

Terrible Beauty
Barbara Gallucci's Levittown

"Ranch '50: Photographs by Barbara Gallucci"
At Gallery Kayafas, 450 Harrison Avenue

BY CHRISTOPHER MILLIS

A few months ago, I was talking to a group of students in one of our local art departments when a question came from an audience member. How did I know what to say in a review? I begin by trying to pay attention to two events, I explained, starting with my own response to a work — just what is it? The next phase involves piecing together how much the artist had to do with making that response. Wrong answer, apparently. So I guess that means you just dis what you don't like, the young scholar interpreted.

In fact, one of the toughest things about responding to somebody's art (professionally) is recognizing how little one's own taste matters, or ought to matter. Personal predilections be damned; what matters is quality. Michelangelo's tomb to the Medici offends me for its bombast and its indelicacy, but I can't look at the Academy Slaves without imagining he's still alive. The drivel of early Mozart casts no shadow on my hearing of *Die Zauberflöte*, and neither do Yeats's mystical poems spoil his lyrical verse for me.

My problem with some wonderful exhibits in Boston these days is that though they earn my respect and even my interest, my heart never skips a beat. And in the one recent instance when my pulse did flutter, looking back, I can't be sure whether to attribute the palpitation to beauty or botox.

At Gallery Kayafas, the measured, geometric, color photos of the antiseptic, hideously appointed, and otherwise painfully banal interiors of people's homes by Barbara Gallucci proved hard to take. Gallucci decided to return,

on the 50th anniversary of its construction, to Levittown, New York, that prototype of suburban sprawl where countless thousands of identical homes on countless thousands of identically sized lots — themselves leveled to the flatness of a landfill and emptied of anything natural or manufactured that might indicate distinction or personality — allowed for the post-WW2 baby boom, whose offspring include the revolutions of the 1960s and the politicians currently vying for the White House.

In terms of urban design, Levittown represents the apotheosis of post-war American conformity, a place where the uniformity of people's abodes combined with their precise proximity to their neighbors to produce Joe McCarthy and *The Twilight Zone*. The chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee and Rod Serling were obsessed, in different ways, by the same phenomenon: the secret evil of the completely familiar.

In Gallucci's photos, the familiar looks secretly evil indeed. A wall, often paneled in flimsy, corrugated wood, stands decorated with Salvation Army bric-a-brac. And it's not just any wall. I learned from Gallucci's artist statement that the wall that's transfixed her was the one designed to hold the built-in Admiral television. Everybody's was the same. At the base of each wall, a nondescript, acrylic, wall-to-wall carpet — the industrial-strength kind, smooth as a soldier's buzz cut — fits like a Tupperware lid over floors

undoubtedly made of poured concrete. Even the personal artifacts that line the walls and the mantels, the family photos, the greeting cards signed "Love, Mom and Dad," read as if they'd come off an assembly line. These are barracks, not people's homes.



AZAELA ROAD: in Barbara Gallucci's Levittown photos the pool invites you in even as the surroundings make you want to run away.

Yet they are people's homes, and they have been for half a century. Gallucci the artist is really a semiotician; she's a reader of cultural signs. Her photographs want to be understood not as celebrations of beauty, certainly, but as testament to how architecture drives aesthetics and how aesthetics, in turn, reflect the soul. The first inhabitants of Levittown learned well from their surroundings. They and their children went on to Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Sudan, and Afghanistan. Gallucci's photos are deliberately, exhaustingly ugly, and they mean to be.

The only exterior shots in the exhibit are a group of no less pristine and exact color images of a Levittown community swimming pool. As with the shots of the insides of homes, no humans occupy the space; what's different here is there's no evidence of people either. The water lies flat and rippleless and blue under a cloudless sky and a blinding sun. And whereas the living rooms feel congested to the point of claustrophobia, the pools deliver a vast forlornness, an inverse appeal, the promise of a sensual experience that at the same time gets taken away. In its warmth and clarity and emptiness, the pool invites you in, even as the surroundings — a stingy spray of trees, outnumbered by phone polls, beyond which lies a wasteland of pavement as a water tower with the word "Levittown" looms nearby — make you want to run away.

