

## PHOTOGRAPHY

### The Shame of the Suburbs

Bill Owens May Not Condescend to His Subjects' Shallowness, but He Does Not Transcend It Either

By WILLIAM MEYERS

Until September 24 (533 W. 26th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-714-9500). Prices: \$2,300–6,000.

'Sneery' was my wife's whole critique of "Bill Owens: America," a retrospective exhibition of the photographer's best-known work at the James Cohan Gallery. Prudence and affection are usually enough to keep me from contradicting her in public, but certainly some extended reflection is called for.

The pictures in the exhibition are drawn from Mr. Owens's four books — "Suburbia," "Working (I do it for the money)," "Our kind of people," and "Leisure" — although most come from the first, originally published in 1973. An immediate success, both critically and commercially, it went through two additional editions at the time and then was reissued in 1999 with an introduction by David Halberstam. "Suburbia" was chosen for inclusion in "The Open Book" exhibition currently on display at the International Center of Photography, meaning the curators consider it among "130 of the most significant examples" of the photobook ever. I think it was rightfully included, with the caveat that "significant" is not the same as "best." Bill Owens is one of the very few photographers to have shot people in the suburbs to any great extent. There is a long, long list of photographers who made their reputations shooting in cities and a shorter but impressive list who made their names with studies of rural communities, but Mr. Owens is uniquely associated with suburbanites living in the tract housing developments that absorbed 60 million Americans in the decades following World War II.

More specifically, he is known for his study of folks in Livermore, Calif., an archetypal community off Route 580 running east from San Francisco Bay. Most of the pictures in "Suburbia" were taken between 1968 and 1972, when Mr. Owens lived in Livermore and worked as a photojournalist for a local newspaper. His work made him intimate with a broad segment of the relatively small

population, and he felt he was one of them.

The great prosperity that followed World War II made it possible for working-class types who had felt trapped in crowded cities by the Depression and the wartime exigencies to buy their own homes, built on their own little plots of land. Materially they were middle class, but culturally they were still working class. “Class” in America is a very ill-defined concept, but what was involved here was mostly taste. Or lack of taste.

The people in Bill Owens’s photographs are tacky, almost all of them, and tackiest when they have aspirations. This sets them up for ridicule — for being sneered at. But “tacky” is an aesthetic and not a moral category: A person may wear polyester and yet be noble, generous, brave, and even smart. I don’t think Mr. Owens is interested in the spiritual consequences of his subjects’ cultural limitations. He took a course in visual anthropology when he was at Chico State College, and has said his ambition was to “study the sociology of who we are.” He is wonderful at presenting data, but rarely transcends it.

Most of the pictures in “Bill Owens: America” are portraits, and he is good at placing his subjects in a socioeconomic niche so that we know a lot about them and their “life-style.” “Untitled (Cookout couple)” (c. 1972) is a very well-known picture: It is the first one after the introduction in the 1999 edition of “Suburbia,” in which it has the caption, “Sunday afternoon we get it together. I cook the steaks and my wife makes the salad.”

The plumpish wife wears striped pants, a T-shirt, a happy smile, and painted eyebrows that exaggerate the arch of the natural ones. The man is slightly shorter than his wife. He wears a floppy chef’s hat, a white polo shirt with hair showing in the open collar, and large metal-framed eyeglasses, and he has a dirtied white towel tucked in at his waist. His left hand, with a Band-Aid on the index finger, is draped around his wife’s shoulder, and his right hand holds a barbecue tool loaded with meat over the bulbous Weber grill. He himself is pot-bellied, not yet obese but showing the effects of too much red meat and not enough exercise. The support at the base of the grill has broken loose from one of the

three legs.

The couple stand on the concrete slab of a patio: To the left is the sliding glass door into the house, and behind them a bare stucco wall with factory-made windows. She is smiling, but he stares stolidly at the camera. He looks as if he is probably as competent at whatever it is that he does for a living as he is at being the grill master — after all, he can afford this house — but is brilliant at neither. He uses up-to-date locutions like “get it together” and eats high-status food. This is a creditable picture, professional if not original in its technique, and interesting because of its subject matter. But for all it shows us, there seems to be some further insight that was not pursued, some question not asked.

Driveways and garages are a visual leitmotif of Mr. Owens’s suburban pictures. They show up in “Untitled (Rolling out the grass)” (1972), “Untitled (Pulling leaves)” (1971), “Untitled (Mini bike for sale)” (1970), “Untitled (Photographing dog)” (1972), and “Untitled (Parade with flag)” (1972), to pick just a few. This is appropriate, given the indispensable role of the automobile and the interstate highway system in the creation of the modern suburb, and that the driveway and garage are what connect the house and its occupants to the rest of the world. But I can think of two pictures by Garry Winogrand — “New Mexico” (1957) and “Near Carmel” (1964) — in which driveways and garages figure prominently and are much more portentous than those in Mr. Owens’s work. It is a matter of having an “eye,” and of one photographer simply being capable of making more resonant images than another.

Diane Arbus knew how to sneer, and it was not an admirable talent. The subjects she chose to disdain were cruelly reified: They became objects only slightly human, and presented as such we were invited to feel superior to them. Bill Owens does not do that. If his neighbors are shallow, he knows they are shallow, and shows them as such. But — begging my wife’s indulgence — he does not sneer at their shallowness: He simply seems unable get beyond it.