

LOTS OF GRASS: SUBURBAN LIVING AND THE MODERNIST EXPERIENCE

By Dr. Rory Wallace

Monique Genton documents a specific physical site, Richmond, British Columbia, as one of those many places altered forever by the forces of suburbanization. She portrays the natural world bound within concrete borders and the geometric property lines of these new colonies of the city, but her work is not a lament. Instead, Genton uses the vocabulary and style of Modernist art to tell the modern story of housing developments in the "burbs". Modernism was full of post-war optimism and a desire for the new in both art and housing, but there are lingering, haunting questions about the success of the experiment. For Genton, the Modernist experiment in Richmond is couched in the interplay between grass and development.

Grass and the grid become the emblems of this colonization of the landscape in Genton's work. The lawn—that area of closely cropped, weeded, fertilized, grass—is a European import. We demark our property from our neighbours' with our lawn. From above, the landscape resolves into regular rectangles of green which surround and insulate buildings and people from each other. In *Series 6* Genton reiterates this geographic pattern with small, rationalized, rectangular images of grass within a larger composite rectangle intersected by lines resembling an aerial plan of urban lots. The clean grid reflects the work of Piet Mondrian or Agnes Martin and other Modernist artists who removed the human or figurative element to confront questions of the abstract.

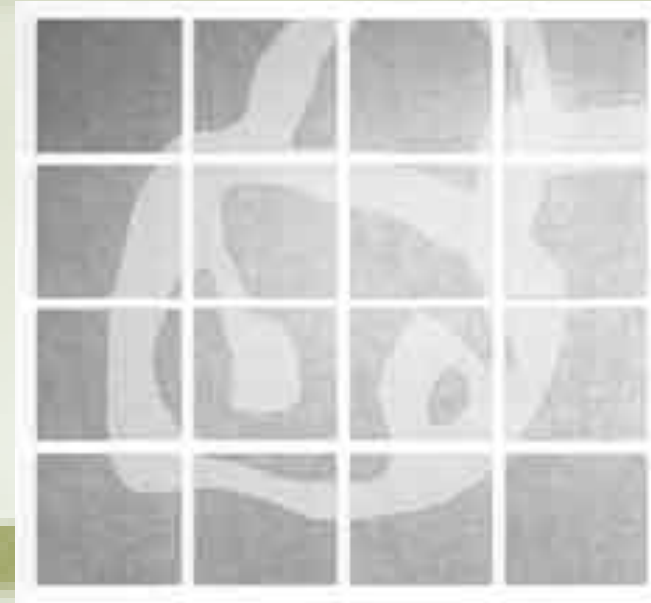
On occasion, ambitious attempts to reject and humanize the urban grid were made. Developments with winding streets and quiet cul-de-sacs gave the impression of pre-industrial village life. However, they existed surrounded actually and metaphorically by the larger street

grid, and limited access points isolated them from the rest of the world, much like current "gated communities". In her *Richmond Gardens* series Genton superimposes the images of seventeen house profiles on the flat grass promise of property. Richmond Gardens, the development Genton grew up in, had house styles called oak, cedar, pine, etc., but, symbolically, no actual trees; nature endures in name alone. The range of profiles creates the illusion of individuality although offering a narrow range of choices, like products in a store. Her use of stencils, and the clean, industrial look of her work in general, reminds us of the Modernist use of print techniques to imitate the new post-war industrial mass production in artists like Andy Warhol. As with Warhol, however, Genton's print techniques throughout are transparently and intentionally "flawed" to distance them from the functional images they critique.

As the gridded landscape of small farms and suburban homes in Richmond is increasingly replaced by large malls and industrial buildings, the lawn becomes smaller, but grass does not lose its emblematic function. In fact, it becomes even clearer that its true function is emblematic because there can be no other purpose to such small and otherwise useless scraps of turf. Works like *Series 8.1* and her parking lot island series (1-5) reveal the way that the new landscape of cement and warehouse retain the vestiges of an old vocabulary of property through lawn. In the photo documentation for the parking lot island series, Genton includes her own feet as she stares down bemused by this vestige of an anachronistic way of owning and marvels at the free-form abstract cement line. In *Series 8.1* she admires the big-box store that has the sheer presence of a Donald Judd sculpture.

In Modernist art, however, there remain questions about art that can turn its back on surrounding political events, like the cold war and Vietnam, in the quest for abstract "truth". In Genton's work there is a sense of the lingering power and impressiveness of the Modernist experiment both in art and in town planning but Genton's story eventually is not just about the loss of green-space, but about that mix of hope and disillusion that haunts us still.

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THE GRASS PROJECT—GARDEN CITY By Monique Genton

I grew up in the 1960's in a Richmond subdivision called Richmond Gardens, a utopian enclave of cul-de-sacs and crescents with new boxy homes poised in a featureless landscape. The shock of moving there from a hundred-acre Ontario farm was buoyed by a sense that we were participating in a progressive social project, exemplary of that Canadian era. The subdivision's continuous winding concrete curbs seemed to constrain any last vestiges of our rural past's unruly landscape, and this attenuated treatment of environment became, for me, synonymous with my experience of modernity. Eventually we would look back at the tidiness of our neighbourhood with disenchantment—but, for the time being, there was optimism.

After a 30 year absence I returned to Richmond to photograph the Fraser River, but found myself pointing the camera more often toward the adjacent commercial developments. I recognized at once a familiar

Richmond-ness, and at the same time, that old sense of optimism, but what was it exactly? I scanned a broad flat landscape of shopping malls, parking lots, light industry, playing fields, and subdivisions in search of some essential feature.

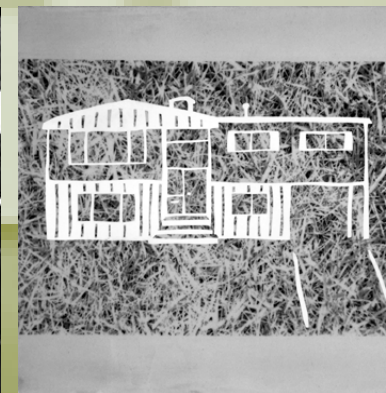
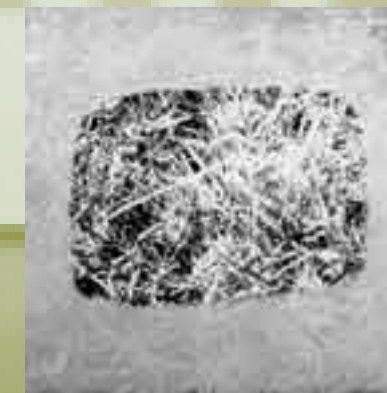
I recall a favourite magazine cartoon from my childhood. It shows a rocket ship about to be launched and an excited crowd looking on, but at the end of the countdown, the rocket's support stand takes off instead. For years and years one of us needed only say "the stand takes off" to initiate peels of gut-aching laughter. Apart from the humour, it taught us that sometimes we are looking in the wrong place, that meaning is often formed in the places in between, the things we step over—or perhaps, for example, in the narrow strip of grass between two parking spots.

Likewise, in *Out of Place*, Canadian landscape architect, Michael Hough

describes that drama and beauty lie in the details of a place and not necessarily in the grander gestures of its built environment.^[i] Hough further defines regional identity as an aesthetic perceived primarily by visitors; the people who live there may not identify their vernacular forms as such or, as being particularly aesthetic or meaningful. It was with my visitor's eyes focused on the places in between—islands of grass dotting parking lots, and low-maintenance ground cover filling leftover spaces, that I recognized not only the prevailing aesthetics of my earlier suburban experience, but surprisingly, its accompanying sense of optimism.^[ii] I identified specifically the *PLI* (parking lot island)—the marriage of field and parking lot—as exemplifying the ongoing modernization of land and the displacement of nature from natural to pure aesthetic form.^[iii] I embarked on a body of work with these modest forms as my subject.

Series 1 to 5 of The Grass Project explore the abstract qualities of PLIs creating a lexicon of form from rectangular, to oval, to D-shaped. Ironically, the forms have little to do with nature, but are dictated instead by both bylaw requirements and the maneuverability of cars. In *Series 6*, almost 200 six-inch square images of grass are designed to fill any specified space; made conveniently modular, nature's inherent unruliness is disciplined within the modernist grid.

In the series titled, *Richmond Gardens*, seventeen homes from my childhood subdivision are painted in stencil-like fashion over rectangular photographs of grass. Although each house design was named after a tree—oak, maple, cedar, etc.—no trees or native plants were spared by the developers. By comparing the paintings to each other, we get a sense, not only of the subdivision's common homogenizing features:



boxy design, wood siding, decorative shutters, built-in carport, and featureless landscaping, but of an insidious assimilation process shaping this neighbourhood's multi-ethnic inhabitants.

In *Series 8* the landscape design of big-box stores and industrial sites mimics the mega-minimalist buildings, veering off in an almost fascist authoritative language. And while we sense, as with Richard Serra's contentious minimalist wall, the extreme endpoint of a modernist idea, the landscape's bold formal language still manages to evoke a sense of joy. As in all the works of *The Grass Project—Garden City*, the landscape expresses a modernist vision that hovers between the disappointment of its failures and the optimism of its design.

[i] Hough, Michael, *Out of place : restoring identity to the regional landscape*, New Haven : Yale University Press, ©1990.

[ii] Sylvia Lavin, Chair of the Department of Architecture and Urban Design, University of California at Los Angeles, lecturing at Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design, Vancouver, June 21, 2003, questioned our selective memory in the resurgence of modernist forms, i.e. turning a blind eye toward the era's failures (social and structural) and invoking only the optimism of its vibrant forms.

[iii] Genton, Monique, *A Bush Book*, ©1992. Distributed by Artex, Montreal, Quebec.