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The American nightmare

Artists Jennifer and Kevin McCoy channel David Lynch to create an unnerving experience of the American dream

Alex Ross

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree, If mankind perished utterly — Sara Teasdale, "There Will Come Soft Rains"

Part of the Toronto International Film Festival's (TIFF) Essential Cinema project, *Soft Rains #6: Suburban Horror*, is a feature projection that uses David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* as a jumping off point to explore several themes: consumer culture, the falsely idyllic suburbs, genre film-making, and the role of cinema in our lives. Originally designed by Brooklyn artists Jennifer and Kevin McCoy for a series of *Soft Rains* pieces commissioned in 2003 (*Suburban Horror* is the sixth), the exhibit is on display at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM)'s Thorsell Spirit House for the duration of the Toronto film festival.

"[I]n general the works within feature projections [...] can be classified as remakes, where the artist uses the original film as a sort of platform for something else or uses it as a framework to explore their own ideas," explains Michael Connor, the exhibit's curator. "This *Soft Rains* piece is an example of that because the McCoy's are really recycling genre elements or elements of *Blue Velvet* and re-assembling them in a new whole."

The main display is a diorama consisting of four separate pieces — each designed from ready-made model materials — which come together to form a pleasant suburban setting. The first piece is two identical white houses on the same piece of land, both with white picket fences, flower bushes, and American flags sticking out on the front porch. Another piece is just a white picket fence with pink flowers, and another is a woman in her kitchen about to bake a pie. The final piece is a mysterious



Projectors and dioramas characterize the ROM's latest installation. DAVID PIKE/The Varsity



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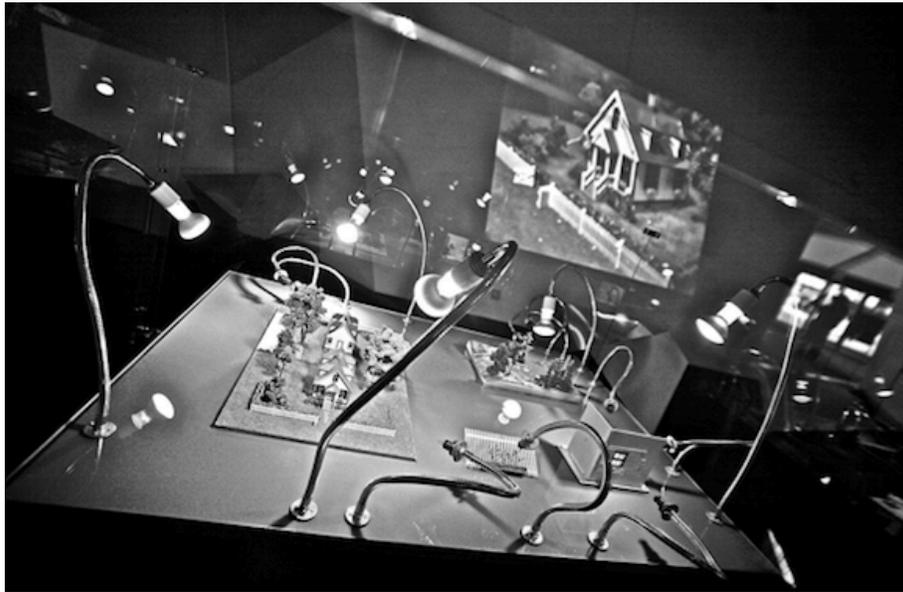
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figure driving a convertible down a tree-lined highway.



Small video cameras mounted around the diorama connect to a central projector, which projects images of the diorama to the upper right corner of the gallery wall. The same seven scenes are looped with Billie Holiday's "On the Sentimental Side." We see an idyllic house with an American flag, then a boy pushing a lawnmower, then the man on the porch, then the pink flowers, and then we get three separate shots of the woman in her kitchen. As soon as the camera shows the image of the stranger on the highway, the music swells and becomes very dark and ominous. Is this person a threat to the tranquility of this suburban scene? We have no idea. The music implies something dark lies underneath the exhibit's quiet, peaceful exterior.

"[The philosopher] Žižek talks about 'The Truman Show' and how one of the classic, American, paranoid fantasies is to be living in the suburbs where everyone is watching you," says Connor. "When he said that it reminded me of this piece, because not only is there the horror that's implied, but also the series of cameras that's watching it."

The whole piece accurately captures the tense atmosphere of Blue Velvet's opening scenes, which offer the viewer similar idyllic images with pleasurable music. However, the tranquil scenery is broken when we see an older man fall over in his garden and start to writhe with pain. The camera then zooms further into his garden and we see black beetles tearing and biting each other. No context is offered, though we understand that there is some dark malevolence eating away at Lumberton.

The exhibit also connects thematically with Ray Bradbury's short story "There Will Come Soft Rains", which features a fully automated house in the future that continues to cook food and clean itself up even after its human occupants have left. "One link I'd like to mention with the Bradbury [short story] is the fact that this is a machine that makes movies" Connor says. "It's similar to the machines in the story that continue to make toast after the humans die. The film will continue to be made and made and made long after we're gone, in theory."

I ask Connor if the piece expresses a horror at the inconsequential nature of human existence. He doesn't quite agree with my interpretation: "That condition is explored,

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but not precisely in those terms. Maybe it would be fair to say it reflects our horror [at being inconsequential]. Certainly it presents suburban life as an inconsequential existence.”

The exhibit also highlights conceptually how cinema culture tends to use many of the same motifs in film. “There is definitely a connection between the idea of this machine that repeats the film ad infinitum and this idea of a cinema culture that repeats many of the same modes,” Connor explains.

“What [the McCoys] are picking out is this suburban idyll that is shattered by...”

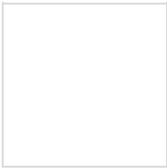
“...a malevolent force?” I ask.

“A malevolent force—exactly.”

Whether that malevolent force is the stranger on the highway or just being trapped in the suburbs to begin with, the McCoys have definitely captured all the pleasure and trauma of their exhibit’s cinematic counterpart.

Soft Rains #6: Suburban Horror runs until September 19 at ROM in the Thorsell Spirit House. Admission is free.

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