

Suburban Blues: An American Mythology

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Abstract

This body of work engages with contemporary American home life and suburbia by exploring themes of isolation, estrangement, and the home by distorting quotidian motifs and reimagining Americana imagery. The work examines how the American landscape has been shaped by the intrusion of industrialization, neoliberalism, and the mythos of the American dream. At this nexus point of the dismantling of social connection, combined with the capitalist demand for hyper individualism and competition, tied with the alienation of human labor and the natural environment, one finds the contemporary American pathos. How do the effects of neoliberalism, suburbia, and hyper individualism relate to the collapse of identity and meaning in contemporary American home life? This project culminates in the creation of a solo exhibition of mixed media and metal sculptures, hand embroidery pieces, and 2D works, using a variety of materials and methodologies to create stylizations and distortions of familiar forms. Steel objects act as a foundation for the work, physically representing industrialization and the extraction of materials, while fabric, in dialogue with embroidery work, embodies domesticity, familiarity, and a certain intimacy. This juxtaposition between materiality creates both a visual and physical tension in the work to invoke a feeling of unease and discomfort to parallel the social discontentment currently in America. The intention is to create a personable and accessible connection between the work and the viewer that can prompt larger conversations about roles in society, American life, and ultimately the collective future. These absurdist and uncanny sculptural portraits of the suburban home asks the viewer to embark on an unending search for insight and understanding of the alienation and homogeneity of suburbia and what that reveals about the current social zeitgeist.

Introduction

This body of work aims to explore the isolation, hyper individualism, and ultimate collapse of the American familial systems and infrastructure, and how this mirrors a larger societal and ecological collapse caused by neoliberal capitalism. This is accomplished by creating a solo exhibition of mixed media sculptures, hand embroidery pieces, and select 2D work, as well as researching neoliberalism and suburbia. By focusing on and distorting the smaller, quotidian aspects of American life, the aim is to create a personal and accessible connection from the work to the viewer that can prompt larger conversations about roles in society, how people relate and create their identities, and

ultimately the collective future. How do the effects of neoliberalism, suburbia, and hyper individualism relate to the collapse of identity and meaning in contemporary American home life?

Intellectual, Historical, and Political Context

Neoliberalism can be broadly defined as a market driven governance, a political and economic ideology that began in the 1980s that reduced government power to regulate corporations, instead supporting private corporate development, globalization, and for profit entities' responsibilities in social welfare and resource management. Historically, neoliberal ideology can be traced back to the end of World War I and as "...an offspring of the Great Depression"⁵, with intellectuals opposing what they saw as a rise of collectivism and socialism in the United States. Over the past couple of decades, the term has proliferated to encompass a number of different meanings, including creating "...An ideology that values market exchange as 'an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs' "⁵. This ethic of neoliberalism has penetrated American society both economically and socially.

Capitalism functions on exponential growth and it can now be seen taking over every aspect of American life. "The need of a constantly expanding market for its products drives the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe."⁷ . While capitalism has historically allowed for a timid creation of the self, an escape from the feudal lord or contemporary one percent to become one's own boss, an entrepreneur, contemporarily the combination of neoliberalism and capitalism has become an ethical guiding principal, a guise for inequality and oppression, and has unraveled the social fabric³. "...Inequality is not an unintended result but itself an important feature of neoliberal politics because it is supposed to serve as a mechanism to increase competition and productivity."³. The increase of competition and productivity is seen not only among community spaces but also seen within the self, with an imperative placed on self-growth, self-regulation, and self-marketability. This is caused by the self being turned into an entrepreneurial subject, with an emphasis on self-reliance and individual responsibility, and other people being seen as monetary survival threats, rather than community members⁶. Market driven governance has been linked to social isolation and an increase in individualism, social competition, as well as consumerism to fill a void left by a lack of identity and fulfillment. This destruction of community in favor of monetization is ultimately a part of larger structural issues of estrangement.

Suburbia and Estrangement

After World War II, widespread ownership of cars, in tandem with government subsidized roads and home building, helped create the suburbs². Large, sprawling, impersonal areas lacking in social infrastructure but typically with a commute to an urban center where people work. Adults in post World War II America had a deep involvement with community and civic entities, taking a more active role in political and social organization, however, over the last third of the twentieth century and beyond that engagement has atrophied¹³. Suburbanization led to greater physical separation between workplace, school, and home, but also a segregation between different classes, religions, and race, creating a more homogenous environment, which is literally reflected in the architecture and landscaping of many suburban areas. Residents of suburbs are seen to have a "surprisingly low rate of civic engagement and neighborliness even within their boundaries"¹³, and that suburban life seems to be "privatizing" social life, encouraging self-isolation. This theory parallels the privatization of social welfare and encouragement of hyper-individualism created by neoliberal capitalism.

One aspect of suburbanization and isolation that cannot be ignored is the dependency on cars as transportation. The Department of Transportation estimated that the average American adult spends fifty-five minutes driving each day¹¹. This is yet another feature of built in isolation that leads to estrangement and lost social connectivity.

Evidence suggests that “each additional ten minutes in daily commuting time cuts involvement in community affairs by ten percent”¹³.

Marx’s theory of alienation describes the estrangement of people from their labor as the products of their labor become increasingly difficult to recognize ⁸. As jobs become increasingly difficult to obtain and vague in function and product, human identity becomes increasingly estranged. "The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers."⁹. This estrangement of labor eventually leads to an estrangement of identity – creating an “autonomous” worker who does not have the ability to create a meaningful, complex life. After the COVID-19 pandemic, many Americans are now working from home, and while that may offset some of the isolation caused by driving, it has created a truly autonomous worker– one who does not interact with even menial coworkers, or if they do it is through digital meetings and other impersonal electronic communication forums.

Another facet of market driven governance is what urbanist Charles Heying calls “corporate delocalization”, meaning that large corporations have displaced locally owned businesses, creating an impersonal environment, eroding social connections, and local economies¹³. Suburban areas lack an organically built downtown area, and this void is typically filled by large corporate block stores or shopping malls¹². These private shopping centers attempt to replace community building spaces by encouraging hyper consumerism instead, feeding into larger capitalist structures. While the local Wal-Mart or shopping mall may be filled with people, the experience is not overcoming social isolation, rather one is “in the presence of others, but not in their company”¹³.

Robert Putnam argues that multiple factors have contributed to the decline of civic engagement and community, including but not limited to, generational change, increased productivity and demands at work, suburban sprawl leading to inaccessibility, and the rise in electronic entertainment, such as television¹³. It is important to note that Putnam’s research¹³ was released in 2000, before the debut of the iPhone, which objectively has changed the social and political landscape immensely. At this nexus point of the dismantling of social connection, combined with the capitalist demand for hyper individualism and competition, tied with the alienation of human labor and the natural environment, lies a contemporary American culture. The constant, never ending search for meaning, fulfillment, and purpose, which is affecting interpersonal relationships and home lives.

Artistic Influences and Inspirations

I take inspiration from a variety of artists across many different disciplines, using photographers and other 2D artists to better understand and visualize my conceptual work and symbology, while 3D artists can serve as more grounded and technical inspirations.



Figure 1. Todd Hido (1968). *Homes at Night* #2154-A [photography].

Todd Hido, born 1968, is an American photographer who has exhibited his work globally. In his 2001 photography series *Homes at Night* (Figure 1), Hido examines the American suburbs by photographing homes that could be “anywhere, anytime”¹⁵ in the post World War II era. Hido uses analogue film to capture these moments, with no staged lighting, to capture the dynamic and familiar shadows created by street lighting. His photographs are all eerily desolate, with each house seemingly familiar, yet ultimately abandoned. He is interested in exploring suburban isolation while leaving space for the viewer to insert themselves into the scene. “Devoid of figures, and with a sense of silence and estrangement, Hido’s works seem to capture the loneliness and alienation of modern urban and suburban life. The emptiness and anonymity of his scenes work to reveal the inherent tensions in our conceptualization of ‘home’. His images investigate the kind of sentimentality often connected with ‘home’ or idealized familial intimacy. Presenting the homes as empty shells for the viewer to fill with their own memories or imagined narratives, Hido utilizes the domestic construct to examine the space that lies between reality, memory, and fantasy”¹³. He describes these photos as an “insatiable search”¹⁶, photographs that ask more questions than they answer. This insatiable search is at the crux of my body of work, with the answer barely out of reach.



Figure 2. Maarten Demmink (1967). *Untitled* [mixed media sculpture].

Maarten Demmink, born in 1967, is a Dutch painter, photographer, and sculptor. While he is mostly known for his paintings, I focus on his sculptural work. Demmink creates small, gritty houses, using wood, fabric, and other mixed materials (Figure 2). These small scale, intimate houses originally inspired me to create a series of sculptural houses for my body of work. His work is focused on depicting human interactions with the environment and how humans are degrading the environment through urbanization and industrialization⁴. In his work, he also calls attention to natural disasters that occur across the globe, including Hurricane Helene in Western North Carolina, and their impacts on people's homes and livelihoods.



Figure 3. Amy Yoshitsu. (1988). *Survival Ornament* [mixed media sculpture].

Amy Yoshitsu is a young contemporary sculptor and designer living in Berkley, California. Their work focuses on the sustainability of infrastructure and how that affects and is affected by climate change, and how often overlooked infrastructure is actually the foundation for the current human experience. They use a variety of mixed materials in their work, including using thread in unconventional ways. "I employ sewing and textiles to interweave the effects of entrenched systems on the body, the delicate, the intimate."¹⁸. This idea of using textiles as an intimate craft form to depict something that many people think of as foreign or uninteresting objects, like power lines and telephone poles, to make them more relatable and human, is profound and connects to my work and materiality as well.

Art Making Practices, Methodologies, and Visual Motifs

My work aims to understand the estrangement from community, identity, and home that neoliberal capitalism has caused. The sculptural pieces focus on visual motifs of the home and the Americana imagery. The iconography of the home is one that most people are familiar with and have a wide range of associations with, some personal and some cultural. In terms of subject matter, I am interested in quotidian visual motifs that are recognizable to everybody. By using and distorting these smaller, familiar subjects, I am bringing awareness and understanding, an access point, to the larger structural issues that loom above our heads. The home is the anchor in which all of the other subjects orbit around. The home is both domestic, deeply personal, and omnipresent, with the natural environment representing home as well.

The usage of raw, industrial materials is representative of the intrusion and extraction of these materials onto the natural landscape. "Within the lifetime of a single generation, a rustic and in large part wild landscape was transformed into the site of the world's most productive industrial machine. It would be difficult to imagine more profound contradictions of value or meaning than those made manifest by this circumstance. Its influence upon our literature is suggested by the recurrent image of the machine's sudden entrance onto the landscape."¹⁰

In this body of work, steel is often paired with fabric and hand embroidery work. Embroidery is an ancient human art form, thought to begin as early as the archaic period, but gaining popularity in the Medieval period, mostly by women¹⁴. Because of this, embroidery became associated as "women's work"¹⁴ and this association has deepened with time, with embroidery being considered a domestic female craft, particularly in American context. Embroidery is often symbolic of the home, the familial, and the quotidian. I am trying to push the boundaries of embroidery as a domestic craft and elevate it to high art status by imbuing conceptual thought into complex embroidered compositions. Embroidery becomes both a medium for art making as well as a conduit for female domestic liberation.

By combining these disparate materials, steel and fabric, in conjunction with embroidery work, the work exudes a physical and visceral tension to create a sense of unease and discomfort. Even the process of creating a steel structure, cutting steel rod and welding, physically contrasts greatly from the process of cutting and ironing fabric, and then spending hours delicately hand embroidering. These differences in material and process are representative of the dissonance and confusion within contemporary American culture.



Figure 4. *Make Your Bed and Lie in It*, 2025.

This sculptural piece, *Make Your Bed and Lie in It* (Figure 4), uses two very distinct materials, sharpened steel rod and fabric, to create a visual and physical tension. A bed is an extremely common, personal item that shapes and reflects people's lives, and by distorting it, it creates a visceral discomfort with an object that is meant to be comforting. This piece is meant to show how the home and something as intimate as a bed is not inherently neutral or positive, rather carries many different associations and memories with each individual viewer.



Figure 5. *The Liberation of the Unicorn*, 2024.

Mythologized horses are a common theme throughout this body of work. Horses are one of the most deeply rooted and recognizable symbols of American identity. Horses as a symbol can represent many things -- they can be powerful and strong, but also extremely weak and fragile, they range from wild/feral horses to domestic and docile pets. This embroidery piece, *The Liberation of the Unicorn* (Figure 5), is referencing a historical artwork, *The Unicorn Rests in a Garden (The Unicorn Tapestries)*¹⁷, as well as the common cultural symbolism of the unicorn. The unicorn, often a symbol for girlhood and femininity, is breaking free of its embroidered chains of captivity.



Figure 6. Example of three pieces from *Home (series)*, 2025.

The *Home (series)* (Figure 6) takes up the largest portion of the gallery space, encompassing thirteen different homes, varying in size, proportion, and perspective, each with unique fabric patterns, embroidered details, and symbology. Almost all the homes have a neutral-warm color palette to give visual cohesion to the series, and mostly use vintage and secondhand fabrics. The embroidery detail ranges significantly from house to house, with some having more simple and recognizable designs, such as windows and doors, others have more imaginative imagery, while some have words embroidered on the sides of the house.

Another important facet of the *Home (series)* (Figure 6) are seven welded telephone poles, each of varying size and complexity. These telephone poles have been strung up throughout the gallery, using embroidery thread as the powerlines, at varying planes. The telephone poles serve to help build the world of the *Home (series)* (Figure 6), as well as to show the American reliance on often failing and fragile infrastructure. Powerlines and telephone poles are an extremely common everyday sight all throughout America, but often overlooked despite the extreme dependency on electricity, internet, phone, and the other services they provide. During Hurricane Helene, every resident of Western North Carolina learned that basic infrastructures that we rely on every day yet take for granted are not a guarantee in life.

By building this collection of thirteen homes and telephone poles, the aim is to recreate an uncanny portrait of suburbia and American home life, furthering emphasizing this by showing the disconnect between different houses through spatial relationships, i.e. the literal gap between houses created by different pedestals, as well as through different iconography and embroidery on each house.



Figure 7. Side 1, *Cowboy Chapel*, 2025.



Figure 8. Side 2, *Cowboy Chapel*, 2025.

For the center piece *Cowboy Chapel* (Figures 7 and 8), I rust dyed fabric to create a unique fabric texture and pattern. This was achieved by finding rusty metal objects and using a vinegar and water mixture to soak the metal objects and linen fabric in, usually overnight to create stronger rust colors. This methodology ties together the two disparate mediums, fabric and steel, by literally transferring the effects of steel and corrosion onto the surface of the fabric. Figure 7 shows wild horses, the silhouette of the Pisgah and Roan Mountain mountain ranges, and cumulus clouds to evoke ideas of the “wild west”, Americana, and the elusive idea of freedom, a tenant of American ideals. This piece has a steel cross welded to the top, complete with chapel windows and doors, to show the inherent connection between American ideals and the ever-looming presence of Christianity that is baked into American ideology. Figure 8 shows a lone figure, a cowboy, pistol drawn, a road, and embroidered words saying “Wanted: Dead or Alive”. This is a reference to old western movies and the ever-present idea of the lone American cowboy, relating back to the hyper individualism that America both celebrates and encourages.



Figure 9. *Empty Home*, 2025.

The piece *Empty Home* (Figure 9), part of the *Home (series)* (Figure 6), is a 12”x12” house out of 3/16” steel rod, one of the larger houses of the exhibition, with a very thin and intricate hand-crafted thread spider web inside. Creating the spider web is a very meticulous process of tying knots and stringing the web together. While houses and the cultural idea of home is often associated with warmth, this piece shows that homes can also be an empty, cold place. The exposed steel rod acts as a strong, yet cold and alienating structure, the lack of fabric represents a lack of intimacy and protection, and the thread spider web serves as a visual motif for abandonment, isolation, and a feeling of being trapped.

Conclusion

With this body of work, I aim to explore contemporary identity and purpose under neoliberal capitalism in America. Through a solo exhibition of mixed media sculptures and hand embroidery pieces, this work highlights commonplace domestic objects and homes and distorts them to gain a better understanding of the disintegration of familial and community structures.

Neoliberal capitalism and suburban sprawl can be attributed to the lack of community connectivity, with neoliberal morals as the driving force, such as hyper individualism, the privatization of personal life, and social/economic competition. The creation of the American suburbs has created a deeper social disconnect, with contemporary residents of suburbia engaging less in community activities than their predecessors, physical inaccessibility to public spaces, and a greater sense of homogeneity and isolation.

This body of work is engaging in these concepts by recreating an uncanny and uncomfortable portrait of suburban houses, as well as by reimagining quotidian objects and Americana imagery. While the future is uncertain, the need for systemic change is overwhelming, and change starts at home.

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