.³*

*Petrochemical products are everywhere — no aspect of daily life is left untouched by them. They represent an absolute faith in the power of technology to shape our future. Dustin Hoffman, as Benjamin Braddock in Mike Nichol's 1967 film *The Graduate*, was receiving excellent advice when famously told to "get into plastics." Paradoxically, however, their production, use and modes of disuse have all proven to be also a threat to the environment and to our health — to the point of begging the question whether we have any future at all.*

Like a heroine in a western, *Ellen*, all bones, skimpily dressed in her pure white undershirt, stands fearlessly alone in the immensity of the desolate landscape (the Mojave Desert). *Renée* is also draped in polyethylene only, but this time the sheeting is stamped with a profusion of logos. Tyvek® features pre-eminently, but one can also see other 'house wrap' products such as the related Typar®, Air-Gard,

³ Information taken from the Website of Dow Chemical
<http://www.dow.com/products-services/index.html>

Please note that passages in italics are meant to reflect different views and attitudes towards Hayeur's subject matter.

and Syntec for the roof, as well as logos of companies selling construction materials. The logos make *Renée* look vulgar. She's not much of a looker to start with, wide, with holes gaping everywhere, disproportionate, especially with the garage door placed prominently at the front of the house, ruining any possibility of symmetry in the design. *Renée*, a Baudelairian beauty, is the fallen counterpart to *Ellen*; she has sold out to big business interests, docile to the banal wishes of her middle-class client.

It's uglier to have a garage entrance at the front of your house, but it's more convenient. Why hide the car at the back of the house like you should be ashamed of it? You are going to park your car at the back of the house like you own an estate or something? Like you live at the Château de My-Place? The backyard is for the swimming pool. Besides, if the garage's in the back, who's gonna shovel all that snow? Anyway you love your car, don't you? After your house, it's the most expensive object you will ever own. Out here, everything is done by car. They say that the time spent driving a car is for some people the only time they are alone with their thoughts. The automobile is yet another sealing system fuelled by the petrochemical industry, driving on asphalt, another product involving the petrochemical industry and that seals us once again, this time from the bumps on the road, a smooth ride for the hours of commute.

Nobody walks anymore. You do that when you have visitors. You go out on the streets of your recently built bungalow development, a hard and geometric environment of brick angles and asphalt strips that consists entirely of the repetition of the same house. (At night, you'd think you were in a Giorgio de Chirico painting.) You go out there, with your visitors, to form an impromptu parade on the theme of 'I have a life, I have a family and friends'. On such moments, strolling awkwardly, you inevitably see some neighbours looking out at you from their windows. You know they know what you are up to. You are involved in a representation of yourself having a normal life. We all do it, occasionally, on the sidewalks of our little subdivisions, at first...

The relentlessly harsh character of the surroundings will eventually be relieved by the semi-chaotic presence of large living plants, like nature coming back to life after a cataclysmic event. However, for that you will have to wait twenty years or so. All your life, in a way. But look at the price, consider the square footage, listen to how quiet it is! Here your children will be safe. They will go to a good school. By the time they are able to flee the paternal house to go slum it in a downtown to learn about deconstruction in some university, there will be mature trees, the bushes will be fully grown. A peaceful garden ready for the coming years of solitude.

The model home is usually covered up in no maintenance siding, aluminum, vinyl or brick. There is even a fake cement stone, a glorified brick, if you will, for those who want to make a statement. *Tiffany*, a man's castle if ever there was one, a monster house sitting at the foot of a popular downhill skiing mountain in Quebec, makes such a big statement. Hayeur has put on even more additions, a garage and supplementary in-house space, all in a different fake stone covering to make the collage/architectural addition loudly visible. It's as if the house were bulging with

too many pectorals. On the right of the house and in the distance, one can see strings of identical, more modest row houses buttressed against one another, a development of condos with a view... on *Tiffany*. At the bottom and at the back, on the parking lot behind pretentious *Tiffany*, a delivery truck from the Coca-Cola Company stands out like a red sore.

Chips make you thirsty. Inside Tiffany everybody sits comatose in front of the gigantic television set in the basement's family room, bellies overextended by the fizzy drink, having ingested enough fat, enough salt and enough sugar to stun a hippopotamus. Secure and drowsy, each thinks simultaneously, in the privacy of their own mind: do I prefer Lost or Invasion? Thank God I can have both of them!

Nadia (2004) is much more modest. It is covered almost seamlessly in an elegant (though improbable) two-tone colour combination of tan and dark green vinyl siding, another product involving the petrochemical industry. The roof is covered up in asphalt tiles, another...

Only the surfaces of Nadia can be seen. Like an organisation employee, she has her name tagged on the front: Nadia. (Where do you live? I live at Nadia).

The ground at the back of the house has a particular history. At first it was a huge open air quarry situated right in Montreal, the Miron quarry. For decades what was extracted out of there served to build the city, then, at the end of the 1960s, the gigantic hole became a dumping ground and received what garbage the city produced. In the 1980s, the city bought the site. It is now a recycling site, complete with state-of-the-art Biogas recuperation from the simmering grounds that uses the methane to heat about 12,000 houses in the neighbourhood. Its final destination is to become a park. *Nadia* is in that park, sitting on 340 million tons of garbage.⁴

Is Nadia standing on solid grounds? Most of the stench is gone. No wonder she has only one window and looks strangely one-eyed. If you live at Nadia you must be blind sided! There is a white translucent sheet veiling the only remaining window. Is it a huge perfumed handkerchief? The door is open, but one only sees darkness inside.

Virginia (2005) is the meeting of an abandoned house and a prefabricated house whose style is based on the old, dilapidated one. The iconic value of the original house has been growing while the lifestyle that came with the house (and, in the popular imagination at least, the simpler life) has been disappearing.

That the style of mass construction housing should offer the buyer some escapism or dream-like element is not new. The architectural style of the houses in the 'Model Homes' series is difficult to establish with precision. If one takes the example of the United States, suburban houses built between the 1870s and the 1930s were, in

⁴ In conversation with the artist during the winter of 2006, and Bandiera, Sabine, 'La Fin de la carrière Miron,' 4 mars 2006, <http://www.sciencepresse.qc.ca/dossiers/Miron.html>

both design and ornamentation, a mishmash of elements of Gothic, Renaissance and Egyptian architecture, or of colonial revival that could be of Spanish or Dutch influence. One could also have a Craftsman bungalow, a New England Cape Cod whose original model goes back to the 1600s, a Queen Anne or a Tudor.⁵ The ornamentation was, however, simplified, the styles were jumbled together. The houses of the 'Model Homes' series today are derived from those houses of more than a century ago. It is as if modernity in architecture had never gone beyond the Victorian era.

Virginia, the model home, being built as *Virginia*, the ancestral home, is being destroyed. What we have is both a ruin and a new, instant, construction. The American artist Robert Smithson, who shared Hayeur's interest in the play between past and future, called the new suburban constructions 'ruins in reverse'.⁶ Modernity has made us accustomed to the fact that the construction of the new demands the erasure of the past.

Only, here, it is more than the past that is erased. The soil itself will be taken away and sold, to be replaced by the rubble left by the construction company. At the back of *Virginia* is a piece of agricultural land from Laval, a satellite city of Montreal, which has some of the best soil in the province but is going to give way to a new

⁵ Hayden, Dolores, *Building Suburbia, Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York, Toronto: Random House, First Vintage Book Edition 2004), pp.78, 100, 105-6. There would have to be some adjustments, but this could describe houses available at the time by catalogue in Canada through Sears, Roebuck, Co.

⁶Smithson, Robert, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey' (1967), in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p.72. Smithson adds: "This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built." (n.p.) In connection with different works by Hayeur, the reference to Smithson was made by Suzanne Paquet who quotes the same passage in 'D'inquiétantes expéditions,' Yves Arcand, *Colwyn Griffith, Isabelle Hayeur*, 22 février au 17 mars 2002, Vu, Centre de diffusion et de production de la photographie, (n.p.) and by Jan Allen, 'The Synthetic Landscapes of Isabelle Hayeur,' *Prefix Photo*, number 12, November 2005, here and there in her article. Since we are on the topic of precedents, Hayeur's clear-eyed look at the suburban housing construction is reminiscent of Dan Graham's photographic essay, *Houses for America*, 1966, and one especially thinks of Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting* (1974), where a suburban house was literally split in two, and of his excavations of the Parisian underground. Closer to home and to our time, the photographic works of Roy Arden in Vancouver, are, if not an influence, at least a confirmation (see Allen, above).

housing development.⁷ The sedimentation process that slowly produced the soil is counted in geological time, while the manner in which it can be taken away is almost instantaneous.

The 'Excavations' series

The soil was already a contentious topic with *Nadia* and *Virginia*. With the works in the 'Excavations' series, it becomes the main topic and is seen again as the site of confrontation of different temporal perspectives. *Blindsight* (2005) shows a nondescript corner of Quebec suburbia where the foreground has been violently upturned to reveal the side of what is probably a huge hole. The vertical descent takes us down several strata of sediment deposits⁸, and reveals a record of time on a geological scale. In those sediments, the artist has added a milk container, pots, shoes..., all partly veiled by computer treatment. These additions turn the substrata into a vision of millenaries in the future, when sediments will be littered with plastic trash.⁹

The ground abruptly ends to reveal a drop, like the edge of a table in a still-life composition. It is as if all the houses and the trees could suddenly be pulled away by tugging at a tablecloth made of grass. All that is missing to add to the feeling of imminent danger is a knife; better still a John Deere backhoe, dangling over the edge.

Blindsight is one of those instances where Hayeur has chosen to title her work in English. The word refers to a medical condition that leaves one able to respond to visual stimuli without actually being aware of them. The 'blind sight' here is that of allowing such housing developments to occur in the first place, without the *foresight* to evaluate the consequences of such actions on the environment.

Aube (2005), the second work from the 'Excavations' series, shows a substratum composed of a close-up of a few inches of ground material which takes up a good third of the image. The ground material is constituted here also of the usual leftovers, mixed in with a clayish soil.

In order to reintroduce plants in what is now an arid environment, you, the new owner, will have to purchase fertile soil, in bags. Shrug it off. Another absurdity of modern life in arrogant suburbia.

On the top and at the bottom of the close-up view of the soil, in a mirror-like inversion, is a view of a bungalow development waking up in the cruel reddish light

⁷ In conversation with the artist during the winter of 2006.

⁸ A photograph of the bottom of the St. Lawrence River at l'Île-aux-Grues, Quebec.

⁹ This mirroring effect between a distant past and a distant future is again reminiscent of Robert Smithson's mode of thinking.

of dawn (aube), and an upside-down view of a vast natural landscape, the Badlands of Alberta. As with the sediment deposits in *Blindsight*, the inverted image is meant to represent the substratum of the area. The substratum is there as a reminder of the time it took for nature to build up the thin layer of fertile soil that can be so easily ripped away.

Succession and *Traces*, both from 2005, are two panels that constitute a diptych called 'Badlands'. The clash between the geological past and the historical past reappears in those two closely related works, but this time the comparison is made by juxtaposing the despoiled grounds of a construction area with a sublime view of the Badlands. The construction soil is a marker of the quick intervention of the entrepreneur on the land, as the past that the Badlands registers is the geological past, counted in millions of years. It is a past completely different from the historical past, the one occupied by human affairs, but its fate has come to depend on it.

Hayeur explores this metaphor twice, reversing the process of comparison in each panel. In *Succession*, a breathtaking view of a valley in the Badlands forms two-thirds of the image, and replaces what ought to have been a banal construction ditch that would come up to the foreground. Where we should be expecting a close-up view and a detailed observation of the composition of land-fill that form the two sides of the ditch as if our nose was put to it, we witness instead the majestic spread of the Badlands. A bungalow development runs along the horizon and the sky is punctuated by tall pylons supporting high tension wires, reminding us of the huge electrical infrastructure that provides comfort to all those suburban homes, but is a potential menace for those who live nearby. In *Traces*, the process of juxtaposition is reversed. The Badlands now fills most of the image, reserving a thin horizon line where a few houses, seen from a distance, are barely visible. At the bottom of the image and in the foreground, we are offered, defiled with rubbish, the close-up view of the ditch, the one we were expecting to find in the first panel. As in *Blindsight*, the contrast of scale provoked by the inclusion of the Badlands in both *Traces* and *Succession* is there to add gravitas to the banal presence of the suburban developments. We have to look at those images with a mental lens that has to adapt its focus back and forth, and in the process we come to understand that issues that appear disconnected are, in fact, related to one another.

The 'Destinations' series

The 'Destinations' series predates 'Model Homes' and 'Excavations', but can serve here as a sort of conclusion. These are landscapes on a cinematographic scale; they are like frozen travellings.¹⁰ *Citadelle* (2003) is a diptych that shows, side-by-side, two very long images of the same site taken from different points of view. A cement

¹⁰ Those are the nice expressions of Enrico Lunghi, 'Constructions et Simulations,' *Constructions et Simulations*, Avril 2005, Casino Luxembourg, Forum d'art contemporain, pp.5, 6. (My translation, S.B.)

wall runs across the entire left panel. Below the wall is an 'agger' - a high bank covered in grass that goes up to the base of the wall, and a chain link fence that separates the upper portion of the image from the lower portion. That lower portion shows a lagoon and then a sandy beach covered in rubbish. Each piece of garbage was brought to the beach by the artist, who partially buried it in the sand before photographing it. These structural elements, the wall, the grass bank, the fence, the water and the sand, along with the sky seen over the top of the wall, make up six stripes that run horizontally across the entire length of the image — emphasizing the forbidding aspect of the scene. The right panel shows the wall from further away, where it ends, and lets the beach, now cleaned-up, dominate the landscape, with the ocean opening up and a beautiful sky occupying the entire upper half of the image.

The cramped, ugly and forbidding space of the left panel is contrasted with the open, sublime and inviting landscape of the right panel. The beach scenes are taken from the Gros Morne National Park in Newfoundland. The wall that dominates and hides the horizon on the left panel and ends in the left portion of the right panel is found in Montreal. Part of the landscape of a popular bike path, it serves as a sound barrier to a train that links the port to the railway system and is slow and noisy. This 'improvement' was built in conjunction with, and for the benefit of, a gigantic city development that abuts the legendary Plateau Mont-Royal area. The people from the Plateau area complained of the increase in foot and car traffic, while the people on the other side of the train track complained about the ugliness of that wall. The protests did not last long and were futile. The wall has quickly become covered in aggressive artworks, mostly from local taggers, and soon became a very long outdoor exhibition surface. The wall has received so much anger, was the site of such an intense conflict, that it now seems to be glowing with rage. Behind it, not visible in this image, is the impressive agglomeration of stacked up housing units, all identical, a compacted version of a suburban housing project, pressed down to size to make it fit the narrow urban footprint it occupies.¹¹ The wall eventually ends and beyond it one finds liberation from the city. In this work, there is no suburbia to cushion the meeting of city and nature. Where one ends the other one begins. In a way, this is a positive representation: it would be, ecologically, a blessing to erase the grounds reserved for suburbia and return them to nature and farming, and to park humanity inside its cities — poetic justice.

Les routes de sel (2003), another diptych, shows one site (part of which was taken at Cape Cod, Massachusetts) in two different ecological states. One panel, 'Lagune' (Lagoon), presents a luscious sea-side environment. The skies are loaded with the humidity from the sea and they nourish an abundance of plants. The scene could be called 'idyllic' if not for a dangerously high level of ground occupancy along the peninsula. 'Oued'(Wadi), the other panel, shows the same site in a state of environmental collapse. Of the crowded constructions there are only two original houses left, forming a sort of survivalist compound. The landscape has turned

¹¹ Just like Hayeur, I live in proximity to that wall. This city, like every other city, is 'littered' with such new developments, called 'infills' that pop up like mushrooms.

sinister. The sky is deadly blue, even the mountains on the horizon have taken on a burnt out colour. The construction was the object of intense collage work to produce the right 'desertified' look, or the 180° view of the mountains which, alone, is made up of twelve images. These panels must face one another on opposite walls to prevent a reading of the diptych as a before-and-after representation of an ecological disaster. Instead, Hayeur wants to put the viewer in front of a choice, as if to imply his responsibility in the making of the landscape.

Hayeur's work is militant in nature and it is interesting to see that the technique of composition of the image recalls an earlier militant period in art, the photomontages of the historical avant-gardes of the first decades of the twentieth century. There too, the essential mode of articulation was to bring together, on the same surface, cut-outs from photographs of various realities and to let them produce discordant effects to reflect the clash of forces of modern society. There is a difference, however, that time has made. Then the debate centered around the sharing of resources of a plentiful planet. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when it looks as if Alfred Hitchcock is going to be in charge of the weather, it is the fate of the planet itself that is the object of debate.

Serge Bérard, 2006¹²

¹² I would like to thank the Canada Council for the Arts for their financial support, and for allowing me to think about the theme of infrastructure in Canadian art. Also the Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec for their financial participation in the production of the catalogue.