

America the Transient - Jane Dickson

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Painted on AstroTurf and industrial carpet, Jane Dickson's recent pictures record a landscape of highways, parking lots, suburban houses and fast-food joints. Within these strangely pixelated, everyday scenes, the author discovers a reservoir of psychological nuance.

Early last summer at World House Gallery's temporary exhibition space in Chelsea, Jane Dickson exhibited several of her gorgeous, bleary pictures of parking-lot sunsets and the less-than-great American highway. Unlike the landscape photographs of Andreas Gursky, which often document that moment when the balance shifts and "nature" is transformed into the "natural surroundings" against which commercial-recreational plants have been constructed, in Dickson's paintings the entire world has long ago been paved. Painted in oil on many different grades and shades of AstroTurf and industrial carpet--unusual mediums Dickson perfected during the '90s in hundreds of pictures showing single-family suburban homes--the paintings have a dreamy quality. In Dickson's universe it's always dawn or dusk, times of day that are often most problematic for the mentally disturbed. Once, when I was to interview a political refugee from Romania, he requested that we change our 6 P.M. appointment because, he said, "I am not so good with the transition between day and night." I was startled by his sensitivity, but later it made perfect sense. "It is difficult to remember," he told me. "It is also difficult to forget."

Dickson's highways seem to occupy a zone between memory and forgetting. It's an ordinary place, full of small and sometimes realizable hope. In *Out of Here, North* (1999), a 6-by-11-foot painting on AstroTurf, the red taillights of three cars are headed towards a hazy opening in the cloud-line at the horizon. (Something persuades me that these must be family cars--perhaps the fact that the surroundings are precisely the kind of suburban landscape that many Americans have now grown up with.) The colors of the road itself are as blurred and dappled as the sky. A few nameless shrubs, oil derricks and transmission towers line the far edges of the highway. Because the plastic blades of AstroTurf grab the paint so well, the support used in this painting is barely recognizable as what we see on patios and miniature golf courses. Instead, the painted surface takes on a pixelated quality, creating a pattern of bleeding, edgeless dots that evoke not only Pointillism but also early TV transmissions. Details are softened in passage, rather than wilfully obscured.

Out of Here, North was installed with three other "Out of Here" paintings (each named for one of the cardinal points of the compass) in the project room at the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art last summer. (The paintings were first shown at Galapagos in Brooklyn in October 1999.) For this installation, Dickson commissioned a soundtrack by Derrek Brown and Chris Morgan of the band Deep Fat. A 17-minute groove that incorporates the sounds of passing traffic, the recording perfectly evokes the endless monotony of daily life. In fact, the slow dreamy atmosphere in the "Out of Here" paintings highlights one of the paradoxes of our wired-up globe: that ultra-high-speed, nanosecond technology still means inertia for most of us. Information travels between satellite receivers at dazzling speed, but we remain trapped in the present. The motion captured in this painting is by no means ecstatic. Rather, it evokes the vague nausea of carsickness, as eternal as the 35th refrain of "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall."

In *Blue Highway* (1999), an empty eight-lane road stretches out before us with its guardrails, lamps and signage until it meets the clouded sky. Dickson's vision of the American road is as far from the heroic nomadism of the Beats as it is from the labyrinthine mystery of David Lynch's film *Lost Highway*. In *Long Beach Lot* (1999), the traffic missing from *Blue Highway* slumbers in the smoggy sunset, guarded by a ring of shadeless palms. The cars are conspicuously modest, late-model Mazdas and Toyotas, presumably bought on payment, washed, insured and anxiously maintained. Dickson is the most clear-eyed, factual of painters, but what is subtly radical about her work is her ability to render the ugly uniformity of exurban construction in a manner which is not at all dystopian.

"I want to see where the edge in bland is," Dickson told an interviewer for *Bomb* magazine several years ago. The Chicago-born artist trained as a figurative painter at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and at Harvard University. While her work is effectively conceptual, she is always using one part of her brain to deal with traditional formal questions of perspective, light and shadow. She "knows how" to make a painting. In the early 1990s, she moved from a Times Square loft with her husband, the filmmaker Charlie Ahearn, and their children, to a more conventional wall-to-wall carpeted dwelling in a less gritty part of Manhattan. It was the novelty of being surrounded by gray carpet that led Dickson to consider the linkages between carpeting and the desire projected by most people onto the idea of home. Freed of the hell of living in a barely plumbed industrial space above Eighth Avenue,

Dickson became fascinated by the American ideal of the single-family house. Her curiosity led her to undertake her portraits of suburban homes on carpet and AstroTurf.

Based on snapshots of houses taken by the artist everywhere from Rockland County and Binghamton, N.Y., to the barrio environment of Los Angeles's Highland Park, the paintings in this ongoing series always keep their architectural subjects in the center of the frame. Through the process of painting, Dickson simplifies and amplifies the image in the photograph, trying to recapture the original feeling of the scene, the qualities that did not translate to film.

In Los Angeles, where Dickson lived for six months in 1999, it's no longer possible to research a house's history of ownership in the public records; residential properties change hands so often that old deed information isn't kept on file. Stripped of the signifying referents of history, things are what they are and there is very little left to really long for. Desire drains. Appropriately, in the "Houses" series there is hardly any anoxic difference between Home 21-Spanish Adobe (1998), Home 27-Tudor Garage (1998), Pink House (1998) or the two-storied brick and clapboard model with the gambrel roof in Home 22-Matthews St. (1998). Similarly, there is hardly any difference between what looks to be a half-million-dollar property, Home 19-Hillside Contempo (1998), and a, let's say, \$80,000 bungalow near Figueroa Street depicted in another painting. As seen by Dickson, all these buildings are primarily receptacles of domestic life, places where people eat, sleep and watch television (another of Dickson's favorite subjects) in the sacred privacy of home.

Darkness hides itself within the trees outside Dickson's houses, the way it does in Ed Ruscha's paintings of foliage and buildings silhouetted against nighttime Los Angeles skies, which are never absolutely dark. In Ruscha's canvases, the desolation of the scene is offset by an iconic quality: by isolating these shards of California emptiness, Ruscha reformats them more cheerfully as Pop. In Dickson's more "realistic" landscapes, however, emptiness is all there is. Yet, this emptiness does not inspire pathos. Dickson's houses remind me of the lyrics of art-rock poet Susie Timmon's paean to her suburban roots, "Finding Someone to Take Care of You":

Come off the exit, take a right
Take another right when you get to the light
Take the first left and another right
Turn off your lights, head up the hill
Coast into the driveway and it's very still ...

When Dickson made her artistic debut in the 1980s, as a part of the Colab Group, with figurative paintings of Times Square life, her work was often misread. Her depictions of strippers, grasping couples on the sidewalk and crime suspects getting frisked against police cars were emphatically night scenes, drawn with oilstick on blackened linen in a manner reminiscent of black velvet paintings. She also created similar effects with oilstick on paper, as in *Jai Alai* (1985) in which the silhouetted figures of three men and a policeman, all bathed in artificial yellow light, hover against a bus station wall. Seen as if through the Vaseline-smear lens of soft-core pornography, these urban scenes were often taken to be a kind of romantic neo-social realism, a cultural anthropology steeped in liberal compassion. In fact, what interested Jane Dickson most about these subjects was the existential street phenomenon of waiting. She was single, in her 20s, and she was waiting for her life to begin. Dickson saw herself then as a participant-observer. "I was a witness," she comments in the *Bomb* interview, "but I wasn't only documenting what was happening to them. It was my experience too."

A show earlier this year at Scholar Fine Art in London presented some of these early Times Square paintings alongside examples of Dickson's subsequent work--a series of New Year's Eve revelers, the highways and the houses, amusement parks and demolition derbies. In "Reconfigured," a recent exhibition of American painting at the Yan Huang Museum in Beijing, examples of her older paintings were accompanied by newer works featuring scenes of strip-mall industries: *Green Laundromat* (2000) and *Taco Fiesta* (2000). Exhibitions such as these help to illuminate the logic and intentions of Dickson's early paintings, and make it apparent how very not romantic they are. It also becomes clear, as you look at the new and old work together, how impossible it is to separate the paintings from the circumstances of Dickson's life.

We love and hate the Beats because they were outsiders looking in; they saw their loneliness refracted in the highways and the diners, the tenements, the oilskin tablecloths and cheap curtains glimpsed while driving past the roadside shacks of America's desperate poor. Dickson, on the other hand, has always been fully implicated in her subjects. The little girl sprawled out in the darkness, her back facing the viewer as she watches television in *Eve on the Carpet* (1996) is her own daughter. The shadowy figure in *Two Palms Motorcycle* (1999) walking the concrete path into a small bungalow, where a blurred TV screen glimpsed through the window seems to be

warming the front room, is most probably her neighbor. Dickson's approach to painting is frequently compared to Edward Hopper's. Despite the distance in time, Dickson's parking lots and taco stands are not so unlike Hopper's famous late-night diner, but what really unites both painters is how they use an elusive realism to capture the strange sadness just under the surface of everyday life. The interstitial images of exurban America typical of Dickson's subject matter are often found in the work of contemporary photographers, most notably Catherine Opie and James Welling. But in contrast to such work, which tends to achieve its emotional power through effects of distance and impersonality, the psychological nuances in Dickson's paintings are very direct. In even her most depopulated scenes, Dickson conveys a sense of recent habitation, of transient human life ghosting the highways and houses. Her eye is never very far removed from the tenuously middle-class state of echt-America where most people live two paychecks away from disaster. Dickson gives an inner life to subjects which might otherwise be seen as kitsch. All the fleeting hopes and disappointments that she captures are integrally a part of how this country lives, and they're also unmistakably her own.

Jane Dickson's work has been seen in recent solo exhibitions at a temporary New York space for World House Gallery, South Orange, N.J. [May 19- June 23], the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art [May 11-July 15], Sclar Fine Art/Gordon Samuel, London [Feb. 15- Mar. 15], Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, Mich. [Mar. 24-Apr. 21], and Miller/Block Gallery, Boston [Feb. 10-Mar. 10].

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