

A Vision of Suburban Bliss Edged With Irony
By Jeffrey Kastner

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The picture on the back cover of the new edition of Bill Owens's classic 1970s photographic essay, "Suburbia," says much about when and where it was taken, and about the delicate balancing act that characterizes the project of which it is a part. In the image, a young couple stand in their large, immaculate kitchen. On the table in front of them sit two icons of abundance, a bowl overflowing with preternaturally shiny fruit and a chubby baby. The stylish mother distractedly guides creamed corn into the child's mouth, while Dad clutches a freshly poured cocktail. As is often the case with Mr. Owens's images, a quote from the subjects serves as the photo's caption: "We're really happy. Our kids are healthy, we eat good food, and we have a really nice home."

Healthy kids, a nice house, a cocktail in the evening, connubial bliss. From our vantage today, across a 30-year gap overgrown with irony, the sentiments expressed by the couple might seem quaint, as outdated as the groovy beads and horn-rim glasses they sport. Indeed, the whole thing might seem like an easy joke at their expense, were it not, in some basic level, so totally true. We know almost nothing about these people. But for the moment, in their comfortable home, with their baby and their bounty, they do seem really happy in a way that many of us would like to be. So is this an admiring depiction of a middle-class American dream come true or an ironic exposé of bourgeois materialism? In the carefully calibrated context of "Suburbia," it turns out to be a little of each.

Considered a groundbreaking exemplar of documentary photography upon its publication in 1972, "Suburbia" later went out of print, dropping off the radar in much the same way its creator did. By the end of that decade — after showing at institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the Smithsonian, winning major awards and producing two more books — he decided he could no longer raise a family on a photographer's wages and quit the art world. Now "Suburbia" is available in a new edition, with a foreword by the journalist and social historian David Halberstam, published late last year by Fotofolio. And Mr. Owens, today better known as an authority on brewing beer, is suddenly in vogue again, showing in major galleries from New York to Paris and, through April 2, in a retrospective at the San Jose Museum of Art in San Jose, Calif.

Speaking by telephone from the Hayward, Calif., office where he publishes *American Brewer* magazine, the 61-year-old Mr. Owens recounted the development of the "Suburbia" project. Born in San Jose and raised on a farm in Citrus Heights, he was an indifferent student who flunked out of college and set off on an around-the-world hitchhiking trip. After returning to finish school at Chico State College, he did a Peace Corps stint in Jamaica. When a photographer visited the village in which he was teaching, Mr. Owens's interest was piqued. He soon picked up the camera and taught himself how to shoot.

On his return to California, Mr. Owens found work as a \$112-a-week news photographer for a small newspaper, The Livermore Independent, in the Bay Area. “I’d been traveling the world,” he said, “and suddenly I got to Livermore and I was in total culture shock. I had a wife and a baby and everybody my age already had the house and the swimming pool and the two cars. I’m shooting the Rotary Club, the Junior Women’s Club and thinking, ‘Who are these people?’ But I started to get to know them. I’d go out and shoot them for the newspaper and then think, ‘Man, I ought to go back and shoot this on my own time.’”

Eager to make the jump from his journalistic work to a full-blown documentary project, Mr. Owens approached the publisher of a local magazine, who agreed to purchase some prints. He used the money to buy a large-format camera and, scaling back his time at the paper, began working on “Suburbia,” shooting every Saturday over the next year.

An admirer of photographers like Robert Frank and Bruce Davidson, Mr. Owens initially saw “Suburbia” less as an art project than as a kind of anthropological document. Referring to the New Deal Farm Security Administration, Mr. Owens said: “I was really influenced by the photographs from the F.S.A. projects. There’s one F.S.A. photo that always stuck in my mind. It’s a picture of a woman, her back is turned to the camera, and all there are on the walls and along the counter are cabinets. I always wanted to open up the cabinets and photograph what was inside.”

With “Suburbia,” Mr. Owens got his chance. Using contacts made through his newspaper work, as well as through classified ads seeking subjects for a project on suburban life, he insinuated himself into the lives of friends and neighbors who sought comfort and prosperity in the growing suburbs of Northern California. He opened the door on their shag carpeting and flowered wallpaper; their mirrored bedrooms and paneled rec rooms; their miniskirts and go-go boots. Whether vacuuming or folding clothes, paying bills or fixing dinner, the people in Mr. Owens’s photographs always seem entirely themselves, for better or worse.

The individual pictures in “Suburbia” may sometimes seem narrow in their documentation of such details, but the story they tell in aggregate is universal, one of aspiration — for a better place with better things, a new way of life in new surroundings, a piece of the American dream. Yet for all the richness of the images Mr. Owens made, it was his decision to pair many of them with quotes he gathered from the subjects — after his editor at Straight Arrow Books, the Rolling Stone imprint that originally published “Suburbia,” told him he had to get releases from everyone he had shot — that gave the project its indelible poignancy.

Whether the subjects are speaking of their possessions or their politics, the captions allow the viewer to measure these people’s image of themselves against the image they present, their hopes and fears against the quotidian circumstances of their lives. “I get a lot of compliments on the front room wall,” says a carefully coiffed matron in her slightly surreal-looking sitting room. “I like Italian Syrocco floral designs over the mantle. It goes well with the Palos Verde rock fireplace.” And a young mother in curlers stands with an

infant in a messy kitchen and wonders, “How can I worry about the damned dishes when there are children dying in Vietnam?”

“Suburbia” sold well for a photo book, going into several printings. It also earned Mr. Owens a reputation in the art world, gaining him a Guggenheim fellowship and a pair of National Endowment for the Arts grants that supported his next projects, a book on groups and rituals called “Our Kind of People” and “Working,” which documented Americans on the job. But by 1978, as he embarked on his fourth book project, focusing on leisure time, Mr. Owens found himself increasingly frustrated with the life of the artist. “I had no money,” he said. “I couldn’t make a living. Then one day I found my Nikon under the seat of my car and I realized I wasn’t a photographer anymore.”

Reviving an interest in homebrewing, Mr. Owens began to study beer-making, eventually opening one of the nation’s first brewpubs, Buffalo Bill’s, in Hayward in 1983. He later opened several more and eventually began publishing trade magazines for the industry. It was not until the early 1990s, after much urging by his longtime friend and patron, Dr. Robert Harshorn Shimshak, that Mr. Owens started to think about photography again.

“We had gotten to know each other in the late 1970s and stayed friends,” said Dr. Shimshak, a physician and Bay Area art collector. “I was over at his place in 1992 or 1993 and I asked him what he was doing with his work — was he at least taking care of the negatives? Bill said, ‘They’re all in a trunk in the basement’ and I had a fit. He said, ‘Well, if you love them so much, why don’t you take care of them?’ He put the negatives in my care and said, ‘They’re yours now.’”

It was Dr. Shimshak who suggested a new edition of “Suburbia.” Acting as editor, he reworked the book’s sequencing, replaced some of the original black-and-whites and added 20 new color images, taken in the late ’70s. “The more I collected art,” Dr. Shimshak said, “the more I realized that Bill’s work wasn’t just influential in the photo world, but also in the art world as a whole. He was one of the first people to look at something commonplace and then take a picture of it that made you really look at it, too.”

Almost every photo in “Suburbia” repays attentive looking, with details that turn an average photo into a great one. “We’re really happy ...” is a case in point. It turns out that the couple in the picture was chosen not because of its neatly nuclear family, but because Mr. Owens wanted pictures of people with pets and they had 23 cats — a half-dozen of which appear, on closer examination, lurking in the corners of the composition.

Indeed, the cats are not the only stealthy aspect of the image: subtle dissonances abound, giving it that tension between celebration and critique that is a trademark of Mr. Owens’s best work. For instance, a longer look confirms that one of the symbols of plenty that attend the couple, the bowl of fruit, is as plastic as the tile-pattern linoleum under their feet. And despite the sunny positivism on the picture’s surface, dusk is falling outside. Through the sliding glass door, beyond the daisy appliqués, you can make out a power plant in the fading light, its buzzing towers marching across the horizon, its wires crazing the sunset like hairline cracks in the otherwise picture-perfect world of suburbia.

