

ART PAPERS

“Memphis / Drive” by David Hall / *Art Papers* October 02

“Drive” (Second Floor Contemporary Gallery, March 1-April 5, 2002), a suite of drawings and video installations by KIM BECK, considers society’s mediations of reality, especially relative to the contemporary landscape’s increasing superficiality and dull homogeneity. Unbridled consumerism and suburban sprawl, hastened by escalating population growth and advances in communication and transportation, transform once sovereign and distinct regions into carbon copies of each other. As in Beck’s prior work, each location represented, whether a parking lot, golf course or housing development, is a veritable “anytown-USA,” personifying a transposable ideal more so than a specific place.

The artist’s mode of representation, always twice removed from the source, accentuates further the notion of copy and model, manifesting as image duplication or short, seamless video looks. Beck’s drawings adopt the format of the stereograph, a nineteenth century precursor to the Viewmaster that consists of a pair of near-identical pictures, one next to the other, to give the illusion of three dimensionality. The artist utilizes this orientation to develop image prototypes and their doppelgangers. *Sprinklers* (2001), the curbside perspective of a cookie-cutter housing development rendered monotonous next to its facsimile, mirrors what the Situationist Guy Debord dubbed “banalization,” the unification of virtual and physical space by self-replicating production and growth, which ultimately destroys “the autonomy and quality of places.”

The omnipresence of public utilities, franchises, malls, bullboards, suburbs, etc. in the built environment habituates one to their presence, such that, while modern life may be inundated with events mediated by images (Debord’s “spectacle”), they often go unrecognized. *Lights* (2001), depicting a majestic sky at dusk filled with roiling clouds, approaches the sublime, but a lonely utility pole on the horizon returns it to earth. The image is seen from the freeway, a perspective that most commuters would find too prosaic to grant a second look; but Beck finds harmony between natural environment and human infrastructure.

Beck repeats, abridges or obfuscates her judiciously rendered, even delicate, representations to reinforce their reading as signs, as reality’s appearance rather than its essence. When a drawing is obscured by gesso or erased, the image displaces its source; the attenuated remains of the picture function metaphorically as a fading memory or an articulation of nostalgia. The video *Flag Wave* (2002) seemingly captures the tranquil sight of a vacant putting green where nothing ever happens, but one realizes it consists of a perpetual one-minute loop. In this regard, the artist’s mode of representation typifies what Jean Baudrillard describes as the “liquidation of referentials... substituting signs of the real for the real itself.”

Baudrillard and Umberto Eco have labeled a representation that maintains no correlation to consensual reality yet tangentially refers to something real as a “hyper-reality.” The experience of *Fairway Walk* (2002), a video projected through a bank of twenty-five droning box fans onto a wall, demonstrates the capacity of mediated structures to define perceptions of reality. Approaching the video of a lush golf course, one sympathetically absorbs the fans’ gusts of air and the sight of swaying branches as a single taste, a surrogate reality shaped by various forms of mass media, especially television and movies, where the image overpowers its referent.

The present age is dominated more than every by forces endeavoring to control representation, an

attitude encompassing all facets of human affairs, including technology, economics, politics and media. Beck's contemplations of image and mimesis (also on view at the Houston community College Annex Gallery September 26-October 17, 2002) underscore the fact that they are, in the end, socially constructed realities; and furthermore, moot.