

# Leisure Island

*An Investigation of Suburban Landscapes and Domestic Spaces in South Africa*

Kirsten Lilford

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*Leisure Island:  
An Investigation of Suburban Landscapes and Domestic Spaces in South Africa*

Kirsten Lilford  
2017

Submitted in compliance with the requirements of the MFA degree  
Michaelis School of Fine Art  
University of Cape Town

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*In memory of Tessa Gauntlett*

*The suburban is seen, if at all and at best, as a  
consequence, an excrescence, a cancerous fungus,  
leaching the energy of the city, dependent and inert and  
ultimately self-destructive.*  
(Silverstone, 1997)





## Introduction

---

Media and communications analyst, Roger Silverstone (1997) brings our attention to the negative elements of the suburban landscape, a space more often associated with the comfortable life – one filled with luscious garden lawns, large crystal blue swimming pools, double garages and domestic workers’ quarters. That this domestic space has ‘protected’ itself from the stress of the city through the use of high walls, electric fences and wrought iron gates, is an irony worth commenting on. As Silverstone notes, this constructed paradise is not without its complications.

Growing up as a white upper-middle class woman in the affluent suburb of Constantia in Cape Town, I cannot effectively see and interpret suburbia without understanding its representation as a form of western colonialism in South Africa and hence note its dominant structuring of social strata. Yet, the suburban environment, enclosed and isolated

from the threats of the city, remains peripheral to not just the larger discourse centred on the city, but also from the very politics of the modern western world that have created it. As cultural theorist, Rita Felski (1999-2000:15) argues, suburbia and everyday life are rarely objects subject to profound investigation or scrutinised as concepts. These objects are not investigated in terms of how they “organise the world according to certain assumptions and criteria” (Felski, 1999-2000: 15). Furthermore, in *The Concept of Suburbia and Modernity*, cultural theoretician Mette Mechlenborg (2007: 1) argues that “artists of early modernity [and] various cultural sociologists, cultural historians and art critics have all approached the city as the primary scene for experiencing modernity, giving the suburb no or only a peripheral role in narratives on modernity.” Mechlenborg asks what kind of practices are revealed if the suburb becomes the focus in our investigation of the imaginings and notions of modernity. She proposes that the

Fig. 1. (previous page) *Lady of leisure* (detail). Oil on canvas.  
Fig. 2. *Fun and fancy things* (detail). Oil on canvas.

very attributes and accessories of suburbia, such as face brick walls, manicured lawns and children playing in the pool, need to be subjected to further analysis (Mechlenborg, 2007: 3).

My research is centred in and on suburban landscapes and domestic spaces within the context of South Africa. In my research, I situate myself as a subject within suburbia. The project is located inside the very 'walls' of suburbia where the societal schisms are entrenched and typically more unexamined by those within its sphere. In my project *Leisure Island*, I attempt to consider white nuclear families living within their suburban gardens and homes. As an aid to underline the visual norms defining the privileged life within pre- and post-Apartheid South African suburbia, I draw on South African lifestyle magazines such as *Garden & Home*, *Fair Lady* and *Your Family*. These lifestyle magazines form a starting point for my photomontage works, in which I cut and dissect not only the suburban scape but the very figures themselves. Sometimes these photomontage works

develop into larger scale paintings, in which I look to reference the process of montage. In my paintings, forms mutate and spread across the different canvases, continually changing and disrupting the coherence of the image. The surfaces of my canvases are scrubbed, dissolved, scratched and disrupted to show the residue of what was once present – the idealised white South African domestic space.



Fig. 3. *Heated pool* (detail). Oil on canvas.



## Essay

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Suburbia, according to theoretician of architecture and urban planning, Robert Fishman (2002: 21), is a middle class invention and “perhaps the most radical rethinking of the relation between residence and city in the history of domestic architecture.” It embodies an ideal of family life and represents “a collective assertion of class, wealth and privilege” (Fishman, 2002: 21). It was created by the wealthy bourgeoisie in late eighteenth century London and evolved slowly by trial and error methods “to create an original synthesis that reflected their values” (Fishman, 2002: 25). Its method of development was similar to that of the Industrial Revolution, then taking place in the north of England, which was also advanced by experimental methods. Fishman (2002: 25) notes that the London bourgeoisies wanted to experience “a new form of family” which was “inner-directed, united by strong and exclusive personal ties,” characterised by families seeking “to separate themselves from the intrusions and the workplace of the city.”

Since its development, suburbia has, typically appeared as a safe space, peripheral to the stress of the city, but its tidy conventions embody both patriarchal and racially discriminative positions. A suburban home, being an isolated and private space, reinforces the ideological constraint embedded in the construction of women’s domestication. Suburban culture is also political culture, arising from a set of outdated notions of the ideal world in white, western terms. In *Not Your Mother’s Suburb: Remaking Communities for a More Diverse Population*, American urban lawyer Amanda Micklow (2014: 729) clarifies these ‘terms’ and suggests that “the suburb is more than a physical location; it is also a social production. Built upon a middle class, white, nuclear family ideal” and, still to this day, “zoning ordinances and the built environment continue to reflect this outdated ideal.” This idea of the organisation of physical space as disclosing and reflecting wider sociopolitical ideologies, in which ideals of family and home

Fig. 4. Image from Bishops court photo shoot (detail).

are tied to classed, racialised and gendered hierarchies of power, is exemplified in the affluent suburbs of Apartheid and post-Apartheid that I consider in this project.

Taking South African suburbia in the 1960s as my starting point, my project is centred on a time period that ranges from 1960 to 2017. I consider the 1960s as it was the time at which the Apartheid regime reached the height of its power. In South African suburbia in the 1960s, there was a great upward mobility for the white middle class at the expense of the rest of the population (Lipsitz, 1995: 369-387). This resulted in many white people having the added indulgences of an upper-middle class lifestyle. On the other hand, people of colour were divided into 'black' and 'coloured' by the Apartheid bureaucracy and experienced life under the severe restrictions imposed by institutionalised racial discrimination. South African author and journalist Mark Gevisser

(2014: 34-37) explains that in the country at that time, people of colour were not allowed to attend the same schools, eat at the same restaurants or go to the same beaches as those who were white. The Group Areas Act<sup>1</sup> resulted in many people of colour being relocated to "thousands of identical little 'matchbox' houses plotted onto the parched greyish landscape" (Gevisser, 2014: 96). This was in great contrast to the wealthy areas that were allocated to the white upper-middle class.

The effects of Apartheid have continued to linger in both the physical topography of Cape Town and the South African imaginary. Artist Bongzi Dhloomo (cited in Gevisser, 2014) considers the residue of Apartheid's control through racialised separation of space in a contemporary context, describing the blue squares and circles<sup>2</sup> clustered in specific areas amongst other parched arid areas of land she would notice when flying over Johannesburg.

<sup>1</sup>The Group Areas Act of 1950 was created by the Apartheid Government of South Africa. It assigned racial groups to different residential and business sections in urban areas. The primary purpose of the law was to prevent non-whites from living in the most developed areas. The law led to the forced removal of non-whites from homes located in areas designated for whites (Union of South Africa, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>It is also important to note that due to government supported jobs many lower-middle class whites could afford to have privileges such as swimming pools and double garages.

<sup>3</sup>The blue squares and circles Dhloomo refers to are the swimming pools in suburban gardens.

<sup>4</sup>The scenes included six white adult models and four white child models partaking in leisurely moments such as having a picnic around a table and playing in a blow up pool in the garden.



Fig. 5. Image from Bishops court photo shoot (2015).

Fig. 6. Image from Bishops court photo shoot (2015).

At first, she was confused by those blue shapes for she had never seen a swimming pool before. However, what the artist realised was that these blue shapes were in fact indicators of where Apartheid architecture started and ended. Dhlomo (cited in Gevisser, 2014: 98) goes on to state: “Now I know, when you look out of a plane over a South African city, how to tell immediately where the suburbs are as opposed to the townships: look for the blue squares and circles.”<sup>3</sup>

While taking 1960s South African suburbia as my starting point, my project attempts to consider suburbia in a contemporary context, particularly as it relates to current questions of home and identity post-Apartheid. In my research, I attempt to consider white privilege and how white people, particularly in affluent Cape Town suburbs such as Constantia and Bishopscourt, have ‘protected’ themselves and their tidy properties. As suburbia is a rather broad terrain, it is important to note that even though historically lower-middle class white people in South Africa could also afford to live in suburbia, my project specifically focuses

on the upper-middle class white suburban population. The upper-middle class I attempt to refer to in my project are white people who have added luxuries in their lives, such as double story homes and large plots of land situated in affluent suburbs such as Constantia. These subjects also wear designer clothing and accessories and ensure that they have up-to-date interior decorating.



Fig. 7. Reserve your Place in the Sun...” (South African Garden and Home, October, 1966: 57).

Fig. 8. “Every wife deserves a Steelbrite kitchen” (South African Garden and Home, January 1970: 31).



In 2015, when I initially began my project, I directed a photo shoot in Bishopscourt [Fig. 4, 5 and 6] to further explore the lavish lifestyles of the white upper-middle class in the sixties. It is, however, important to note that although the shoot<sup>4</sup> included sixties elements, such as the white models’ apparel,

the architecture of the house and garden design were contemporary. This allowed me to create a broad overview of stereotypical views of suburban life that includes those of the current moment. These constructed suburban scenes then formed reference points for small photomontage works which, on occasion, were translated into larger scale paintings. As my project progressed, however, I began to feel limited by exclusively using elements from my photo shoot to create small and larger works. Furthermore, setting up a photo shoot was a slow process and I wanted to be able to generate my photomontage works faster.

Therefore, I decided to look at pages from 1960s, 1970s and 1980s *Garden and Home*, *Fair Lady* and *Your Family* magazines as potential referents. These lifestyle advertisements in the magazines included many images of white families occupying their homes while their children play in their luscious, green backyards. One such image, paired with the tag line “Reserve your Place in the Sun...” (*South African Garden and Home*, October

<sup>5</sup>Post-WWII, women of suburbia were relegated to the domestic sphere by “culture, economy, and the emerging suburban environment.” “A middle class white woman’s place was in the home; and her primary job was to provide a safe haven for the breadwinning husband after he returns from working in the masculine (public) city, and to raise children in order to sustain the workforce” (England, 1993: 24-43).

1966: 57) [Fig. 7], is a clear articulation of a South African ideal dominated by whiteness. This ideal was a result of the Apartheid regime which, according to cultural anthropologist J.T. Sunier (Sunier and Abbink, 2015: 8), “strived to establish the Calvinistic stance that whites were predestined rulers in South Africa and that all whites should be unified in their wealth and elevated status in society.” The *Garden and Home* advertisements I came across, also included the domesticated housewife tending to her children [Fig. 8] or the “stay at home” mother lying by the pool, assertions of the gender positions of the time<sup>5</sup> in which women, although very privileged, were limited by the physical design of suburbia that was originally built and planned to facilitate the domesticated housewife within the nuclear family (Micklow, 2014: 4).

Using lifestyle advertisements in the magazines as well as images from my photo shoot as reference points for small paper works and larger scale paintings, I attempt to adjust the image of suburban spaces in the South African narrative to create

discomforting scenes. In other words, I attempt to respond to race and gender analyst Richard Dyer’s (1997) call in his book entitled *White* to “make whiteness strange” through engaging with the spaces in which most white, upper-middle class people feel comfortable. For to say that one is concerned with race “has come to mean that one is concerned in any racial imagery other than that of white people” (Dyer, 1997: 1). Dyer (1997: 1) claims that his “work is about the racial imagery of white people. [That he is not working] merely to fill a gap in the analytic literature, but because there is something at stake in looking at, or continuing to ignore, white racial imagery.” As Dyer notes (1997: 3), to be a white person is to occupy a social category that assumes being white is to just be a person, not of a race but rather of the human race. It is important to note that while theoretical discourse on the subject of whiteness by those such as Dyer, has been ongoing for at least twenty years<sup>6</sup>, it is only fairly recently that theoretical discourse regarding whiteness, privilege and racial identity in South Africa has intensified<sup>7</sup>. So while Dyer’s statements are valuable to



Fig. 9. *Kustom-Kitchen*. Oil on canvas.



consider whiteness universally, it is important to note that my project is located within the specific context of the racial segregation of Apartheid and the contemporary ideologies towards race that were informed by this history.

Not only is my project located in a white, South African, upper-middle class context, but it also is positioned from a female point of view. I feel that it is important to address gender in my practice as I am female, most of the figures included in my works are female, and females have played a significant role in suburbia. When the suburbs were first constructed in Europe, for example, white women held the home. Therefore, suburban homes were largely occupied by women and children during the day, while men, the bread winners, went to the city to do the 'public' work. More specifically, Dyer (1997: 129) notes that there are special anxieties surrounding the whiteness of white women in the suburban home; because they are the physical bearers of children, and because they are held primarily responsible for their initial upbringing, women

are the essential means by which the group, or the race, is in every sense reproduced.

However, in terms of 1960s South Africa, this distinction is slightly different than the European context Dyer writes about and is perhaps more akin to America, where white women often had live-in domestic servants of colour and, although they certainly influenced and taught their white children, they did not have to 'bring up their children' on their own or do all the domestic labour. This enabled them to have more leisure time. Nevertheless, this does not suggest that these women were particularly happy. In *Women of American Suburbia through Cinematic Reflection*, cultural analyst Kateřina Martináková (2012) states that being the perfect housewife left many women feeling lonely, isolated and depressed, for they were trapped within the cage of their very homes whilst their husbands ventured outside of the sphere of suburbia into the bustling, male-dominated city for work. Women were typically left without a car and a husband for most of the week (Martináková, 2012: 4-5). Psychologist Betty Friedan (1976

cited in Martináková, 2012: 4) famously writes in *The Feminine Mystique* that the issue at hand is a “problem that has no name.” Drawing on Friedan, Martináková (2012:4) notes that in the 1960s, few housewives spoke about their feelings to one another or to their husbands for they felt that they had no rights to feel dissatisfied.

The ‘white housewife’ and ‘domestic servants of colour’ are certainly not characters of the past and one could perhaps consider whether contemporary South African suburbia as a whole is also in fact an anachronism in its own right, arising from a set of outdated ideals of world in white terms. It is this question which my project considers for, as previously mentioned, I do not paint scenes that are simply limited to the ‘60s, ‘70s or ‘80s but ones that also extend to the current moment. In *Portraits in Miniature: White English-Speaking South African Women in Selected Short Stories* by Nadine Gordimer, political activist Mary West (2010: 77-78) explores the similarities between South Africa of the 1960s and the country in a contemporary sense, or rather, the somewhat stunted progression of suburbia

from Apartheid to more recent times:

White South African suburbia<sup>8</sup> in 2009 is perhaps much the same kind of space as it used to be during the height of apartheid. While black citizens are moving into previously white residential areas, the ethos of such areas remains largely unaffected. Walls are still high, security gates and alarm systems are still mandatory, and black domestic employees present the same problems they always did: although a necessity in maintaining excessively big homes and gardens, ‘they cannot be trusted’, as ‘white speak’ in South Africa would have it.

Furthermore, West focuses more specifically on the changes in the positions of women in suburbia, questioning: “So how is the white liberal English-speaking South African woman adjusting in post-apartheid, post-millennial South Africa? How are Clara Hansen’s and Hattie Telford’s<sup>9</sup> descendants fitting in?” Her reply: “Not so well” (West, 2010: 85). While Apartheid South Africa may be formally dissolved and the 1960s image of the domesticated housewife may be no more – for example many women are breadwinners.



Fig. 3. *Heated pool*. Oil on canvas

Furthermore, we may also be on our way to multiplicity without (white) supremacy but we certainly have not arrived there yet. West (2010: 88) states that the “residue of the attitudes, practices and values of those temporalities continue to ‘colour’ life in white suburbia.”

In my paintings, I attempt to investigate these ‘attitudes, practices and values’ by ‘making strange’ that which is typically seen as normal or acceptable within suburbia. In order to do this I include elements such as fluorescent pink line in *Heated pool* [Fig. 3] which traces the edge of paving in a garden whilst a mother gazes on holding her baby, or an oversized paper doll which towers above the tiny toddler in *Daughter of suburbia* [Fig. 10]. These peculiar elements are an attempt to find an equivalence to Dyer’s observation (1997: 4) that in order to ‘arrive there’ white people need

to see their whiteness, see its peculiarities, its oddness, its particularities, in order to put it in its place and end its dominance.

That is not to say that my project does not acknowledge that suburbia has not had the opportunity to shift its ethos in the present day. For example, in *The Struggle Against Encroachment: Constantia and the Defence of White Privilege in the “New” South Africa*, labour resource analyst John Pape (2002) writes that in post-1994 South Africa, Constantia<sup>10</sup> property owners had the opportunity to negotiate redistribution<sup>11</sup> of land. Although they would lose a portion of their wealth and privilege, they could have still maintained considerable comfort as well as been a part of developing a new democratic South African future. However, this option never gained any momentum and instead a different type of social contract has been

<sup>6</sup>In *White*, Richard Dyer, played an important role in looking beyond the normality of whiteness and advocated for the significance of analysing imagery of white people.

<sup>7</sup>On 9 March 2015, The Rhodes Must Fall protest movement was started by University of Cape Town students. It originally began as an initiative to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University. The campaign for the statue’s removal led to the #FeesMustFall movement which began in October 2015. #FeesMustFall is a reaction to an increase in fees at South African universities. Many students have reacted against black students not being able to afford tertiary education due to their poor socioeconomic background as a result of the Apartheid regime. Protests began at the University of Witwatersrand and quickly extended to the University of Cape Town and other universities across South Africa.

<sup>8</sup>Due to the historical legacy of the Group Areas Act, there are still suburbs that are majority white.

forged, where “old wealth and new wealth have found common ground and the Constantia of the new Millennium remains much like in the waning years of the previous Millennium” (Pape, 2002: 137). Constantia, for example, still consists of land owned by predominantly white residents with plots ranging from 800 to 4000 square meters. It is still “green, green, green” with massive open, cultivated public areas – forests, gardens, wine farms and grassy hillsides (Pape, 2002: 124). Furthermore, the suburb is still ‘protected’ from the frantic city, allowing for no major shopping malls, street lights or stations for transport. The majority of properties still have large walls around them and a domestic quarter is not an option but rather a ‘must-have,’ allowing privileged families to live a carefree existence free of laborious household chores.

In my work, I seek to make the insecurity of the indulged lives of white people in suburbia apparent. I attempt to do this by creating ambiguous forms, unnatural light, dislocating spatial coherence, and dissecting shapes in the compositions. In *Fun and fancy things* [Fig. 2] for example, I reference an earlier

photomontage *Study for Fun and fancy things* [Fig. 11] and paint the figures with no heads. Similarly, in *It happens in the best of homes* [Fig. 12], I reference another photomontage, *Study for It happens in the best of homes* [Fig. 14], and paint a large green lawn so that it juts into a part of a white family’s suburban home. By dislodging them/us I look to literally and metaphorically, undercut the security with which they/we speak and act in the world. Furthermore, in *It happens in the best of homes* I include a red sky and strange artificially pink umbilical cords which curl themselves



Fig. 11. *Study for Fun and fancy things*. Acrylic and magazine cut-out on paper.



Fig. 2. *Fun and fancy things*. Oil on canvas.

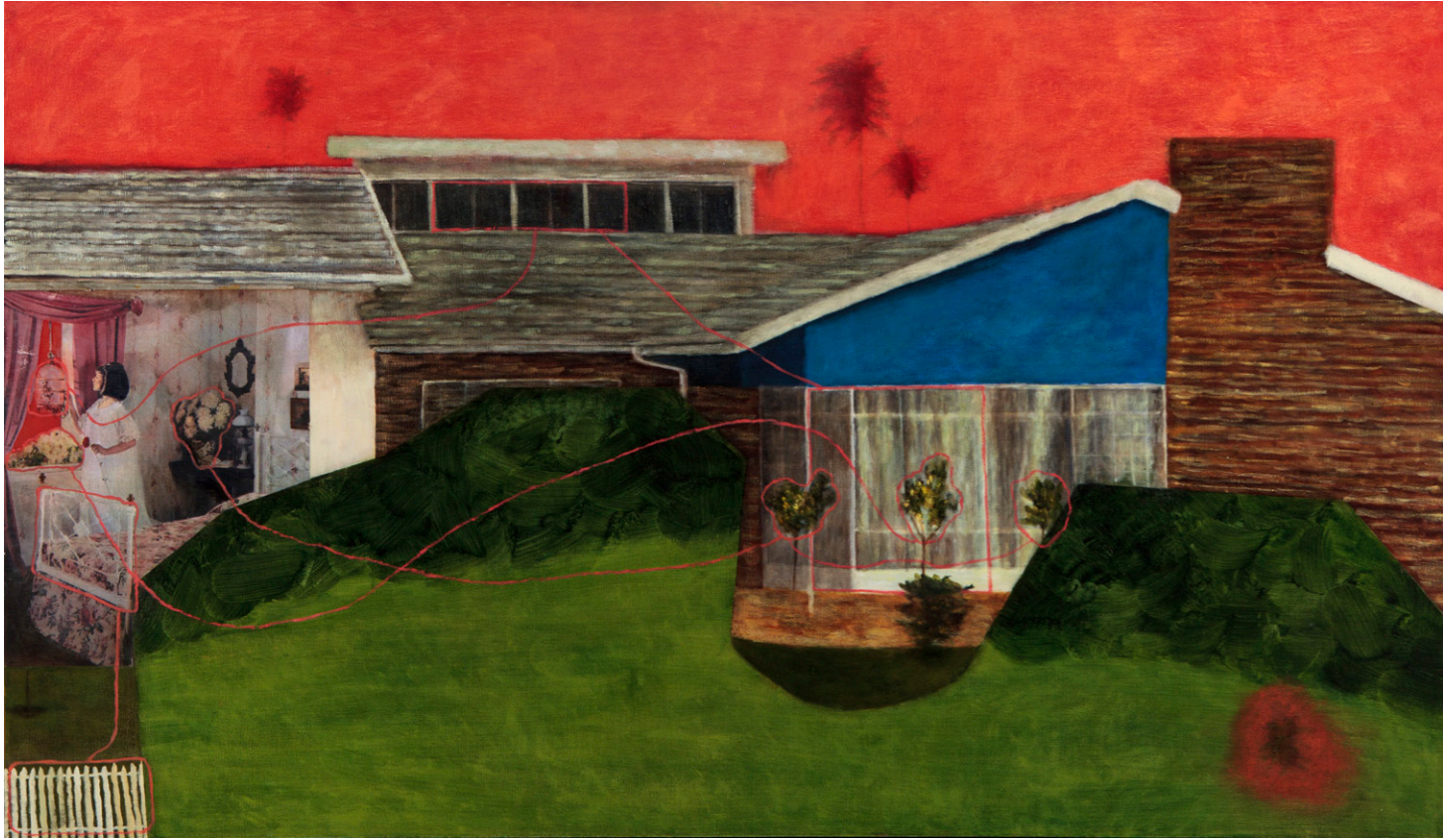




Fig. 13. *Leisure Island*. Oil on canvas.

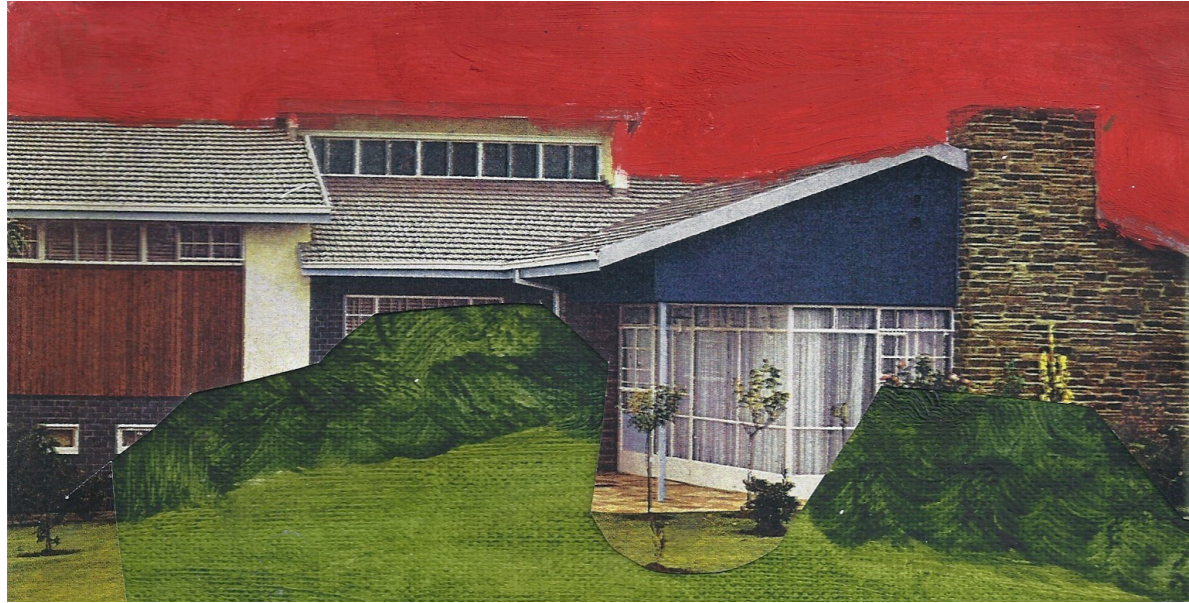


Fig. 14. *Study for It happens in the best of homes*. Oil and magazine cut-out on paper.  
 Fig. 15. *Reserve your place in the sun*. Oil and magazine cut-out on paper.



around plants and other objects in the image, and in *Leisure Island* [Fig. 13] I placed a cut-out of a red wobbling jelly over a little girl's face. I am aware that these strategies do not necessarily make whiteness strange. A red sky may intimate some danger or strange shift in atmosphere, it may prompt the viewer to understand that all is not 'normal' but it does not interrogate whiteness. However, these subtler intimations that things are not right in the world, where previously they were thought to be fine, is where my work's interest occurs.

In almost all these works photomontage is a

central technique. It has proved particularly useful in my attempt to prompt the viewer to understand that all is not so 'normal' in suburbia. Close to collage, photomontage typically describes the process and outcome of constructing a composite image by cutting, tearing, gluing, rearranging and overlapping two or more images into a single new image. Unlike collage<sup>12</sup>, however, photomontage is not comprised of various materials such as fragments of fabric, newspaper clippings and pieces of paper, but rather uses a combination of photographic images joined together (Ades, 1976: 14). Similar to painting, the montage can

be described as an applied medium, or more suitably in the case of my works, a construct. Rather than simply using advertising material and photographs as references or departure points for paintings, photomontage allows me the possibility to construct my own suburban scenes. Some of my photomontage works are pieces in their own right while others form the basis of larger paintings. The visibility of seams in the montage is a crucial element within my compositions (both in the originals and in the paintings) and serves to remind the viewer that the scene in view is not one taken directly from reality, but is rather a constructed composition, much like in Brechtian<sup>13</sup> theatre (Eiland, 2003: 53). When placed together, photographic images create what is known as a 'tertium quid',<sup>14</sup> or third space. This tertium quid, as evident in my works, aims to heighten the impact of the juxtaposition of the cut-outs and creates "a provocative dismembering of reality" wherein the viewer can create a narrative of their own (Ades, 1976: 13).

The 'dismembering of reality' that Ades speaks of highlights both the constructive and deconstructive possibilities of photomontage.

Taking my photographic sources from pages torn from 1960s, 1970s and 1980s magazines such as *South African Garden and Home*, *Fair Lady* and *Your Family*, I construct and deconstruct my own suburban scenes. Construction, selection and reconstruction plays a central role in my artistic process whereby, through my chosen medium, the resultant theatricality generated by the cut-outs, stick-on figures or characters in their suburban backdrop underlines the artificial and constructed nature of white suburbia in South Africa. To me, the figures or objects, although seemingly part of the same story, somehow seem to read as though they have been taken from different acts of the same play and then grouped together. In other words, there is a sense of disconnection as though they were together on the same stage but enacting different parts of the same play simultaneously. In this vein, I am interested in the idea of superimposition, the 'cut and paste' of multiple contexts and parallel worlds. How I choose to arrange my suggested "stage set" directly affects how my work may be read. Thus, the physical constructions inherent in



Fig. 16. *Study for Leisure Island*. Oil and magazine cut-out on paper.  
Fig. 17. *Outdoor light*. Oil and magazine cut-out on paper.

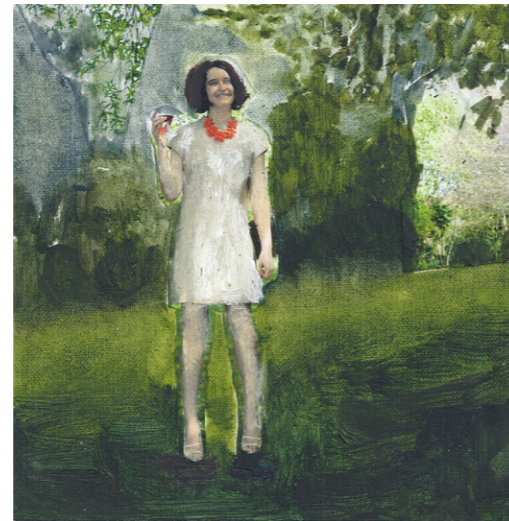
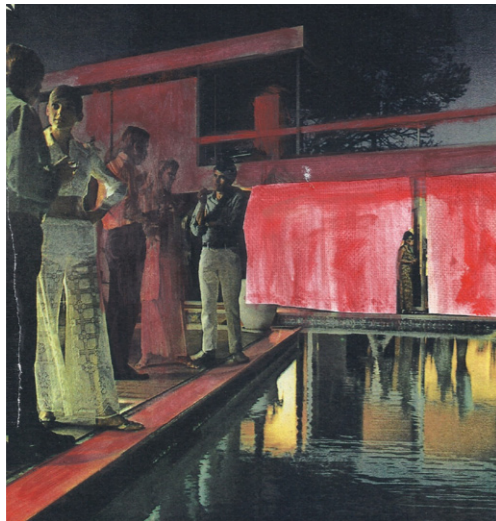
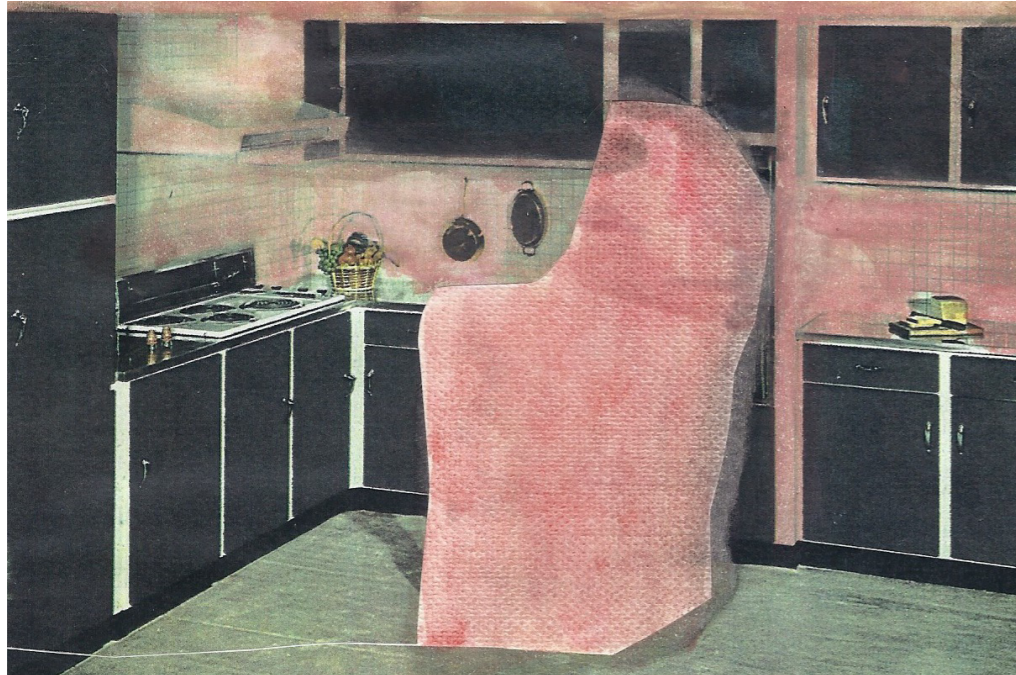


Fig. 18 (top). *Study for Kustom-Kitchen*. Oil and magazine cut-out on paper.  
 Fig. 19 (bottom left). *Study for Pool party*. Oil and magazine cut-out on paper.  
 Fig. 20 (bottom right). *Bishopscourt*. Oil and magazine cut-out on paper.

the montage medium can, in this context, be interpreted as a means to reiterate the ideological constructs imbedded in white South African suburbia.

According to art critic John Berger (2003), the true power of photomontage lies in the way in which it dislocates symbols, or in the case of my project ‘characters,’ ‘cut-outs’ or ‘figures.’ By literally cutting them out from their familiar surroundings, we can see that “the natural continuities within which they normally exist have been broken, and because they have now been arranged to transmit an unexpected message, we are made conscious of the arbitrariness of their continuous normal message” (Berger, 2003: 221). The objects’ or symbols’ so-called disguise, which fits them so well when they are in their expected place, is abruptly revealed for what it is. In this way, photomontage has another power which simple photography customarily lacks: an ability to pierce the surface and allow for

further reading underneath.

Therefore, the way I choose to place together the objects in my work is important. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, if I placed mundane objects or symbols together in their ‘expected place,’ the work would not prompt the viewer to see that all is not so well, but rather all would be perceived as stereotypically ‘normal,’ in white suburbia. Artist Richard Hamilton’s strategy<sup>15</sup> for *Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes so Different, so Appealing?* (1956) [Fig. 21] has been very useful to me in terms of choosing my objects and symbols for my photomontages. In this work, Hamilton constructed a domestic interior filled with contemporary furnishings and objects of popular culture, such as Armour tinned ham, a Playboy burlesque nude and a champion body builder titled ‘Zabo.’ To begin the piece, he constructed a list of qualities and things that he considered to be quintessential in the imagining of the construction of a modern

<sup>15</sup>Clara Hansen is a character in author and political activist Nadine Gordimer’s short story, *Enemies*. In the book, Hansen is portrayed as a white, elderly aristocratic widow who embarks on a train trip from Cape Town to Johannesburg, leaving her ‘faithful’ and long-serving Malay chauffeur and manservant, Alfred, to look after her worldly possessions and home in her six-week absence. Hattie Telford is also a white English female portrayed in Gordimer’s later short story, *Comrades*. In the book, Telford is required to negotiate the real implications of comradeship in a climate opposed to anything but hostility.

home. Hamilton's list included: "Man, Woman, Humanity, History, Food, Newspaper, Cinema, TV, Telephone, Comics (picture information), Words (textual information), Tape recording (aural information), Cars, Domestic appliances, Space" (Stonard, 2007: 613).

This prompted me to compile a similar list for my own body of work that attempts to embody the South African suburban context, where I prescribe categories that point to both gendered and political positions. Given that suburbia is a rather expansive terrain, the list helps me identify more specific elements of suburbia which are of significant importance to my montages: Man ('leader and provider for family'), Woman ('housewife'), suburb ('Constantia' and 'Bishops court'), White ('privilege'), Maintenance ('house and garden'), Private ('fence' and 'gate'), Property ('house

and garden'), Apparel ('dress,' 'paper doll' and 'necklace'), Swimming Pool ('blow up pool,' 'swimming pool toys'), Magazine ('*Garden and Home*,' '*Fair Lady*' and '*Your Family*').

However, creating a list is not the only working preparation method that I employ for my photomontage works. Another process that I draw on is painting into, on top of and behind my photomontages, by which the contrasts between the sharp photographic images against the loose brush marks become interesting. For example, this can be seen in *Bishops court* [Fig. 20], where I glued a photograph of a woman and a small section of foliage onto a loosely painted garden scene. Once I pasted the elements onto the sheet of painted paper, I painted onto the subject's dress. Another example is *Outdoor light* [Fig. 17], in which I painted a dark swimming pool and then stuck a photograph of figures into the

<sup>10</sup>Constantia is a residential area situated on the foot of Table Mountain. It occupies some of the most sought after land in Cape Town and, unlike other wealthy suburban areas, Constantia "has carefully preserved under-industrialised, under-commercialised quaintness." There has been an effort to recreate the environment of an idyllic English manor untouched by crass city life (Pape, 2002: 124).

<sup>11</sup>A redistribution process whereby Constantia property owners would give back a portion of land to the original black and coloured owners. However, this never fully developed. The government did not push it and Constantia residents also did not push it (McDonald & Pape, 2002: 137).

<sup>12</sup>In one specific paper work entitled *Tupperware party* [Fig. 34] I do draw on collage, where the scene includes a photograph partially covered by gauze bandages.

<sup>13</sup>German poet and playwright, Brecht "developed a politicized form of theater he called 'epic drama,' a style that relies on the audience's reflective detachment rather than emotional involvement" (Morris, 2016).



painted environment. I then painted into the two figures outfits, hair and skin.

When I go about this process, however, I do not simply paint into to every photograph. Some photomontages such as *Study for Leisure Island* [Fig. 16] is predominantly constructed of photographic material and, in a sense, I would call this specific photomontage more of a referent to a larger scale painting than an actual artwork in and of itself. Furthermore, in *Study for It happens in the best of homes*, I also felt that painting into the photograph of the



house was not necessary and would lose key details in the intricate photograph. I simply painted a green wash below the dissected house, suggesting a lawn and a stark red strip above hinting at sky. This photomontage was of interest to me but I felt that it would be far more evocative on a larger scale. As a result, the larger scale painting entitled *It happens in the best of homes* has more painterly layers. Therefore, in this case the referent is not the actual work. For a piece to be deemed an actual work, it must be able to effectively communicate my concerns relating to the

Fig. 21 (left). Richard Hamilton (1956). *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing?* Mixed media.  
Fig. 22 (right). Hannah Höch (1930). *Indian Dancer: From an Ethnographic Museum*. Mixed media.

peculiarities and instability of white upper-middle class suburbia in both its scale and materiality.

It is important to note that my process of using photomontage to point to highly gendered and political positions is not new. In a broad historical sense, photomontage was also used to make feminist and political statements, often as a form of protest. It became popular amongst revolutionary artists envisaging a new world, such as German artists Hannah Höch and John Heartfield, during World War I. Höch and Heartfield, who lived through both world wars, strongly opposed war, and Höch likened the physical cut and paste of photomontage to the violence of combat (Ades, 1976: 14-15). Höch's photomontage work also addressed emerging gender politics, exploring the concept of the 'New Woman' in Weimar Germany, presenting complex discussions around gender and identity in a series of both biting and poignant

collages. In the highly political series *From an Ethnographic Museum* (1929) [Fig. 22], Höch combines images of female bodies with traditional masks, objects and layers of block colours, capturing a rather androgynous woman who is ready to take her place as man's equal (Whitechapel Gallery, 2017). Höch also explored racial discrimination through photomontage. For instance, the series mentioned above consists of twenty photomontages that depict images of white female bodies with cut-outs of African male bodies and masks from museum catalogues placed over them, creating photomontages that offer "the visual culture of two vastly separate civilizations as interchangeable – the modish European flapper loses none of her stylishness in immediate proximity to African tribal objects; likewise, the non-Western artefact is able to signify in some fundamental sense as ritual object despite its conflation with patently European features" (Jolles, 2006: 21-22).

<sup>14</sup>According to the Online Etymology Dictionary (2017), 'tertium quid' is "something indeterminate between two other things," literally a "third something." It is used in alchemy to denote an "unidentified element present in a combination of two known ones." The Latin word also figures in phrases *tertium non datur* ("no third possibility exists") and *tertius gaudens* ("a third party that benefits from conflict between the other two").

<sup>15</sup>Richard Hamilton's work entitled *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing?* was produced in just a morning, after Hamilton had presented his wife and her friend with a list of ideas that he wanted the collage to represent and they retrieved images relating to these ideas from magazines such as *Ladies' and Home Journal* (Stonard, 2007: 613).

Although operating from a very different standpoint, one could perhaps say that the political and social commentary inherent in my practice coincides with these artists' use of the medium; whereby I have chosen to include elements of advertising within my montages so as to envisage a new suburban world, one that suggests that all is not so 'stable'. For example, I juxtapose magazine cut-outs of white people, houses, interiors and domestic objects on top, adjacent to and behind my painterly landscapes and gardens so as to construct new, uncomfortable environments. It is uncomfortable because the dislocated, painted into and cut into scenes are far from what one would usually expect when they think of the typical idyllic images associated with suburbia, such as those found in magazine advertisements.

It is also the awareness of the violence innate to Höch and Heartfield's use of the medium that intrigues me. The idea of physically cutting or tearing something out, removing it from its original context and then re-situating it alongside something different is forceful. Earlier in my research for this degree, my

compositions consisted of carefully cut-out figures, characters and objects. In these cut-outs, I attempted to keep the cutting edge closely aligned with the edges of the objects. I then began to consider what would happen if I attempted to intensify the violence. I began to think about what happens when one tries to cut something out. More often than not, one tends to overcut or undercut along the seams. Sometimes one even accidentally slices off parts of the image. Following on from this, I began to think about the violence implied in the act of tearing. What about the fine grain of



Fig. 23. Kendell Geers (1999). From the *Suburbia* series. Cibachrome.

Fig. 24. *Night watch*. Oil and magazine cut-out on paper.





Fig. 25. *Hour of leisure*. Oil on canvas.

the paper if the image was peeled back? What would I be able to reveal or conceal? I began to include these strategies in my compositions and started to notice elements of dis-ease, discomfort and a shattering of the perfectly constructed illusion. These strategies were useful because they allowed me to literally unmask the neat and tidy lives of my suburban subjects and reveal the unknown and unseen abnormalities, instabilities and insecurities which creep within their very fences and walls.

The mode of defense that suburbia puts up – gates, (electric) fences, guard dogs – highlights white fear of criminality (that is always invariably imagined to be black). In many of my photomontage works, I often attempt to look inside these suburban walls. In my photomontage work entitled *Night watch*<sup>16</sup> [Fig. 24], however, I focus on ‘the other side’ of the wall, on what lies beyond. Kendell Geers’s body of work entitled *Suburbia* (1999) [Fig. 23] informed this work. In Geers’s photographic series, the viewer is made aware of the exterior barriers of the suburban home. The viewer is

presented with photographs of walls, razor wire, alarm system warning placards, ‘Please Close the Gate’ signs, electric fences and spikes. Similarly, in *Night watch*, I used numerous photographs of electric fences, alarm system placards and high walls as a starting point for my work. However, I used the photographs as a part of a photomontage where I cut out elements such as an *ADT* guard hut and walls with electric fences. I then placed photographs into a flat dark painted section. In doing this, I attempted to collapse the distance between objects and the sky, giving the work an overall feeling of claustrophobia and spatial disorientation. Furthermore, the inclusion of two cut out toy animals alongside the *ADT* hut hints at the vulnerability of white suburbia where the ‘guard dogs’ are, in this case, rather useless.

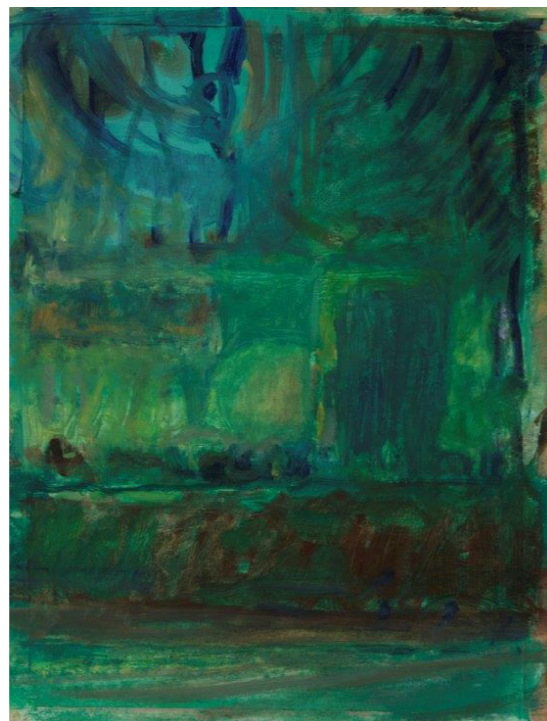
My bigger paintings draw from the photomontages, sometimes directly, and other times reference the process. I felt that through the process of painting and working on a much larger scale, I would be able to further develop

<sup>16</sup>The title of this work references Rembrandt van Rijn’s famous painting entitled *The Night Watch* (1642). The dark night scene is dominated by two key figures which appear to be on guard and about to lead a protest or march. Rembrandt compresses a total of 34 characters into the painting giving the work overall feeling of claustrophobia.

<sup>17</sup>Scumbling is a dry-brush painting method. A brush applied with firm paint is softly applied across the surface of the canvas so that the top weave of the canvas catches the paint (Palte, 2011: 73).

some of these scenes and the sense of unease and anxiety they emit. I project my personal experiences of South African suburbia onto anonymous figures representing ‘whiteness’ in an attempt to consider how painting might unfix these ideal scenes, revealing the uncertainties and peculiarities of the subjects. While the paintings retain echoes of the original photomontage material, the original source image is disrupted by erasures created by scrubbing, scumbling<sup>17</sup> and placing cut-outs over the larger background image that cites the domestic suburban space.

In large paintings *Leisure Island* and *Hour of leisure* [Fig. 25], I initially did not only reference the photomontage process but actually stuck the physical cut-outs onto the canvas. In both instances, I pasted paper cut-outs of red jellies onto the large scale paintings. However, what I soon realised was that the big paintings did not need the stuck-ons. The stuck-ons did not read well against the oil-painted canvases as they appeared tacky against the slowly worked layers of



scumbled paint. They work on a smaller scale as the paper pieces are painted in a matter of minutes and therefore there is an interesting juxtaposition between the sharpness of the photograph and the loose, single layer of paint. Therefore, I decided to tear off all the stuck-on images in the bigger paintings and rather looked to reference the visual of the

photomontage by how I painted the red jelly-like objects. This was a better decision as the painted red jellies appear to be far more vibrant. What became an unexpected and conceptually useful occurrence in this process was that in painting the jellies I could not achieve the same precision of the photographs. The jellies looked more lopsided and wobbly, a ‘wobbliness’ that further communicated my concerns relating to instability of white suburbia.

South African painter, Josie Grindrod’s<sup>18</sup> exhibition *Last Light* (2017) also investigates a suburban environment from her own white, privileged perspective, problematising and disassembling the security of the suburban garden space. The artist takes a single family photograph entitled *Fête Champêtre: The Referent* (2007)<sup>19</sup>, in which seven children play on a manicured lawn as the basis for her body of work. The snapshot has a “choreographed quality, the children’s play made stagey by the closing shutter” (Stielau, 2016). Grindrod repeatedly returns to this image, making

paintings that further unmask the staged elements embedded in the photograph. In *My Mother’s Garden II* (2016) [Fig. 26], for example, Grindrod paints a groomed garden scene with a neatly trimmed hedge and what appears to be a rectangular shaped topiary, hinting at a garden that is labour intensive and controlled. Grindrod’s artificial, viridian green palette dismembers the image further, creating a scene that is far from the sentimental ‘mother’s garden’ alluded to in the title but rather that of a garden that is sinister and uninviting. The perspective is also flattened, where Grindrod has strategically used the same greens in the foreground and the background, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere. Art critic, Anna Stielau (2016) writes on Grindrod’s exhibition that “it isn’t only the moment that’s dissected, though – it’s the landscape, which splinters as if under enormous pressure. Still recognisable but alien, the space refuses untroubled contemplation.”

The nature of the ‘trouble’ Grindrod refers to is seen within the context of a pre- and post-

Fig. 26. Josie Grindrod (2016). *My Mother’s Garden II*. Oil on paper.

<sup>18</sup>Josie Grindrod is a South African artist who recently had an exhibition at the Irma Stern Gallery entitled *Last Light*. The exhibition presents a collection of nearly 100 paintings and prints which, like the poem *Last Light*, “read as vivid fragments strung together by an irregular meter” (Stielau, 2016). These landscapes typically reference the large, luscious gardens of her previous family home in KwaZulu Natal. Grindrod’s recollection of the landscape, however, has a sharper edge suggesting that not all land is hospitable (Stielau, 2016).

Apartheid South African landscape, where in a country marked by inequality “imaged land has its own affective charge” (Stielau, 2016). Being conscious of one’s privilege and intimate relationship to land “when that land is, in so many respects, a figment of the white South African imagination,” is not an easy task (Stielau, 2016). However, in Grindrod’s body of work, it is evident that the artist is conscious of her relationship to the South African garden scape as a white woman. Grindrod reflects this through various painterly strategies in *Her Father’s Land*, *Willowstream Park*, *KZN I-III* (2011-2016). The work consists of three monotypes in which a hillside scene is gradually disrupted from one work to the next by a storm lurking nearby, perhaps hinting at the failed attempt by the white population to control the land. In the last frame, the perspective is flattened and the garden becomes murky and dark, creating an overwhelmingly claustrophobic scene suggesting an atmosphere that is far from what one would typically associate with the hillsides of Grindrod’s white father’s land (Stielau, 2016).

I found Grindrod’s reflection on the nature of the ‘trouble’ and the garden scape useful in my own production of paintings in that I am aware that the suburban scenes I paint are from my own imaginings of growing up in a privileged, ‘protected’ space. As a child, I had a large garden that was continually manicured, a big swimming pool and plenty of room to have my birthday parties on an expansive lawn. I certainly cannot deny that these memories are tinted with nostalgia. However, what my project attempts to explore is similar to Grindrod’s concerns: how does one place these imaginings within the context of a racially discriminative past where privileged childhood memories were to the detriment of people of colour? Akin to Grindrod, my work also begs the very hard question of how to depict a familiar relationship to the suburban scape when that land is merely a fantasy of my white South African imagination. In my research, I certainly do not attempt to have the answers but rather through the painterly strategies discussed here, seek to explore the questions. Similar to Grindrod’s ‘groomed garden scene’ that appears to be ‘labour intensive and



Fig. 27. *Pool party*. Oil on canvas.



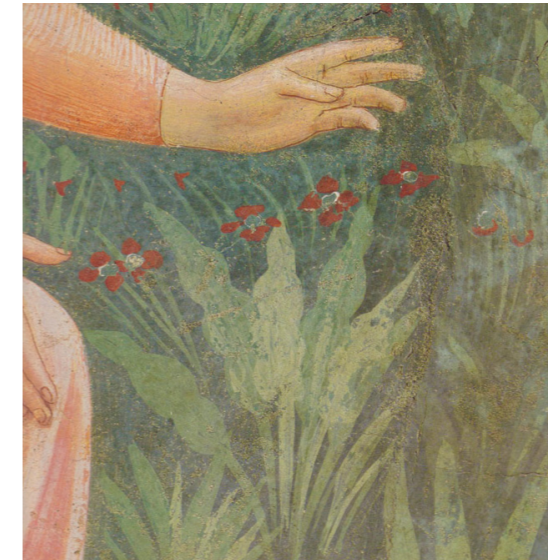
controlled' in *My Mother's Garden II* (2016), I also refer to my memory of my garden having a manicured lawn. Furthermore, many of the photographs from lifestyle magazines as well as in my photoshoot that I reference in my paintings also have neatly trimmed hedges, crystal clean swimming pools and interiors with polished, shiny floors. These tidy gardens and homes all allude to the relationship

between leisure and alienated labour<sup>20</sup>, As Karl Marx (1994: 393) claims in *Alienated Labour*:

It is worth questioning what happens to the industrial worker? He spends his best energy for seven or eight hours a day in producing 'something.' He needs his work in order to make a living, but his role is essentially a passive one. He fulfils a small isolated function in a complicated and highly organized process of production, and is never confronted with 'his' product as a whole, at least not as a producer, but only as a consumer, provided he has the money to buy 'his' product in store.

The alienation of labour in the domestic landscape of South Africa is an important point of consideration in my visual exploration of segregation, white privilege and privacy. In my painting, labour is not shown directly in the image but rather through the absence of the people who perform it, in this case the black working class. The visual cues of absence may raise questions, similar to those of Karl Marx's in the above text; who ironed the subject's clothes? Who mowed the lawn? Who groomed the hedges? Who made the jelly? The

Fig. 28. Fra Angelico (1438 -1450). *Noli me Tangere*. Frescoe.



'masked' labour in the tidy homes of white suburbia is apparent in my body of work by the very omission of the people who labour, an embedded violence evoked by very neat, sharp edges of cut-out forms. This sharp edge can be seen in *Leisure Island, Pool party* [Fig. 27] and *It happens in the best of homes*, where I have used masking tape during my painting process to ensure that there is a more tightly controlled element outlining the interior or house which is very different in colour, tone and mark from the exterior, the space beyond the 'protected' interior walls in the paintings. Another sharp

edge can be seen in *Heated pool* where I have used masking tape to outline the swimming pool as well as the paving around it. In doing this, I attempt to emphasize the absent labour that was imperative to maintaining the clean, blue pool.

In my paintings, I also attempt to disrupt the neatness of suburbia with visual forms or splotches that are in direct contrast to the neat cut-out edges within my work. In particular, I use a red 'splotch' to allude to dis-ease. Similar disruptive marks can be found in Fra Angelico's frescoes of the Florentine monastery of San Marco (c. 1485-50). French philosopher and art historian, Georges Didi-Huberman's (1995: 20) takes note of these ambiguous red interruptions, specifically in Fra Angelico's *Noli me Tangere* [Fig. 28]. They appear over plants in the background scenery and over Christ's body, suggesting both flowers and the stigmata as they pass over the meadow and onto Christ's hands and feet. South African artist Lauren Palte<sup>21</sup> (2011: 57) comments on these same markings in her thesis entitled *A Wounded Surface: Dissolving the Human Form*, noting

Fig. 28. Fra Angelico (1438 -1450). *Noli me Tangere* (detail). Frescoe.

that while the material form of the red patches is unchanging, “their specific placement within the painting opens them up to ambiguous readings as both malevolent and benevolent at the same time.”

Similar to Fra Angelico’s frescoes, the red ambiguous shapes in *Fun and fancy things*, *It happens in the best of homes*, *Hour of leisure* and *Leisure Island*, interrupt the formal organisation of the paintings. They mutate into constantly shifting shapes that are dotted across the three canvases. The palm tree from *It happens in the best of homes* appears to drop down and float onto the lawn of the same painting, which then gives the impression that it has mutated across onto *Fun and fancy things* where the shape is suggested as many hovering, scumbled, red balls of light. The mutating balls appear in another form in other works such as *Leisure Island*, in which

they become a big luminous jelly, which then again appears to mutate and spread across into five little purple jellies in *Hour of leisure*. These faltering layers of red paint disturb the apparent stability of the background source material. Thus, the painting suggests a more uncertain experience than the secure and idyllic life inscribed in the referent.

I attempt to make connections between these ambiguous shapes and other objects in my paintings through the incorporation of a pink ‘lasso.’ In *Lady of leisure* and *It happens in the best of homes*, objects are enclosed or trapped by a pink outline that intersects, encircles and connects objects: flowers, a birdcage, a picket fence and windows. In *It happens in the best of homes*, this mapping began with wanting to integrate the inside, namely the ‘cut-out’ interior of the home, with the exterior of the ‘protected’ walls of the house. Using the lasso,

<sup>19</sup>The work’s title references an eighteenth century European genre of painting taking the form of a garden party. Despite the natural surroundings, the figures of *fête champêtre* scenes have “a lingering air of artificiality about them; they’re stiff and formal to the point of silliness” (Stielau, 2016).

<sup>20</sup>According to Karl Marx (1994: 387-388), alienated labour can be described thusly: “the worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent [...]. This fact simply means that the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer [...]. Furthermore, “all these consequences are contained in this characteristic, that the worker is related to the product of his labour as to an alien object. For it is clear that, according to this premise, the more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, and the less they belong to him.”

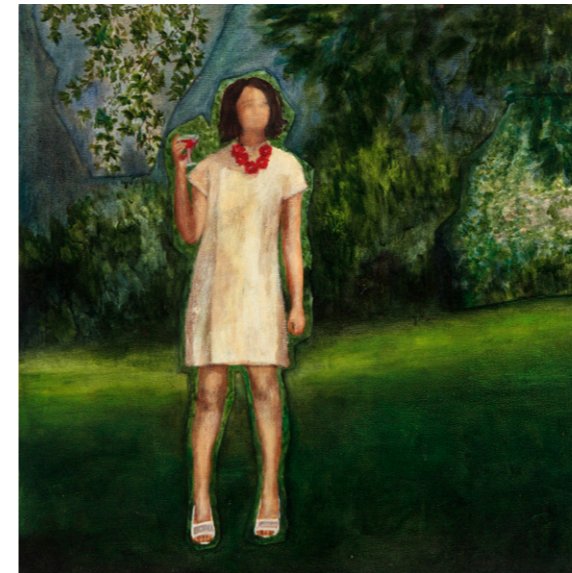
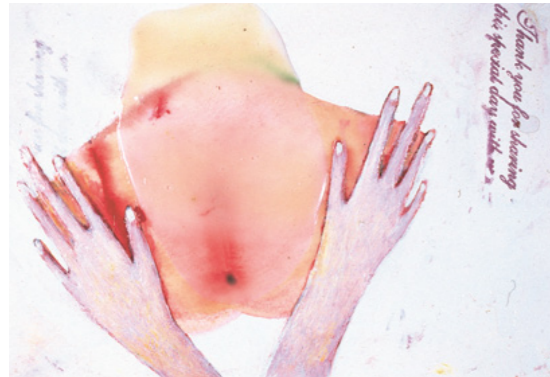


Fig. 1. *Lady of leisure*. Oil on canvas



I connected the vase of yellow flowers in the bedroom to the little blobs of yellow paint signifying blossoms in the garden. I continued the process to connect other objects such as the birdcage to the window and a picket fence to a bed. The lasso, however, does not merely connect up forms. It has various associations: a noose, imprisonment, death, estrangement. Each form in its turn suggests entrapment of some kind. The play between the object and the lasso is pushed further in *Lady of leisure*, in which the circular form hovers above the blue blow up pool, encircling the ground. Here, the form is ambiguous, suggesting an escape or a loophole as well as a trap waiting to contain and hold.

Although using a very different strategy, the 'hovering form' is also incorporated into *Kustom-Kitchen* [Fig. 9], derived from a montage incorporating a photograph found in *South African Garden and Home* (1970: 31) [Fig. 8]. In this montage, *Study for Kustom-Kitchen* [Fig. 18], I cut the mother and child out of the kitchen scene in the original magazine photograph. In their place, I painted a fluorescent pink wash. Seeing this as a process piece and not a finished work in its own right, I felt that the vacant space in the kitchen needed to be developed further and on a larger scale in order to communicate my artistic concerns relating to discomfort and dis-ease within the domestic home. In the subsequent painting, the vacant space appears to be less of a cut-out shape and more of a hovering object which I continually scrubbed into and glazed fluorescent pinky washes over the white area to give it a glowing quality. Unlike the stark cut-out lines in the referent, the painting has far more of a presence because of this hovering shape, an aura of the figures and objects that once were there.

Fig. 29. Penny Siopis (2002). *The Shame Series* (detail). Mixed media on paper.

Associate Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Witwatersrand, Sarah Nuttall (2011), offers a pertinent observation on painted whites and residues of scrubbed canvas in Penny Siopis's *The Shame series* [Fig. 29], which the artist worked on and returned to across the years from 2002 to 2007. In these works, the white either takes the form of the original primed canvas or is made by applying white paint to the canvas. Siopis claims that "white can be read as negative ground positively blanked out, as if information has been covered over" (Nuttall, 2011:291). This idea of 'whiting out' an area



Fig. 30. John Brosio (2012). *Queen of suburbia*. Oil on canvas.

as an act of concealing is pertinent to my consideration of obscuring the photographs of suburbia that I take as my sources. Where in small works such as *Golden hour* [Fig. 35] or *Living room* [Fig. 36] I have scratched into and torn away at the photographs revealing the white paper underneath. These 'white sections' create rather ambiguous scenes which prompt the viewer to create narratives of their own.

In addition to white, Siopis, often uses pinks and hot reds that, without being too reductive, have been argued to hint towards anxiety and questions of gender (Nuttall, 2011: 289). Similarly, while not intentionally or overtly associated with sentimental or stereotypically 'feminine' qualities characteristically associated with the colour, the pinks that I use in my work offer an uneasy, slightly anxious sentiment. For example, in *Kustom-Kitchen* inventions of colour disregard the original, muted tones in the referent. By instead engaging a palette of fluorescent, occasionally murky pinks, a rather uncomfortable space is evoked. The little cheese board in the right of the painting offers the viewer a short-lived

sense of comfort, but paired alongside layers of luminescent pink paint and a scrubbed looming form, becomes hard to associate with a cosy, suburban kitchen. In some cases, such as in *Hour of leisure*, pink turns to deep red, and the visceral resonances evoked by the colour of the paint suggest that all is not well in suburbia.

Art critic Steven Parker's (2012) pertinent observation of 'our'<sup>22</sup> failing inability to control this overly prescribed and mythological suburban paradise has shed light on my choice to use uneasy hot pinks, ambiguous shapes and scrubbed surfaces. Colour and shapes are, however, not the only contributors to creating an anxious scape. In John Brosio's *Queen of Suburbia* [Fig. 30], composition is key. Parker (2012) describes a woman smiling, completely unaware of what is going on in the suburban setting around her. The title *Queen of Suburbia* signifies that the woman rules her domain and, judging by her expression, she seems rather happy about it. However, Parker goes on to claim that the word 'queen' in the title is used ironically for, although there is the implication

that a queen has power, the looming tornado in the background of the image is certainly something that she has no power over. The significance of Parker's interpretation of the woman in suburbia as powerless is important in relation to my own work where through the incorporation for example of the cut-out jellies in *Leisure Island* or *Hour of leisure* and the large paper doll in *Daughter of suburbia*, I suggest that the white subjects of suburbia are failing in their attempts to 'control' the tidy world in which they live.

As my project is situated in Cape Town, Parker's interpretation of 'our' failure to dominate this 'mythological suburban paradise' is particularly pertinent in the context of the currently drought-ridden city especially with regards to the swimming pool, a 'must have' for any affluent suburban garden. As geologist Mercedes Vidal (2011: 68-69) states:

The pool represents a form of domination of water for human use, since it represents the artificial creation of determined conditions impossible to achieve in open



Fig. 31 (top left). David Hockney (1964). *Picture of a Hollywood Swimming Pool*. Acrylic on canvas.  
 Fig. 32 (top right). David Hockney (1966). *Portrait of Nick Wilder*. Acrylic on canvas.  
 Fig. 33 (below). David Hockney (1972). *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)*. Acrylic on canvas.

water. Associated with the pool, we find the attributes of pleasure, status, leisure and health that have transformed these artefacts into an object of desire and a cultural icon of the western world.

Western Cape dams are at an all-time low, with stage 4 water restrictions currently coming into place in June 2017. This means that suburban residents no longer have 'control' over the appearance of their swimming pools and gardens. They are not allowed to fill them up or water them respectively. This has angered many suburban residents who seem to be more concerned with keeping their gardens neat than with the greater environmental and socioeconomic disaster that the city attempts to mitigate through severe water restrictions. This begs the question of how many affluent suburbs have managed to get away with lush, over-watered lawns, 'green, green, green' gardens and full swimming pools when, for many months prior to stage 4 water restrictions, the city has been experiencing the worst drought in 30 years? Questions of severe inequality and abuse of power arise

when suburban residents are allowed to use water for leisure and status while, for example, many people in the Cape Flats and lower income areas are becoming ill because they do not have adequate access to drinking water.

This constitutes a pressing current example of how Constantia, like other upper-middle class suburbs, has managed to carefully preserve its status, its elevated position of power that sees it as conveniently disconnected from and largely disinterested in the greater socioeconomic environment in which it exists. Thus in my project, I employ various painting strategies in my attempt to address the social privilege of having a swimming pool in suburban Cape Town.

First and foremost, the act of painting water in a swimming pool is literally complexity in itself. Art critic Matthew Sperling (2017), in his writings on David Hockney's swimming pool paintings, makes note of Hockney's interest in the technical challenge of painting water itself. Sperling (2017) quotes Hockney, who states: "In the swimming pool pictures,

I had become interested in the more general problem of painting the water, finding a way to do it. It is an interesting formal problem; it is a formal problem to represent water, to describe water, because it can be anything. It can be any colour and it has no set visual description." Hockney found a remarkable means of representing water in his pool pictures. Sometimes the play of light on the surface is represented through what Sperling (2017) calls "Dubuffet-like patches of variegated colour that resemble jigsaw pieces or a camouflage pattern, in works such as *Picture of a Hollywood Swimming Pool* (1964) [Fig. 31] or *Portrait of Nick Wilder* (1966). [Fig. 32]" In other instances it is signified by squiggly white lines wiggling across the surface, as in *Sunbather* (1996). Other times it is suggested by abstract forms of blue paint as in, *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* (1972) [Fig. 33], a painting set in the landscape of southern France, with the painter Peter Schlesinger dressed in a red suit standing at the edge of the pool looking down.

This specific painting informed my own

composition of *Heated pool* that includes a female subject holding a baby and a hot pink line around the swimming pool that sits in the foreground. I initially struggled with the challenge of depicting the water in the pool. I continually painted over and over the canvas, never seeing a result with which I was satisfied. This became rather interesting from a conceptual point view, where the challenge of depicting and containing water in this work related to the idea of the pool as a symbol of the disconnection of the suburbs from the wider social context, especially within the context of the drought in Cape Town. Then, I considered Hockney's method of finding an equivalent to water and instead rendered movement of light on the water of the pool in more abstract forms using two shades of blue paint. On the left-hand side of the composition, a mother, holding her baby, is standing poolside. In the middle distance and in the background, wild nature and green colours are dominant. While I reference Hockney's pool works on one level because they provided me with a solution for painting water I also consider his work a useful stylistic

<sup>21</sup>Lauren Palte is a South African painter who graduated with an MFA from the University of Cape Town in 2011. Although her thesis *A Wounded Surface: Dissolving The Human Form* focuses on a very different subject matter to that of mine, it has been useful to me in reflecting on my painting and process of making.

<sup>22</sup>I read Parker's 'our' in my case as a reference to white South Africans living in suburbia.

<sup>23</sup>This perception that all is normal in suburbia is commonly held by white people living within its very sphere.

reference as his subjects embody another privileged space which bears some useful parallels to my concerns. While Hockney's subjects however seem to occupy a sunny and untroubled world the background in my work is gloomier than in Hockney's, as if it is foggy. A scumbled, horizontal line of hot pink divides the canvas into two parts; the bottom part comprises of geometric shapes whereas the upper part is painted with long, horizontal brushstrokes of saturated green, suggesting a wild, uncontained scape. These 'uncontained' parts of the image create a useful interplay of the more contained parts of the painting such as the woman's detailed wedge shoes and the carefully painted hem line of her yellow dress. This juxtaposition evokes the instability of both the image and the space. Furthermore, the visual elements of the work such as the abstracted or geometric marks, the saturation of colour and the overall composition combine to further establish the sense of dis-ease that exists in the world of suburbia which is commonly perceived<sup>23</sup> to be orderly and comfortable.

*Leisure Island* and *It happens in the best of*

*homes* are also two paintings in which 'wild nature' and 'green colours' are dominant. In *It happens in the best of homes*, the formal organisation of the suburban home is dissected by long horizontal brushstrokes of saturated green, suggesting a manicured lawn surrounded by big, loose forms of paint indicating shrubbery. *Leisure Island* also began with a dissection of the suburban space. The cosy, enclosed interior lingers amidst the unruly outdoor scape, where large strokes of deep grey-green plummet across the canvas hinting at a mountainous wilderness; a garden unkempt and hostile to the subjects at play. Much like a small child not wanting to swim to the deep end of a swimming pool for not knowing what lingers beneath or being too scared to fall asleep in the dark for fear of what might 'jump out', the painted green sections in *Leisure Island* also represent a fear. A fear which is seen within the context of South African suburbia where whites fear being attacked by people who they assume to be black. The title of the body of work as a whole, *Leisure Island*, references this very fear; white people of suburbia isolate

themselves, living claustrophobic, indulgent lives so as to 'protect' themselves from the very sociopolitical instability that they have contributed to creating.



Fig. 34. *Tupperware party*. Oil, magazine cut-out and gauze on paper.

## Conclusion

In this project I have attempted to go beyond the surface of the tidy world of South African suburbia and reveal some of the discomfort of its construction through the act of painting. The focus of my project tends to be understated as, through subtle indications, I aim to hint that life in contemporary South African suburbia is not as stable or contained as imagined in historical understandings of suburbia.

In my project, I have attempted to hold my argument from both sides. I allude to the black working class who supports this idyllic suburban world by their labour, such as trimming hedges, maintaining swimming pools, cleaning the house and looking after white children. I then work against the background of this and attempt to reveal the vulnerability of white suburbia. *Leisure Island* connotes this isolation that whites have constructed in their own right. The title also alludes to an environment where there is 'free time' to carry on with one's preferred pastimes. However, as discussed in the essay, leisure

is not 'free' but is a privilege that is to the detriment of others.

The process of photomontage has allowed me to construct my own domestic scenes that disrupt and destabilise the comfortable domestic spaces of the referent images through peculiar details and structuring. Through this project, I considered my shifting and unresolved experiences of self, and an often uneasy relationship to the images portrayed. The visual cues of disruption of unquestioned comfort that I utilised in my paintings include mutated shapes, dissected landscapes, sharp cut-out edges and a combination of colours that establish a sense of dis-ease. These curious visual signals in my work attempt to reveal anxiety and a shifting ground around the physical and conceptual significance of white suburbia in a contemporary South African context.



Fig. 35. *Golden hour*. Oil and magazine cut-out on paper.



Fig. 36. *Living room*. Oil and magazine cut-out on paper.

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