

SUBURBAN CRAWL

David A. Parker's work contemplates the idea of an afterlife, the need to escape and the connection between the two

words: Amber Drea

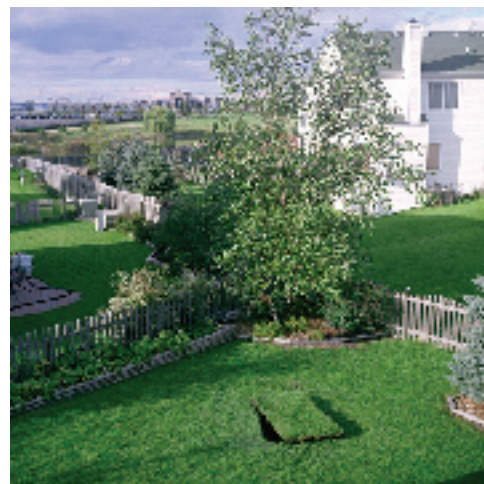


left:

"Escape Strategy No. 2"
Digital c-print. 42" x 42", edition of 5 + 1AP, 2006

below:

"Escape Strategy No. 4"
Digital c-print. 42" x 42", edition of 5 + 1AP, 2006.



Originally from a small town in western New York, David A. Parker never thought he'd live in a suburban housing development. However, when he got married, his wife's retired parents decided to move in with them, and the only place they could afford was in Naperville. "It really brought up a lot of feelings [for me]," Parker says. "What's wrong with suburbia? Why does it feel so strange?"

Out of these questions came the "Escape Strategy Series," a succession of photographs that explore different methods, albeit futile, of getting out. Three of the large-format images depict Parker wearing a white track suit launching Superman-style off a trampoline placed in his backyard or in the cul-de-sac in front of his house. Since the trampoline is visible, Parker is not asking the viewer to suspend disbelief; rather, he's making it clear that escaping is impossible. "There's this moment [when] you're kind of caught in believing and sympathizing with the person and wanting to be able fly," Parker says. "But then you're like, 'Come on buddy, this is ludicrous.' And I think that, for me, that play exists with art itself."

Another piece in the series is a photo of a lawn with what seems to be a trap door. The vantage point is from a second-floor window in Parker's home, so the viewer can see the backyards of the other houses, which meet in a grid, and the Acura dealership in the distance. The image conjures the idea of a safety bunker, of an underground tunnel or, more darkly, of a grave. "Maybe the only escape is the final escape," Parker says with a smile.

The sense of overwhelming commercialism is also present in the photos. In the fifth image of the series, Parker is standing in front of a white telephone pole off Route 59, but he is so tiny that he's almost invisible. Birds are flying in V formation overhead, cars are rushing by, strip malls line either side of the road and a water-filled ditch reflects the repetition of the poles. Parker is reaching for the sky while blending into the man-made structure, as if being consumed by it. "The figure is lost in the landscape and trying to escape," he explains. Parker cites Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, whose photograph "Arbol de

la Vida" depicts her standing against a tree covered in mud, as an inspiration for this piece. "She's almost prematurely returning to the earth," he says.

Returning to the earth is another theme that recurs in Parker's work. In the video "Land Reclamation," a "head" emerges from the dirt and begins sucking a map back into the ground. "[It conveys] the mythic ideas of the earth taking back its own," Parker says.

Similarly, the sculpture "Circuit" addresses the mysterious nature of the afterlife. Parker took a pool table one of his neighbors threw out, stripped it down to its skeleton and covered the frame with a transparent green fiberglass screen, in which he cut grave-shaped holes. He used bumper pool balls—which are white and red—to represent blood cells, and placed a basket under the slot where the balls eventually land. This allows the viewer to participate in the work by picking up the balls, rolling them across the table and watching where they go. The basket symbolizes beginnings (they're used for holding babies or food), endings (dirty laundry, severed heads) and the idea of reincarnation. "We have fields of green and we cut holes in them and we put things into the holes—and then what happens?" Parker wonders.

Though his work is highly conceptual, it also evokes a strong emotion. In an older installation piece, titled "Heartbeat Carillon," heartbeat monitors signaled glass bells to ring, allowing up to five participants to hear their individual heart rates chiming at the same time. "Some work, like a painting, might be a document of the artist's feeling, and [he's] sharing this with you. Whereas with the piece where the heartbeats are mixing and melding, that's much more about what happens when this person sits here and this person who they don't know sits over here and they hear their heartbeats in this relationship," Parker explains. "I'd love to be there to witness that, but it's much more about what happens to them."

David A. Parker's debut solo exhibition *On and Off the Grid is on display at Kasja Kay Art Projects Gallery (1044 W. Fulton Market, 312/492-8828) through February 17*