

A Suburb Sinner

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A Suburb Sinner

The contemporary suburb is a place of many contradictions. It is covered in green grass, constructed gardens, and carefully planted trees, yet it is completely unnatural and inharmonious with nature. It is considered a utopia in which to raise a family, yet it is entirely vehicle-dependent and offers little walkability or cultural diversity. A suburb is outwardly attractive, yet behind the beautiful façades lays substandard construction, questionable craftsmanship and poor foundations. In *A Suburb Sinner*, I explore, deconstruct, and prod at my suburban past from my outsider's perspective as a gay man in the suburban environment, allowing me, through the lens of my art, to both critique and embrace the various aspects of my suburban past. Furthermore, my artistic exploration allows me to make educated choices about the type of location and the kinds of cultural surroundings in which I would like to live in the future. The exhibition is largely inspired by the icons of suburbia that permeate my memory, such as the green lawns, immaculate landscaping, fenced yards, and the bricked façades of the houses that always looked *just different enough* not to be identical. Using an interdisciplinary approach consisting of 3D printing, printmaking, bookbinding, sculpture, installation, as well as fabric and wallpaper design, I set out to investigate the artificiality of the suburban façade through my own history of growing up in this image-obsessed and highly regulated system of living. Reexamining personal memories of place, home and identity, *A Suburb Sinner* presents the viewer with a multi-sensorial lens through which to view the deconstructed materials and forms of a suburban landscape from the perspective of not belonging or fitting into the societal norms of that place.

Growing up in numerous suburban developments outside of Toronto, I always imagined that the suburban way of life must have originated in the United States. The life that I knew closely resembled the post-war “American Dream” ideal, where middle-class families flocked to new suburban developments to raise their children in an innovative era of prosperity, security, and homogeneity. However, upon beginning research for this thesis support paper, I was surprised to learn that the origins of the word suburb in fact lie in the old-world of London, England. The European origins of the word did not represent the same middle-class lifestyle associated with the North American suburb of today, but instead represented the lower class and the “othering” of unwanted persons. In eighteenth-century London, the core of the city was the only appropriate place for the elite to live, and the unfortunate were pushed to the periphery of the city where the noisy and dirty factories were located. Both income and social standing trended downward as one moved further away from the core of the city (Fishman 6). At the time, the term “suburbe” was defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “a settlement on the urban fringe... a place of inferior, debased, and especially licentious habits of life” (Old Oxford English Dictionary). The title of my exhibition, *A Suburb Sinner* is influenced by Shakespearean London, where “...so many houses of prostitution had moved to the disreputable outskirts that a whore was called ‘a suburb sinner’, and to call a man a ‘suburbanite’ was a serious insult” (Fishman 7). The exhibition’s name serves a double meaning, as my experiences with bullying and being “othered” as a queer person within numerous suburban environments often left me feeling like a sinner for not fitting the hetero-normative expectations of my community. It also touches upon the way that the

suburban habitat controls nature and has created a disconnect from what is truly wild, thus illustrating a lifestyle that is not sustainable and frequently criticized as such.

A Suburb Sinner reflects my youthful experience within the hetero-normative standards and expectations that often surround the contemporary North American suburban régime. My exhibition refers to a form of regulated middle-classism: the way that people have perceived me and judged me in my life. The suburban lifestyle is commonly perceived as being a desirable one, in which idealized families support their children by giving them any material thing they need to be happy. From my perspective as an outsider, it is a place of superficial community, unspoken rules, and high personal expectations, all of which are created with the intent of raising prodigies who will one day marry and raise kids of their own in the suburban paradise. However, as urban theorist and historian Robert Fishman notes, the suburban world of leisure, family life, and its perceived harmony with nature, from its origins, has always been based on the principle of exclusion:

Suburbia can thus be defined first by what it includes – middle-class residences – and second, (perhaps more importantly) by what it excludes: all industry, most commerce except for enterprises that specifically serve a residential area, and all lower-class residents (except for servants) (6).

While the neatly landscaped lawns and newly paved roads may present an image of a perfect setting to raise a family, anyone who has grown up in such an environment can attest to the importance of the façade in suburbia. In my experience, my family outwardly tried to present the illusion of perfection, while hiding less acceptable family histories such as multiple divorces, stepchildren, half-brothers, and family feuds over custody and

child support. For some reason, appearances were everything on both sides of my split family, as if convincing the neighbours that everything was perfect would somehow make it so. Growing up, I was always passively resistant to many teachings from my parents, step-parents, educators, and churchgoers since I would often witness hypocritical behavior from these people outside of these institutions. I have now come to realize that it was the façade of a well-rounded family that created this duality of appearances and actions. I would often find myself searching for hidden information on my parents, going through their personal items, journals, bills, phones, and dresser drawers. In retrospect, I believe this behavior was a reaction to the façade that my parents presented outwardly to the world, leaving me thirsting to understand who they really were and what they were like before the social expectations of the suburban place took hold.

One of the reasons why suburban life looks so appealing from the outside might be simply due to the affluence of those who live there. The mainly middle and upper-middle class inhabitants' problems are often overlooked as there is little empathy for those who live in the perceived utopian environment of suburbia. This viewpoint derives from the materialistic perspective that all you need to enjoy life is enough money to live comfortably. But, I have come to understand through my personal suburban history and my experience as a gay man in the suburbs that a community and the place you choose to live needs to have more than just financially stable neighbours who maintain nice lawns and clean outward physical and emotional façades. A place should also encompass a sense of community, diversity, education, and walkability, similar to many urban neighbourhoods that grew naturally out of the core of a city. It is fascinating how a place and its design can affect the groups of people living in it and how there becomes a

somewhat unwritten identity and a set of underlying rules that inhabitants are expected to know:

A neighborhood's architectural distinctiveness has in itself an effect on group identity. Through day-to-day visual experience the inhabitants of a neighborhood know when and where they have crossed the line from a region that is "us" to a region that is "them".... Any sharply circumscribed town can thus be a unifying landmark for its inhabitants. It performs this role by simply being there for everyone to see and experience. A town favored with architectural monuments enjoys the added advantage of symbolic resonance – a resonance that is further heightened when ceremonies are conducted around them and stories are told about them (Tuan 96).

The original suburban concept was designed to locate people within countryside or park settings that visually offered a natural landscape without the labour of having to maintain a rural homestead (Fishman 146). Contemporary subdivisions are now typically on the outskirts of cities, often replacing parks and farmland. Many scenic suburban developments and streets are actually named after the natural habitat that they replaced, creating an ironic history for the area.

My current object-based art practice does not openly speak to my personal experience of adolescence that I have described here in any direct or literal way. I am a reserved person and I deeply respect my parents for doing what they thought was best for my siblings and me at that time. I value the somewhat crazy and chaotic way that I was raised, as it prepared me to deal with numerous obstacles in life with ease. I grew up in a

rather emotionally wild but physically mundane environment that lacked a general sense of cultural diversity. This social homogeneity has made me desire greater societal experiences through other individuals, education, and travel. Looking back at my most impressionable years, it is easy to dismiss these experiences as simply part of growing up — but at the time, it was everything I knew. My current artwork, with its focus on suburbia, aims to reexamine many of these personal experiences and ways of living that have been ingrained in me from my parents, neighbours, friends, and educators. I have discovered that my art can illuminate specific memories by association, transforming personal histories through the physical labour of art making. The original memory and history can be revisited with a degree of criticality in an installation or single piece of art.

Two books that I read during the first term of my MFA have strongly influenced my thought process and ability to take my suburban past seriously. The first book is titled *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck). The second book, by Robert Fishman, is titled *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. Both of these texts allowed me to explore my suburban past, which I had formerly considered commonplace and not worthy of any artistic exploration, in a new light. I was convinced that this lifestyle was uninteresting and that people were neutral about the matter, but I was mistaken. The urban versus suburban discussion is alive and well and is one that will likely not be settled for as long as we have access to cheap transportation and land. The suburban landscape, although architecturally uninspiring, does provide a resilient and critical foundation for, *A Suburb Sinner*.

Place

Figure 1. Douglas Browning, *Childhood Farmhouse* (aerial view), 1987, colour photography.

I took my first steps on a one hundred acre sheep farm in rural Ontario. The farm was on a beautiful rolling and rustic landscape, a calm place of flora, fauna, and hard work (Fig. 1). I felt directly connected to the natural environment that surrounded me. The vast landscape was humbling and the presence of animals such as sheep, horses, goats, chickens, and pigs was a constant source of amusement. No amount of gardening, grass cutting, or weed whacking could control the landscape that encircled the homestead, an unachievable task that constantly reminded my family of Mother Nature's immeasurable power. At the time, family farming as a way of life was being threatened as huge-commercial operations financially dominated the industry, and consequently our

family history and small-farming operation took a turn for the worse. Unable to earn a steady income, our family fled to the newly-constructed suburbs to the south, hoping to create a more financially stable life near the city. The sheep farm from that point on stood for financial letdown, as it has for many families since the industrial revolution: “In the mid nineteenth century the rough stonework of the farmhouse had stood for the hardships of rural life from which so much of the middle class had fled, and which few wished to recall” (Fishman 149).

Coming from a rural to a suburban setting was a drastic change for my family. There was a new set of social rules to follow that stuck to the strict and neat standards of the residential lifestyle. The landscape was controlled with visually harsh materials. We were suddenly in close proximity to other suburbanites and we were experiencing a different type of nature than we were used to, one of weedless green lawns, pavement, concrete, and wooden fences. It felt like an abnormal experience at first, but we quickly started enjoying it and partaking in the environment-dominating maintenance rituals.

A short time after moving from the farm, my parents separated and moved into different subdivisions in neighbouring cities. My siblings and I were shuttled back and forth on the main highway between our mother’s and father’s houses, spending more time in the car than ever before. The lifestyle was vehicle-dependent, but the car rides were enjoyable. Unexpectedly, the family sedan became a social space; a place in which both intimate conversations as well as heavy and heated arguments took place. Many of my family’s suburban homes were seen as financial investments and houses with “potential” would be bought and sold for profit a couple years later, and the cycle would be repeated.

Between both sides of my split family, we moved a total of nine times over a period of eighteen years.

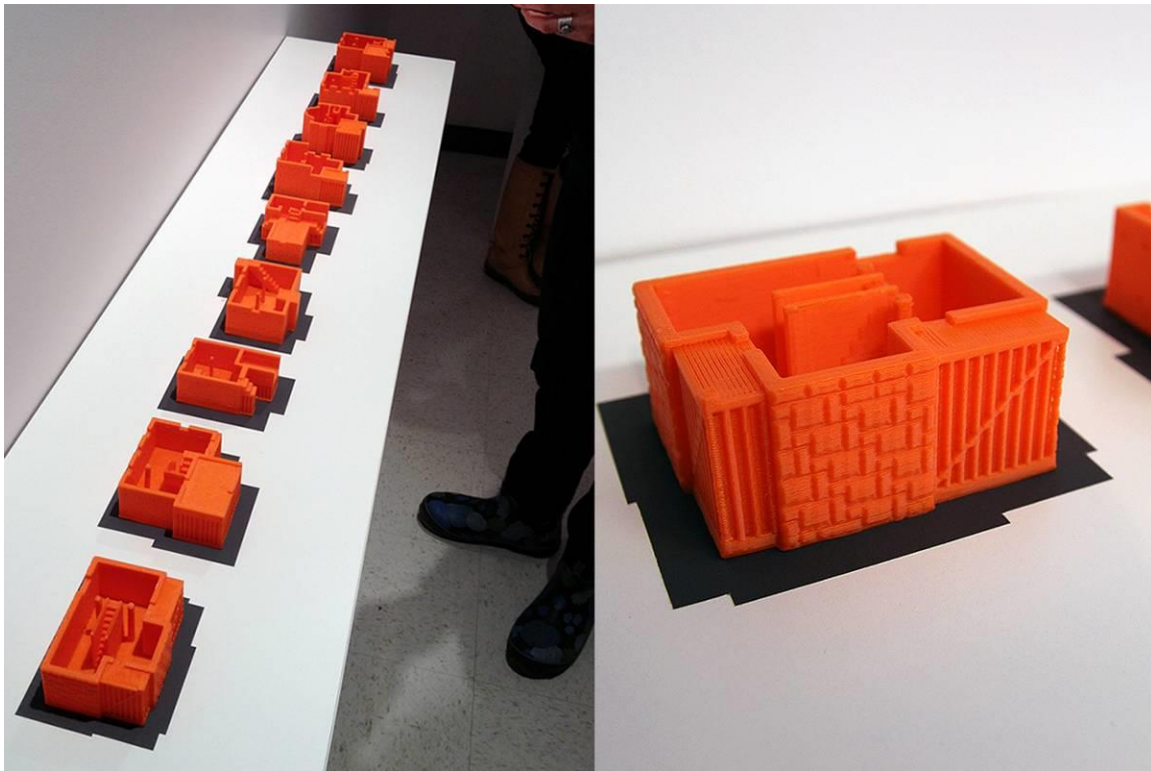


Figure 2. Mackenzie Browning, (*3D Foundations*): 6160 Vannest Road, 58 Parnell Crescent, 79 Pinebrook Crescent, 598 Fernhill Boulevard, 8340 Bessborough Drive, 76 John Walter Crescent, 8 Halstead Road, 414625 Baseline Road, 2202 Minsky Place (installation view), 2013, ABS plastic, wooden shelf, and matte vinyl.

Inspired by this past, I aimed to make an installation that recreates the nine basements of the houses that I lived in and moved from during my childhood and adolescence. The title of the work is a list of street addresses of the homes in chronological order. The first foundation, on the far left of the installation represents the stone farmhouse where I began my life (Fig. 2). This foundation is physically different from the other eight foundations as it has a field stone texture, a simple rectangular design, and a small, narrow center staircase. The other eight foundations are obviously of a suburban design, with many angles and complex staircases, all contributing to the multifaceted exteriors that suburban houses have for the sake of grandiose “curb appeal.”

The nine foundations are digitally designed using TinkerCad software and 3D printed using a MakerBot printer with “construction site orange” ABS plastic. The nine foundations are installed on a floating shelf and resemble a single streetscape of the suburban kind. Viewers are invited to peer into the small-scale models and imagine that they are descending the little staircases into the basements. The frequently cold, damp concrete space of the suburban basement was an important place for my family and me. In the varying suburbs and municipalities where I grew up, it was more desirable to buy a house with an unfinished basement, as opposed to one with a finished basement. Since my family bought these homes as investments, keeping the basement unfinished was better for resale value. In many of these developments, the houses are designed in pods, grouping like-sized homes together in one neighbourhood. This does not give the family the option to expand their living space without physically moving to another neighbourhood:

Moving is a well-established tradition in America, and *moving up* constitutes a significant part of the American dream. Not only is working one’s way to a bigger house central to our ethos but it makes sense functionally as families bring children into the world. But why must the move to a larger or more luxurious house bring with it the abandonment of one’s neighbors, community groups, and often even schoolmates? The suburban pod system causes people to move not just from house to house but from community to community (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck 44).

Due to property standards and common bylaws in these neighbourhoods, it is difficult to get approval to expand your house with a backyard addition or an additional floor, and

thus an unfinished basement offers the only space for expansion without moving to a larger house.

My 3D printed foundations offer an imaginary place of bygone houses, forgetting the exteriors and upper levels and embracing the strength of the foundation as a metaphor for my personal experiences and memories that took place there. When I am back home, I often drive by the houses that I have lived in, seeing what has changed, how the landscape has grown, and how each house has depreciated or transformed superficially. The nine foundations are designed from memory and act as a symbol of my nostalgic memories of my childhood and the places that seemed important to me at the time.

Spending so much time reflecting on my past also brings up many questions about my future. The concept of place and where I will eventually settle down is frequently on my mind. I am currently at a transitional point in my life; I will be moving away from Saskatoon upon the completion of my MFA program. I will either be moving back home to my family in Ontario or with my partner to a suburb of Denver, Colorado. This change fills me with tension and anxiety and thus I have been examining each option and how place will directly impact my future and how the chosen locale will influence my creative conceptions and outlook on life. For me, a sense of place is vital, but it is often hard to define a place or realize the significance of a place until you have moved away and become an outsider to your own experience:

Place can be difficult to locate. One might think that one can spot it somewhere, some way off in the distance, perhaps, and yet as one approaches it seems to disappear, only to reconfigure at some farther point, or back from whence one came. Place itself can seem a confusing

place in which to find oneself, an uncertain place to explore, even with someone to guide us (Dean and Millar 11).

I often have not recognized my attachment to a place until I have moved away from it. My ultimate ambition is to find a place that I enjoy from the beginning, not just a sense of visual familiarity, but also a locale that I will savor and grow to love with time. I have come to realize that I recurrently feel trapped when living in a single place for too long, which could be due to how frequently my family moved and the constant shuffle between houses, communities, and municipalities that I experienced growing up. I am always prepared to move and I crave the sensation of living in an unfamiliar place, but conversely, I desire to find a stable place that I can truly consider to be a home between my travels.

Repetition

As a printmaker, I often liken the act of creating an edition of prints to the construction of a new subdivision. All of the prints in an edition are substantively the same, but they may contain some cosmetic differences (especially in a varied edition). Similarly, in order to maintain cost effectiveness, most homes built in the same suburban community are designed to be foundationally as similar as possible with the façade slightly changed through mirroring designs, alternating bricks, shifting colour schemes, and modifying front entrances. This is done to give the residents the illusion of uniqueness for their home. Surprisingly, these cosmetic modifications, although nonstructural, involve significant effort and expense from the developer:

As much as 20 percent of their construction budget goes toward the application of the superficial variety – different shapes, colours, window

types, different tack-on ornament... but these efforts are in vain, because beneath the surface articulation is a relentless repetition of the same building (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck 48).

The concept of repetition is an important one in both printmaking and suburbia. Life is generally repetitive in a suburb, since residents will often find themselves repeating the same yard work, driving on the same roads, eating at the same restaurants, and performing the same mundane tasks over and over again. The same can often be said of printmakers. While a great deal of technical skill, creativity, and precision is required to be a printmaker, it often involves repeating the same task tens or even hundreds of times to produce an edition or installation. Printmaking is also decidedly sculptural with many reductive techniques, layering of colours, and building of technical complexities.

One artist that has been a strong inspiration for my installation practice is Dominique Pétrin, a multidisciplinary, performance, and installation-based artist born in Montréal, Québec. She often manufactures altered states of consciousness and perception through complete and all-encompassing visual illusions, designs, and colours. Most recently, her work has been in the form of “mammoth, psychedelic installations: pixel-happy works that attack the viewers with a kitschy cacophony of colour, making it nearly impossible to think (or see) straight” (Jow par. 12). One of her altered rooms, titled *Hotline* (Fig. 3), has influenced my own printmaking practice and has also reinforced my ideas around the importance of labour and the handmade. Her work is comprised of countless hours of screen-printing, hand-cutting, and gluing using a potato starch-based adhesive. Her installation practice is highly involved. She stated, “I improvise most of my installations in situ, which makes the installation process explorative ... the overall

assemblage experience is as important as the work itself. This is intimately connected to performance, but on a very personal level” (Jow par. 3).

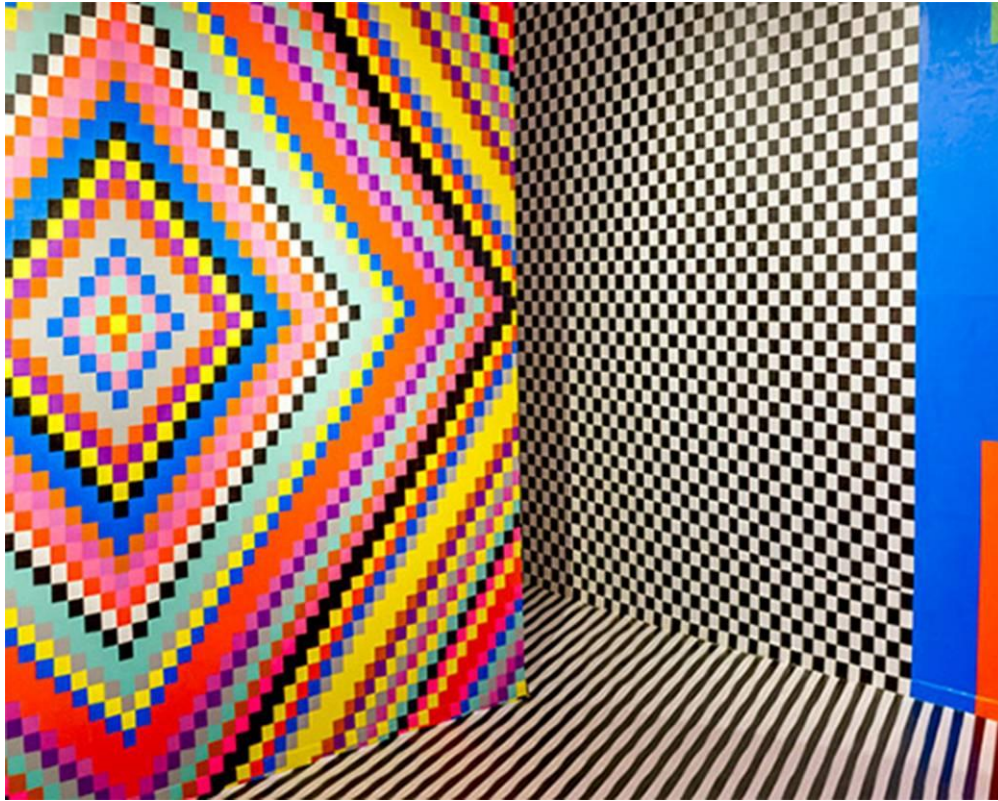


Figure 3. Dominique Pétrin, *Hotline*, 2013, silkscreened paper installation.

Another inspirational artist whose interests often lie in a sculptural print-based genre is Mitch Mitchell. Mitchell is primarily a Canadian-based print artist, originally from Springfield, Illinois. His work visually analyzes industry, trade, and globalization through print media and the graphic multiple. I am personally interested in how he has successfully moved printmaking into the realm of sculpture, specifically with his work *BERTH* (Fig. 4), a series of hand screen-printed boxes that explore:

The role of economy, waste and production, class social systems and historical hierarchies. Thousands of individually hand silkscreened and folded boxes take on various visual scenarios mimicking an aerial view of

a shipping container bay, a mound of rubble, architectural portrait façades and palettes of construction material (Mitchell “BERTH” par. 1).

A second work of his that has influenced my own art practice is *Distance Arc*, which is a balloon-like shape that is constructed using quilted newsprint, staples, rust, various electronics, and an inflation system. Both of Mitch Mitchell’s print-based installations work to push printmaking beyond the two-dimensional plane and into the physical world of endless perspectives (Fillmore par. 7).



Figure 4. Mitch Mitchell, *BERTH*, 2010, silkscreen on folded handmade boxes.

One of my pivotal installations and an outcome of my interest in the endless possibilities of perspective in installation art are a series of hand-printed bricks and the construction of an architectural façade. *The Cookie Cutter Folly* references the historical idea of a folly or replicated ruin. Traditionally a folly is a costly ornamental building or foundation with no practical purpose, which often serves solely as a decorative ruin for a garden or park. My foundation folly installation is constructed of four types of differently

designed bricks that are hand screen-printed, cut, and assembled. The differing brick designs reference numerous types of suburban building materials, trends, and the multiple homes that I have lived in (Fig. 5). The traditional red bricks that comprise the majority of the installation allude to the most desirable home exterior and the pretension that a material can carry, while the fragility of the printed bricks also pokes fun at the somewhat cheap, mass-produced quality that many suburban developments have. Growing up, a fully bricked home was always considered more desirable and carried the greatest resale value. Houses that were finished with vinyl siding or that were only partially bricked, predictably brought less value in the real-estate market. A fully bricked house is still considered an upgrade in suburban housing developments, similar to granite countertops and interlocked driveways. Traditionally, a red-bricked suburban home brings a prestige that other materials do not offer. The red screen-printed bricks in *The Cookie Cutter Folly* are overemphasized through physical height in order to reference the traditional cachet they offer in reality.

The second brick design that comprises the folly is a cream coloured, flat brick that offers a look into the past. The warm yellow hue references many Ontario farmhouses from decades ago and the excavated clay used to make the home's veneer. In the early twentieth century, many farmhouses were constructed from handmade bricks formed from the clay from excavating the foundation. This brick also mirrors the lengthier, thin bricks used in earlier suburban neighborhoods of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. They were often used for retaining gardens or decorative brickwork that lined the lower section of ranch-style houses. The yellow brick hue is warm and inviting, echoing the familiarity and comfort of a family home.



Figure 5. Mackenzie Browning, *Cookie Cutter Folly*, 2013-2014, screen-print on archival cardstock, and adhesive.

The third and largest brick design is a simulated concrete block with varying coloured pea-stones and embedded gravel. This brick was designed to be the foundational element for the installation. Many newly built suburban homes have exposed foundations of poured concrete or cinderblock that is often visible on the sides, backs and even small areas on the front of the home. Older neighbourhoods, which were built before the innovation of poured foundations, have exposed sections of cinderblock footings that are regularly known for leaking and cracking with age. This specific screen-printed, paper brick aims to reference both structural types of foundations and emphasize its bizarre architectural and minimalistic beauty.

The final brick is an ornamental half brick that references outside, inside, and interlocking stone walkways. The design can also reference the aerial view of a suburban

home's angular roof. It is a brick that can be used to fill gaps, create adornment around windows and has the potential to construct pathways of varying warm and neutral colours.

The bricks and concrete that shape the façade of many residential houses in North America create a sturdy boundary between the inside and outside world. This particular folly represents the brick as an aggressive and robust boundary, one that is highly constructed and controlled on one end, but seems to have either collapsed or the construction process has been abandoned on the other (Fig. 6). The presence of a hand-crafted wooden palette on the far end of the installation further emphasizes the ongoing construction process (Fig. 7). In many ways, this particular installation turns a printmaker into a print-based bricklayer, having to design varying bricks that slot together and hold the weight of the structure above.

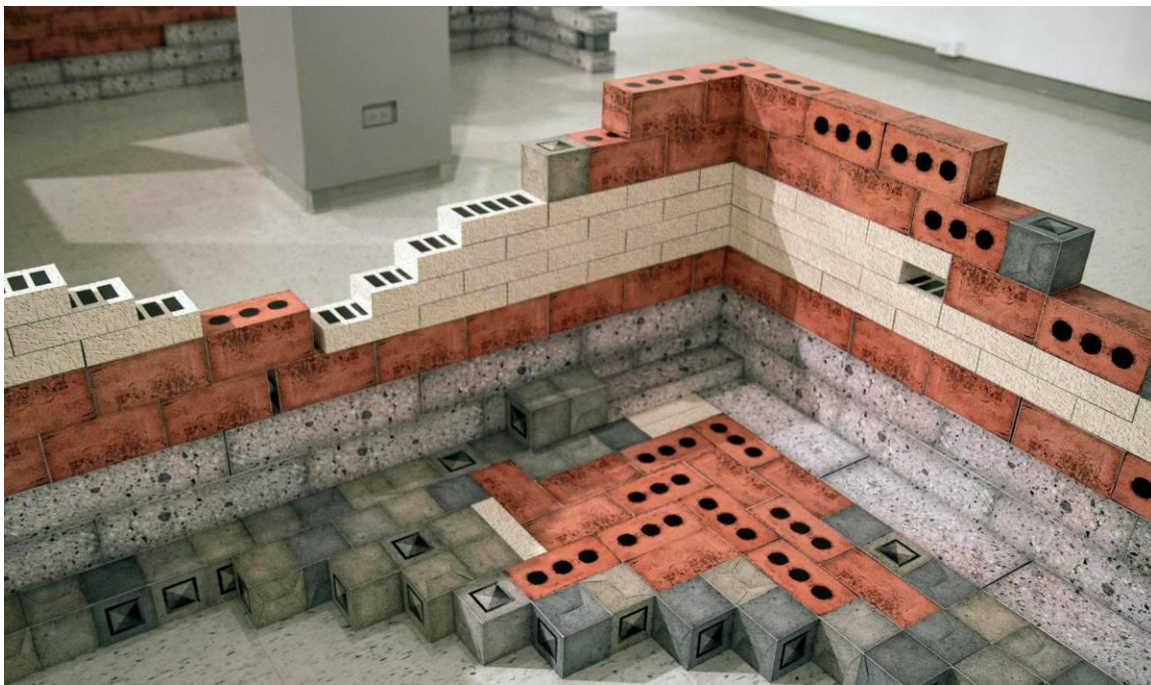


Figure 6. Mackenzie Browning, *Cookie Cutter Folly* (detail), 2013-2014, screen-print on archival cardstock, and adhesive.

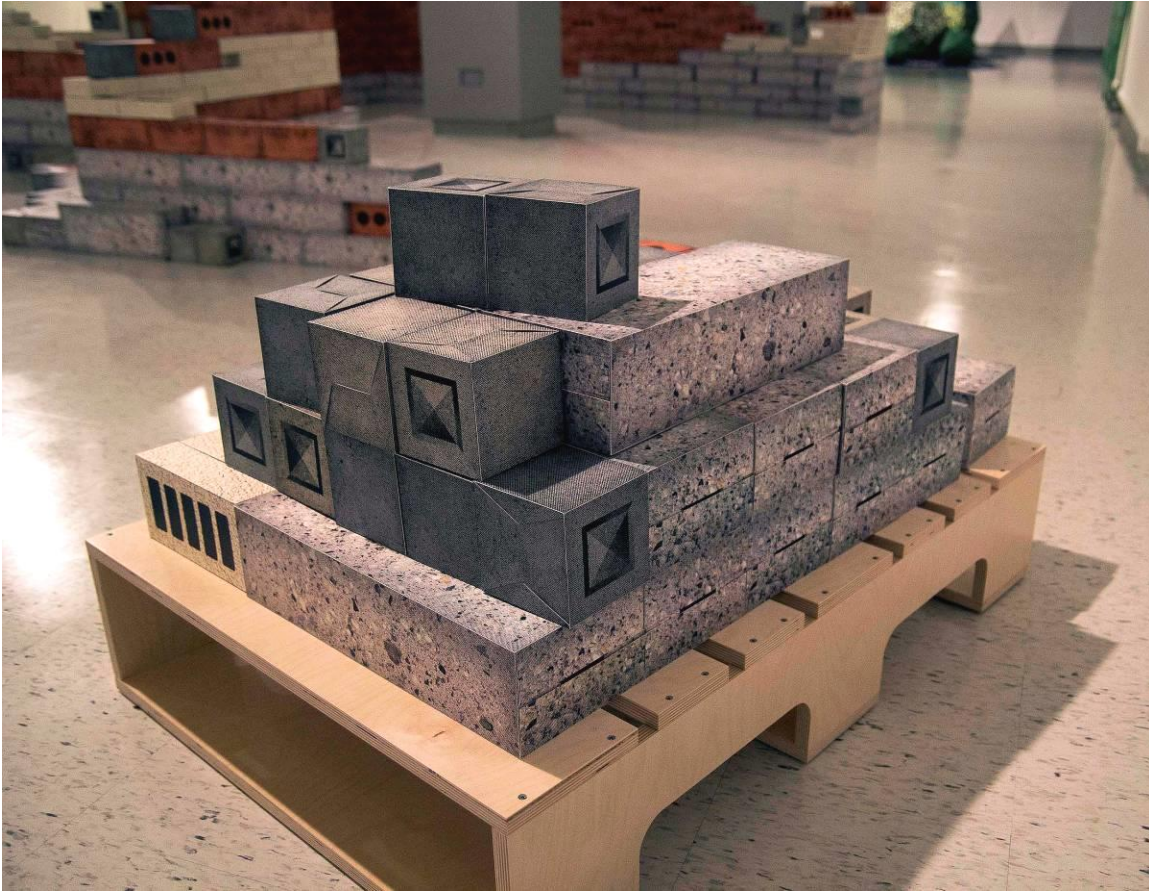


Figure 7. Mackenzie Browning, *Palette Deluxe*, 2014, paper bricks, Baltic Birch plywood, and metal hardware.

Endless Perspectives

Pushing the tradition of printmaking into the realm of sculpture and greater physical interaction has always been a strong interest of mine. This effort has pushed me to explore the definition of installation art and differing viewpoints within the field of fine art and sculpture. Claire Bishop's definition of installation art is the most fitting in my opinion, being both wide-ranging while avoiding being overly academic:

Installation art is a term that loosely refers to the type of art into which that viewer physically enters, and which is often described as 'theatrical', 'immersive' or 'experimental.' However, the sheer diversity in terms of appearance, content and scope of the work produced today under this

name and the freedom with which the term if used, almost preclude it from having meaning. The word ‘installation’ has now expanded to describe any arrangement of objects in any given space, to the point where it can happily be applied even to a conventional display of paintings on a wall (Bishop 6).

Quite often, installation art can deal with the creation and use of multiples to construct a larger space and is thus conducive to the printmaking tradition of the editioned multiple. Installation art brings the human body into the space of the art, making the gallery-goer’s reaction part of the experience and conception behind it, thus creating an embodied space in the gallery as opposed to the more disconnected and purely visual experience that is common in traditional museums, commercial galleries and historically traditional artistic practices:

Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision (Bishop 6).

With these ideas in mind, I set out to make an indoor garden installation that is completely hand screen-printed, cut, and folded. It aims to create an immersive, sensorial experience within the context of the standard white architecture of the gallery and its common “do not touch” attitude towards experiencing fine art (Fig. 8). The installation makes the museumgoer question the intention of the space. Is it imagined being inside or outside? Is the space an abstraction of recollections or a fabrication of fictional viewpoints? The *Barrier Green* garden installation consists of hand screen-printed floras,

cardboard shrubbery structures and four-colour process printed river rock, beach stone, and wood-mulch (Fig. 9). The garden acts as a “green” or “soft” barrier within the gallery space. It is a way of directing people through the space, and controlling how they move around and which parts they avoid, without being obvious or offensive. The name, *Barrier Green*, was inspired by a common art supply, barrier cream. Artists and tradespeople use this topical lotion to place a physical barrier between the skin and the contaminants that may irritate or infect it. The *Barrier Green* installation repurposes the concept of placing a physical barrier between two things or spaces, while referencing a suburban milieu. Many green barriers, such as trees and hedges, are used in landscape architecture to control or hide unsightly elements such as cars, water meters, concrete foundations, or utility boxes. Specific plants and shrubs are even chosen to keep dogs and cats out of gardens. These barriers can also be used to block out neighbours, define property lines, dampen street noise, and potentially prevent people from walking across an area or lawn.



Figure 8. Mackenzie Browning, *Barrier Green*, 2014, screen-print on rice paper, cardboard, and adhesive.



Figure 9. Mackenzie Browning, *Barrier Green*, 2014, screen-print on rice paper, cardboard, and adhesive.

The inspiration for this installation came from an older neighbourhood that my family used to live in. It was a beautiful mid-twentieth century home with a huge front yard with established trees. As soon as we moved in, we realized that the neighbours were not tending to their front yard and had several unsightly vehicles in the driveway, including a bright yellow, rusted-out pickup truck. Like many suburban areas and municipalities, there was a property standards committee responsible for enforcing community rules on behavior and aesthetics in order to sustain property values and provide a higher quality of life to all residents. The committee forced our neighbours to clean up their yard and they built a small white fence along the property line to keep their mess out of sight. At first we thought the fence was a great idea, but the neighbours then installed moderate-sized gargoyles facing our yard with metal platforms on top of several of the fence posts. It was a passive sign that the neighbours were displeased with us and the gargoyles were revenge for keeping such a beautiful yard and for trying to enforce similar standards upon them. At first, my stepfather would go out at dusk and slowly turn each gargoyle around to face their property instead of ours. But each morning the effigies would be facing our yard once again. This went on for several weeks until my stepfather planted a green barrier of tall-lush cedars to block the view of the fence and its unsightly gargoyles from our property.

Barrier Green also embodies a disconnect that contemporary suburban landscape has from other forms of natural spaces such as provincial parks, rural fields, and dense forests. After living in more than a few suburban developments, my personal interactions with nature changed dramatically compared to my upbringing on an immense rural farm. I now look at landscape and nature in general as something that should be controlled and

continuously perfected, an act of physical maintenance to prevent disorder. My critical viewpoint of the suburban landscape is expressed in the *Barrier Green* installation, which consists of individual screen-printed shrubs, which offer an ideal shape of perfect symmetry and flora that is in endless bloom. Both interior and exterior designs within the suburban environment frequently mimic naturally occurring forms and shapes, but often with a more curated or controlled appearance. This phony garden installation pushes this mimicry of nature and idealization of landscape beyond the natural and into the realm of design and the hyper-fake aesthetic. This constructed suburban landscape is meant to embrace the beauty of controlled suburban gardens by mocking the absurdity of this type of landscaping and its disconnect from what is truly natural and sustainable. As a continuation of the garden installation, I created four fabrics that could be used in a home as decoration either inside or outside. These four printed fabrics are an extension of the *Barrier Green* installation, borrowing four of the floral designs and translating them into a black and white colour scheme. These custom-designed materials offer a glimpse into how my designs can easily transfer into the world of interior design and decorating (Fig. 10). This textile series started off as handmade ink drawings, which were then digitized using Adobe Illustrator and printed on a large scale using the desired fabric pattern repeat ratio and mirroring. The textiles are digitally printed on a cotton-linen blend fabric, which has a similar texture to painter's canvas. The materials are reproduced in large bolts of 54" x 12' and hung on the wall using metal tension cable at the top and middle sections, allowing the fabrics to reach outward from the wall and emulate the slope of a suburban roofline.



Figure 10. Mackenzie Browning, *Hosta* (left), *Spiraea* (right), 2014, digital archival print on linen-cotton blend fabric.

The chosen flower-patterned designs used in this series of textiles are familiar to a suburban neighbourhood and landscape. The plants are connected to my own work experience as I have pruned, watered, and sustained these plants at numerous houses that I lived in, and sold them while working at two different garden centers in my old neighbourhoods. The separate varieties of greenery illustrated on these black and white fabrics are the plant species of *Bergenia Cordifolia*, *Spiraea Salicifolia*, *Hosta*, and *Eastern White Pine* (Fig. 11). I can ultimately see these fabric designs used in the domestic environment to create curtains, pillows, duvet covers, tablecloths, and/or cloth napkins.



Figure 11. Mackenzie Browning, *White Pine* (right), *Bergenia Cordifolia* (left), 2014, digital archival print on linen-cotton blend fabric.

There is often a resistance to the overly commercial, illustrative, and graphic design trends that are constantly permeating the world of fine art training and education, but personally, I enjoy embracing these boundaries in my own studio practice. The blurring of fine art and design creates an opportunity for continual learning. I strive for my art and installations to be an amalgamation of fine art, craft, graphic design, and illustration. My studio practice favours printmaking but embraces an interdisciplinary approach of sculpture, paper cutting, painting, computer design, and other forms of new media. I am especially fascinated with installation art as it allows me to expand printmaking into the third dimension but, more importantly, allows the spectator to interact and see the fine art from a series of multiple viewpoints and angles that are not

easily achieved in many other art forms. Claire Bishop further defines installation art through its relationship with the spectator:

Installation art, by using an entire space that must be circumnavigated to be seen, came to provide a direct analogy for the desirability of multiple perspectives on a single situation. One artist who has articulately theorized this shift in relation to installation art is Mary Kelly (b.1941). For her, the viewer of an installation is ‘sort of out of control’ because ‘the view is always partial’ – ‘there’s no position from which you can actually see everything at once.’ Like many artists in this period, Kelly came to regard installation art’s multi-perspectivalism as emancipatory – in contrast to single point perspective, which centres the viewer in a position of mastery before the painting, and by extension, the world (Bishop 36).

Inspired by *Barrier Green*, I created three separate artist’s books to coincide with the two main installations for the exhibition, *A Suburb Sinner*. A handmade artist-book can be an extension of an installation practice and offers the opportunity of endless perspectives. These books are displayed in a small grouping and embody the immersive qualities of the main installations, but in the compact, convenient package of a handheld book. Each book is hand-bound, cut, and assembled using found images that were digitally scanned and converted into separate layers, which were then hand screen-printed using a four-colour separation process. The artist-books symbolize three concepts of suburban living: *Ground*, *Boundary*, and *Structure* (Fig. 12). The books do not offer any visual ‘white’ space for the reader to rest their mind. In addition, the books are completely wordless, containing only the signature of the maker. Thus, the books do not

contain a clear front or back, allowing the reader to feel and read the book from any side, angle or format. The fact that the books do not contain words creates an involvement that is meant to complement the visual experience and allows the reader to envision the suburban textures within the context of their own understandings of home and place. This lack of text and multiple-perspective approach to design is similar to many sculptural installations where the piece can be experienced through an endless number of angles.



Figure 12. Mackenzie Browning, *Boundary* (left), *Ground* (middle), *Structure* (right), 2014, screen-print on cotton-rag paper, cardstock, and adhesive.

The first book, titled *Ground*, represents the residential lawn and North America's obsession with lawn care—akin to the concepts that will be discussed as part of the *Suburban Leisure* print-based installation in the next section (Fig. 16). The grass constructions within the confines of this artist-book signify individual blades of grass on a magnified level as the book can be twisted and turned to create a chaos of grass blades or simply opened on a level surface to produce a controlled lawn of straight individual

blades of grass. This duality of chaos and control offers a glimpse into the concept of control over nature versus the uncontrolled power and constant resistance it has (Fig. 13). The screen-printed grass texture is a flawless rich green colour, referencing both the popular emergence of artificial grasses and the use of chemicals and fertilizers to attain a lush and exceptionally uniform lawn.



Figure 13. Mackenzie Browning, *Ground*, 2014, screen-print on cotton-rag paper, cardstock, and adhesive.

The second book, and the most complex, is entitled *Boundary*. It illustrates the concept of a “soft barrier,” an obstruction of greenery that is put in place to divide a property, create privacy, or control the walkability of an area. It also embodies “rigid barriers” such as wooden fencing, chipboard, and traditional brick (Fig. 14). These screen-printed textures are merged together, layer upon layer, using a center bound, accordion bookbinding technique. When the artist-book is upright, it has a strong visual

presence, almost like a Chinese finger trap, with its multiple angles, edges, and textures. The book offers numerous images of boundaries that can be transformed from many angles. One side of the artist-book offers a “green barrier” while the other consists of mainly rigid building materials, such as wooden fencing, pavement, and brick.

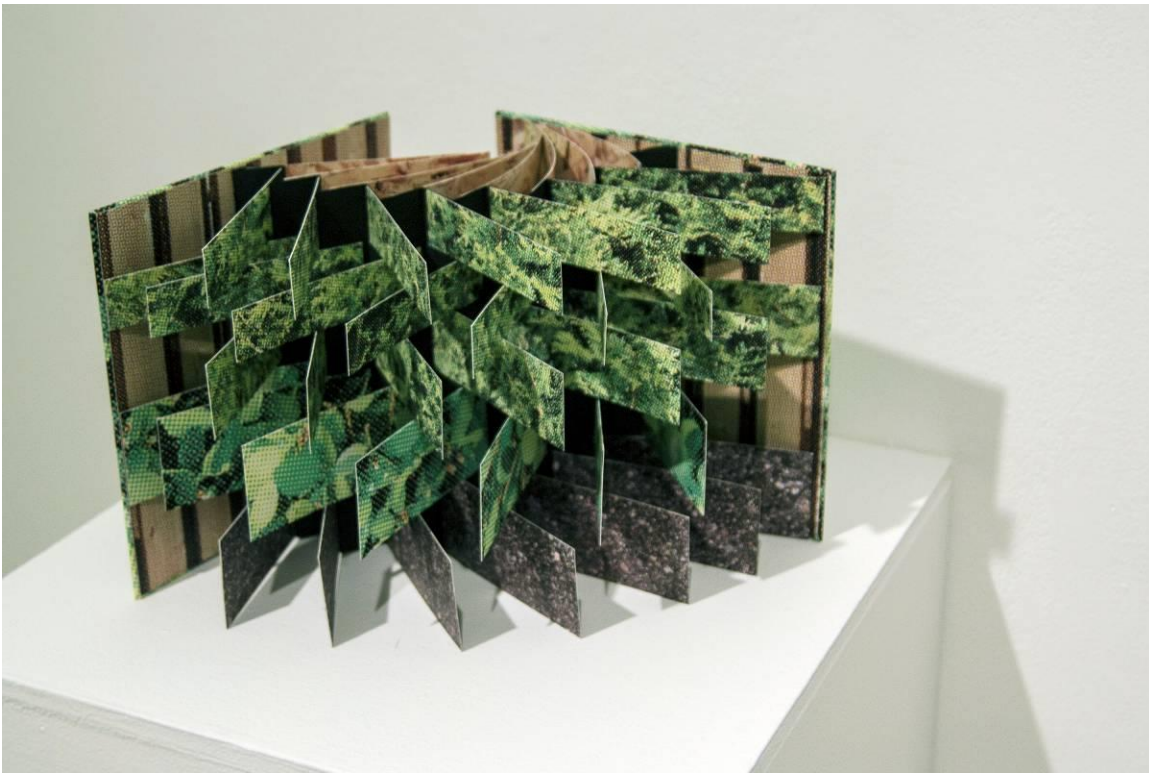


Figure 14. Mackenzie Browning, *Boundary*, 2014, screen-print on cotton-rag paper, cardstock, and adhesive.

The third artist-book of the set is called *Structure*, as its main features are three cutout windows with decorative window muntins.¹ This book strongly places the three-part series within a suburban framework with its repeating window frames and corresponding screen-printed material that is mounted to modified dual accordion-style bindings (Fig. 15). This design references both the inside and outside of the suburban home, with its windows that cast dramatic shadows, much like when the sun comes

¹ Muntins are wooden or metal cross-strips that divide window panes or decorate windows in traditional Western style architecture.

beaming into your house during the “golden hours” of a bright and sunny day. The symbols of barriers that attach to the book binding reference structural hedging and other greenery that often frame the neutral architecture of suburban construction.



Figure 15. Mackenzie Browning, *Structure*, 2014, screen-print on cotton-rag paper, cardstock, and adhesive.

These books aim to draw attention to the diverse sensorial experiences that are often found in installation practices, but instead rendered into a compact-book series that is more intimate and hand-held. These books are also sculptural and pay homage to the printmaking tradition and the craft of book making. The books, when opened, offer several planes that allude to the suburban façade, the earth, and the physical barriers that humans create. They also offer something that traditional printmaking does not: the ability to physically touch the hand-printed material. The screen-print inks used to make

these multiple textures are archival, acrylic based, high gloss, and water resistant, thus making it a great material to withstand constant physical touch for years to come.

Façade

The front lawn has become an icon of my upbringing as it symbolizes the obsessiveness of myself, my family, and the history of our suburban lives. Many grass species used today for the residential lawn have been slowly engineered with time to withstand drought, insects, and weeds. But for some, over-seeding and handpicking weeds from the lawn is still not enough; it has to be controlled and perfected using different chemical substances to meet a never ending standard of perfection. Like the individual blades of grass, I too feel that the suburban environment has changed me. I no longer feel directly connected to my rural beginnings, except through photographs, farmhouse artifacts, and family story telling. The controlled suburban lawn has become an art object in a sense; it is cherished, maintained, and scarcely walked on, except when being weeded, mowed, fertilized, and trimmed:

The front lawn is not a family space, and family members rarely venture out onto it except to maintain it. It belongs, rather, to the community. The lawns, in conjunction with the roadside trees, create the illusion of a park. Their greenery transforms an urban street into a country-lane. The lawn is the owner's principal contribution to the suburban landscape – the piece of the “park” he keeps up himself (Fishman 147).

Suburban Leisure creates a fake “AstroTurf” of hand screen-printed paper boxes that lie on the minimalist gallery floor (Fig. 16). These boxes allude to both the individual

suburban plots of grassy land and the identical housing units that typically sit on the site. The lush-green grass texture similarly comments on the recent trend to replace a natural lawn with high-end artificial turf, made of realistic synthetic fibres. This installation is meant to be a multi-sensory experience and invites the gallery-goer to sit on the iconic yellow-webbed, aluminum chairs and enjoy the many sounds of a constructed suburban soundscape, including the roar of a lawn mower, street sounds, sprinkler systems, and birds. The sounds are subtle, but highly repetitive to emphasize the “fake” aspect of these often highly organized and constructed developments.



Figure 16. Mackenzie Browning, *Suburban Leisure*, 2012-2013, screen-print on archival cardstock, aluminum lawn chairs, motion sensors, speakers, and various electronics.

The soundscape only plays when the motion sensors (located at the base of each chair) are activated by the participant's feet. The sound is both inviting yet irritating, especially for someone who is unfamiliar with the constant buzz of the contemporary, compact suburb. This specific installation marked the starting point for my installation practice during my MFA degree. It is not part of the, *A Suburb Sinner* exhibition, but is important to the evolution of my artwork as a whole.

This grassy installation was inspired by my father's obsession with his lawn and his resistance to Ontario banning the many cosmetic weed killers and pesticides that are used to keep lawns unnaturally green (Fig. 17).



Figure 17. Douglas Browning, *Father's Front Lawn*, 2014, digital photography.

Growing up, I would frequently watch this obsessiveness and would often partake by dragging a two-foot wide “weed bar” on a rope up and down the lawn and cutting the grass not once, but twice in opposite directions to ensure that each strand of grass was the same height. The maintenance of the front yard became the leisure of my life; it was something that my family and I found relaxing and highly satisfying. When I left home for university, I missed this labour, but soon came to realize that this effort was mainly unproductive and its only mission was to impress the neighbours and create curb appeal. Many of our backyards remained sparse and functional, as they were not seen from the public street. To this day, my father still maintains a beautiful lawn, with a sprinkler system and weed killers that he imports from the United States because they cannot be legally purchased in Canada.

Due to my personal connection with the suburban landscape, I have adopted green grass as a symbol of my suburban upbringing. For a long time, I related myself to the likeness of the sheep and the duality of a rural childhood versus a suburban and urban adolescence. I was devoted to my rural past, always thinking that it was far superior to the remainder of my upbringing, but I came to recognize that I was holding onto a notion that was no longer part of me. I am more city than country, and more suburban than rural; I am a hybrid of each environment, possibly making me an outsider to each one. When I settled on green grass as the symbol of my upbringing, I decided to create wallpaper that represented this idea of my current self as, *A Suburb Sinner*. With this wallpaper, my goal was to create an iconic grass design, something highly illustrative, repetitive, and exceedingly green, an image that highlighted an often-mundane plant, bringing attention to its fakeness and its role in maintaining the suburban façade (Fig. 18).

This wallpaper, *Lawn Paper*, is hung in a series of three rolls and moves when people walk past it. The adhesive backed material of the paper slightly curls towards the gallery walls, creating a more organic appearance when compared to the *Cookie Cutter Folly* that sits within close proximity to the *Lawn-Paper* wall hangings. If this wallpaper were installed in a room, it would overwhelm all architectural elements, decoration, and furniture, leaving the viewer in an immersive state of colour and pattern. The wallpaper is made in reaction to the often subtle, neutral colours and patterns that are used in contemporary interior design. Wallpapers are too often intended for the masses, with designs that are unoffending and dispassionate enough to withstand design trends and the fear of a dated décor. I can imagine this wallpaper installed in a small bathroom or den, a room that would create an all-immersive awareness, producing an almost hallucinogenic visual experience similar to the installations of Montréal artist Dominique Pétrin.

On a process level, this wallpaper can be digitally reproduced for less than fifty dollars per roll. This digital design and development represents a way of working that I have tried to resist, as it is the opposite of the handmade. The balance between the handmade, hand-assembled and the digital is a constant struggle for me as a printmaker, sculptor, and installation artist. There has always been some element of digital influence in my art practice, but this is the first time that I have used a third party to print a commercial product for me. I have always feared that technology and mass-production methods will influence too many artists, removing the hard work, the handmade, and the craftsmanship from the profession.



Figure 18. Mackenzie Browning, *Lawn Paper*, 2014, digital print on semi-gloss wallpaper.

Awaiting

The homogeneous nature of the suburban lifestyle provides an environment that many consider ideal for raising a family. In fact, the children of suburbanites often remain, or return to, the same lifestyle when they marry and look to begin their own families. Generally speaking, the majority of the inhabitants of a given suburban neighbourhood are traditionally structured families of similar social classes. While many of the aspects of suburban life do appeal to me (such as owning a plot of land, having a detached house and a garage to call my own), as a gay man I never quite felt included in the family-oriented, hetero-normative environment in which I grew up. This disconnect created a desire in me to learn more about other classes and cultures, as I had limited exposure to diversity growing up. I crave ways of deconstructing what I have experienced so that I can unlearn and relearn varied ways of living, creating, and experiencing the vast variety that life has to offer. This resistance pushed me to research alternative-living options in North America such as new urbanist development strategies and neighbourhoods that naturally grew out of a downtown core, with the hope that one day I will be able to experience these types of living firsthand without feeling like an outsider.

As our society rapidly grows and becomes more multicultural, people are beginning to recognize many of the downsides of the traditional suburban lifestyle. As such, urban design is changing as people recognize the importance of walkability, greener living, and a strong sense of community. New Urbanism is a relatively new type of urban design that promotes walkable neighbourhoods that contain a mix of incomes, housing types, and a blend of both commercial and residential properties. This design movement arose in the early 1980s and has proven in high demand from people looking to escape

the segregated structure of the traditional suburb and its heavy dependence on a vehicle to get around (Handley par. 7). Another alternative is living in an older neighbourhood that is close to a downtown core and built upon an old-style grid system. These neighbourhoods often lack modern conveniences and the cleanliness of newer, more suburban areas, but they are typically more walkable and offer the ability to live, work, and shop in the same neighbourhood without relying on an automobile. They also typically have a wider diversity of income levels and a greater sense of community. Many even contain new homes as some residents find it more desirable to demolish an old house and build a brand new one in an established, mature, and convenient neighbourhood.

For Sale

My exhibition, *A Suburb Sinner*, aims to critically investigate how my suburban upbringing affected my personal concepts of place and belonging, and considers the associations between suburbs and different ideas of nature. This artistic endeavor has turned into a comprehensive review of long forgotten memories, sights, materials, and sounds that have been revived and reimagined through printmaking, bookbinding, sculpture, and installation art. *A Suburb Sinner* reexamines the icons that stand out in my mind from years in the suburban setting, such as rigid and soft barriers, lush-green lawns, controlled gardens, and the importance of keeping a striking façade. Suburbia creates an affordable sense of ownership, safety, and insulation from the chaos of urban life. It gives people purpose in life and provides them with space and land to call their own. However, I have discovered through creating *A Suburb Sinner* that I have yet to find a singular developed environment that suits my personal needs for community and general livability

as an artist and gay man. My position as a gay man on the social margins means that I struggle to fit into the urban, suburban or rural setting, but I find comfort in specific aspects of each place, especially the aesthetics of suburban neighbourhoods that informed my most impressionable adolescent years. I have lived on a rural sheep farm, in several suburban developments, and in downtown high-rise apartments; however, the controlled and regulated suburban landscape of similarly-styled homes, luscious gardens, fenced backyards and a piece of land to call my own stands out the most for me. My artistic exploration of place and personal history is not finished with this exhibition, as each new piece of art or fragment of an installation sparks another recollection of my complex history and relationship with place.

My two main installations, *Cookie Cutter Folly* and *Barrier Green*, which form the core of my thesis exhibition, will continue to grow. Printmaking and its strong connection to the multiple allows me to keep producing bricks, rocks, mulch and other hand-printed material for my future installations. My print-based installations can continue to evolve and change as my ideas and concepts of home, domesticity and place develop with further research and first-hand experiences. I have felt like an outsider for most of my life. As a gay man, I was bullied for not fitting into the hetero-normative expectations of the suburban utopia in which I grew up; as an artist I am on the margins for creating installations and art pieces which merge the boundaries of art, craft and design. My installation practice is akin to a home renovation or an elaborate garden project. I am eager to extend my practice into the space of an actual suburban house or small plot of grass, blank spaces to fill with my own artistic interpretations. It is possible, based on my personal history with place, that a single location may not be enough for me.

Since I have felt like an outsider most of my life, I am starting to believe that I unconsciously seek this position. I may be at my most comfortable being uncomfortable, living as an outsider within the suburban landscape while viewing it from a distance with bemusement and mild critique, through the lens of *A Suburb Sinner*.

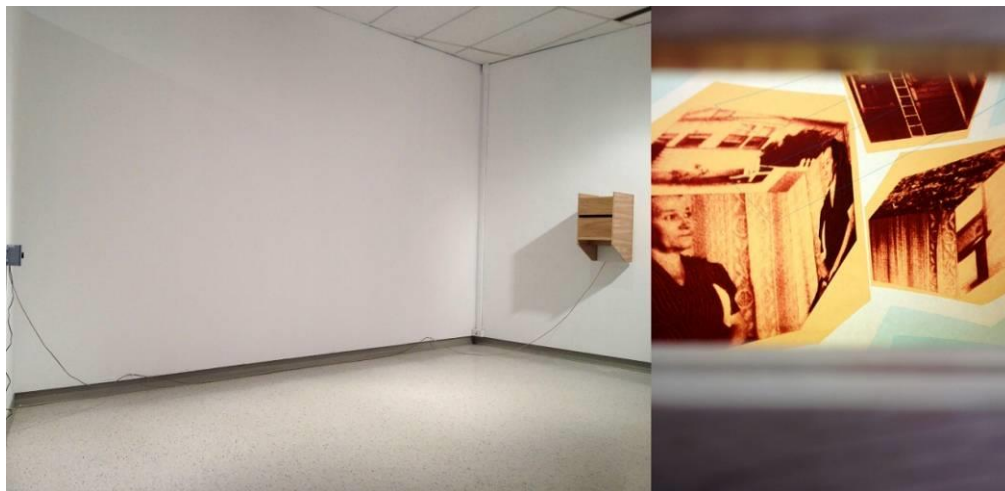
Appendix A

The following images present other important work created during my MFA degree:



Mackenzie Browning, *6:24PM*, 2012, screen-print on canvas, plywood, metal hardware, and various electronics.

My artist lamp, *6:24PM* uses an inner lighting system to illuminate images of intimate indoor spaces that are screen-printed on the inside of cotton canvas. The warm light slowly fades on, and then dramatically shuts off. Not all sides can be seen in one lighting cycle, thus forcing the viewer to wait patiently for the next image.



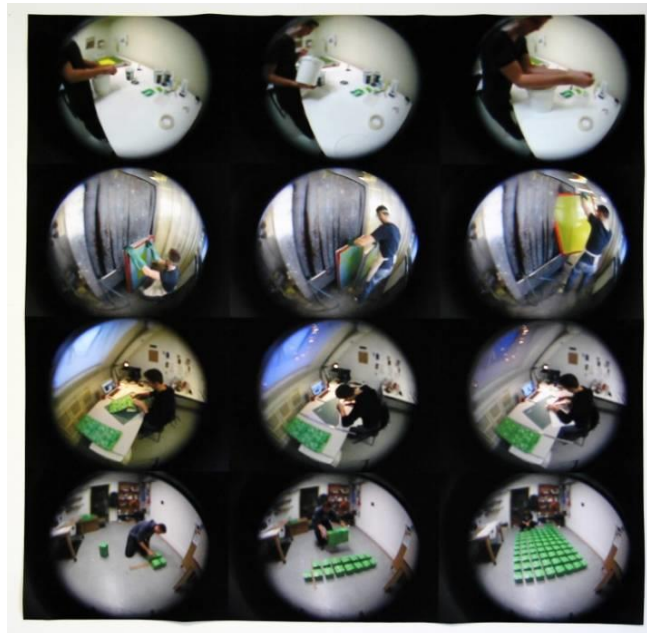
Mackenzie Browning, *To Confide In*, 2013, screen-print on cotton rag paper, plywood, LED lights, and various electronics.

My interactive sculpture, *To Confide In* was created to increase the social experience in the contemporary gallery setting. The sculpture cannot be experienced without the help of another person. This helpful person has to press an industrial button on the opposite wall so the sculpture can be experienced by a second individual.



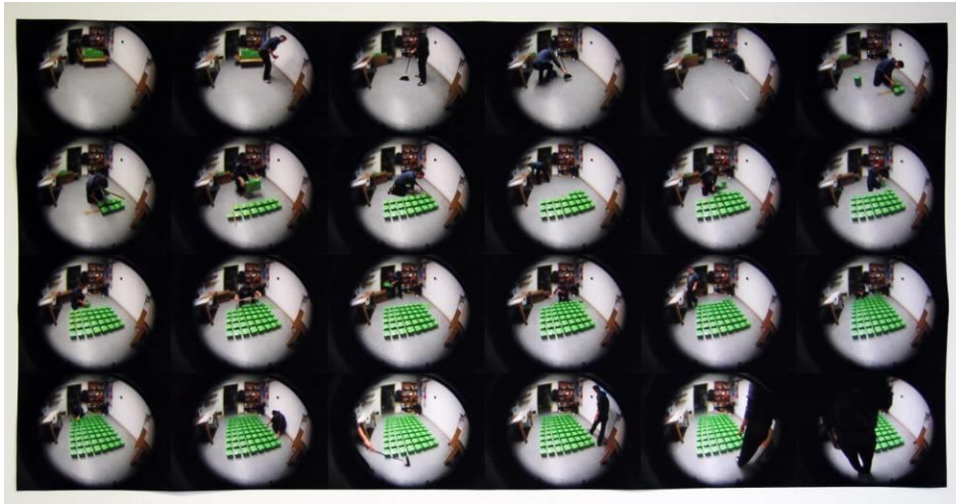
Mackenzie Browning, *Fisheye Lens*, 2013, plumbing pipe, electrical tape, door peep-hole, and paint.

This do-it-yourself lens was created to document the process of printing, paper folding, and overall creating. It was designed to slip over a standard point-and-shoot camera to work with both high-definition video and photography. It was used to create the *Circular Task* series of digital prints.



Mackenzie Browning, *A Circular Task I*, 2013, handmade fish-eye lens, digital print on matte paper.

This series of three prints was created to display the process side of my installation and printmaking practice. Specifically, these digital prints document the creation of the *Suburban Leisure* installation and its highly repetitive construction.



Mackenzie Browning, *A Circular Task II*, 2013, handmade fish-eye lens, digital print on matte paper.



Mackenzie Browning, *A Circular Task III*, 2013, handmade fish-eye lens, digital print on matte paper.

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