

Exhibits provide new viewpoints on the '50s

By Cate McQuaid,
Globe Correspondent

In the 1950s, trends in home design were not unlike a certain painful stage of adolescence: Everybody tried to fit in. In Levittown, N.Y., 17,000 cookie-cutter ranch houses went up. Exquisitely designed furniture was mass-produced so as to be affordable to all. The intent may have been to level distinctions within the middle class (although everyone who originally settled in Levittown was a white Christian), rising to the great American proposition that all men are created equal.

New York artist Barbara Gallucci, in two Boston-area exhibitions, examines and pokes holes in the mid-century, middle-American utopia, and looks at where it has propelled us today.

Her show at the Green Street Gallery, featuring sculptures, photographs, and a video installation, sharply deflates the American ideal of her youth. Gallucci, born in 1953, has crafted copies of Le Corbusier's icons of modern furniture, Le Petit Confort chair and sofa, but rather than using leather-clad cushions and chrome, the artist builds her furniture from plywood and aluminum, at a scale 50 percent larger than ordinary.

Today, those original Le Corbusier designs are museum pieces, and you can still buy the machine-made replicas. Gallucci's handmade sculptures might be the country cousins of those you'd



CHICAGO RANCH HOUSE 2003

find in a furniture store: gawky, oversized and rough around the edges. Or they're like a teenager who doesn't quite fit in; when the pressure to conform is so great, almost everyone feels like a misfit. Climb up to sit on the sofa, and you'll feel like you're 5 years old, with your feet sticking out over the seat.

Her video installation, "Do-It-Yourself," also distorts the viewer's perception into that of a child by placing us low to the ground: She fastened a camera to the bottom of a cart at Home Depot. As we awkwardly and squeakily navigate the concrete floors of the do-it-yourself mecca, we hear a soundtrack from Arthur Miller's 1950 play "Death of a Salesman."

In the first, salesman Willie Loman and his wife Linda exuberantly proclaim a new day, with big band music bolstering their wild enthusiasm. In the second,

Willie's son Biff challenges Willie's empty idealism. "I am not a dime a dozen," Willie hollers. "I am Willie Loman and you are Biff Loman!" Biff replies, "I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that?"

Postwar utopianism eventually led to social and sexual revolution. Gallucci captures how painful it must have felt in the 1950s to be an individual. Bringing us into Home Depot, she ties her ideas to the present, when anyone can pick up a hammer and customize the home.

In photos at Green Street and at GalleryKayafas, the artist shows how residents have imprinted their own dreams and visions on the cookie-cutter ranch houses put up 50 years ago. At Green Street, she returns to the Chicago suburbs where she grew up and photographs head-on the houses in her old neighborhood, still close to identical but adorned with "God Bless America" signs. In one, the carport has been built out into another room, and the SUV sits in the driveway (it looks too tall for the carport, anyway).

"Ranch '50," the images at GalleryKayafas, take us directly to Levittown, that icon of subdivisions. Gallucci photographed the neighborhood swimming pools, still crystal clear and eerily similar. The Levittown houses all featured a hole in the wall beneath the interior staircase, where a television could go. She takes that as her focal point, showing how different homeowners have built into or covered up that hole.

As in the industrial photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher, we see the essential form repeated, but dressed up or altered in each image. "Josephine and John" and "Nancy and Arthur" have torn down the wood paneling and painted the walls white. Nancy and Josephine, it turns out, are sisters;

Nancy may be more well-to-do, because she's knocked down walls, extended the house and filled it with light. "Marilyn" keeps an antique cabinet in front of the old TV hole. "Vivian and Bill" have made the hole larger and put in their own television, as well as an assortment of seashells.

The fascinating images in "Ranch '50" embody the last half-century of design, viewed through a prism of the evolving tastes of the residents of Levittown. Gallucci paints a vivid picture of how people make their own mark, especially in the face of conformity.

("Barbara Gallucci: Do-It-Yourself" at the Green Street Gallery, 141 Green St., Jamaica Plain, through March 6; 617-522-0000; www.jameshull.com.)

("Barbara Gallucci: Ranch '50"; at Gallery Kayafas, 450 Harrison Ave., through Feb. 28; 617-482-0411.)

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