

Something in the Suburbs

A sense of impending horror pervades the work of Kate Gottgens

I have been trawling my unconscious for what it is that Kate Gottgens's paintings remind me of – the way one tries, more by stealth than interrogation, to come upon that word that was on the tip of your tongue.

And finally it has come to me. This cycle of work brings nothing so strongly to mind as the moods, atmospheres and tensions of a Joan Didion novel, especially those like *Democracy*, *The Book of Common Prayer* or *The Last Thing He Wanted*, where the well-managed lives of Didion's central characters suddenly veer off into unimaginably unruly consequences.

Like Didion's prose, Gottgens's painting depends on close and clinically precise observation and, let it be said, rests on unusual levels of sheer competence in technique. At the same time technique is used indirectly and allusively – in Didion's case to build from seemingly random detail, in Gottgens's from quick, assured oil sketch-type brushstrokes that develop an abstract life of their own, to access elusive zones of feeling beyond the literal representation.

At the same time – and here is the point – what the two artists share is a sense of the brittle fragility of our suburban hold on reality. There is an implacable seethe of passion and irrational impulse bubbling to break through and compromise the thin veneer of order we try to impose on our experience of the world. In Didion it breaks through at the moment when the narratives generated by the cynical geopolitics (the arms deals, the corrupt surrogates unleashed against US-supported regimes) that sustain the global American empire erupt into scandal, dragging Didion's 1960's princesses of privilege into unchartered and perilous rapids of the soul.

For Gottgens it lurks - no less dangerously – in the *Malice Aforethought* of the exhibition's title. Gottgens's images are soaked in dread, caught at the moment before the compromising narrative unfolds, but somehow containing the bad end in a set of clues that are not quite given. A girl stands, arms folded, beside a broken down 1960's-vintage Citroen on an empty open road, while a boy changes the wheel. There is nothing else, yet we somehow read the image as recording the moment before something sinister or otherwise dangerous unfolds.

In another painting in the cycle, a woman – sparingly suggested in painterly brush marks, her visage dominated by the kind of Jackie Onassis Kennedy dark glasses that might be described as being the windows on the soul with the shutters closed – has just alighted from a car parked in a suburban driveway, and gazes towards the painter. The literal subject matter is almost certainly taken from the artist's source collection of snapshots, postcards and other retro memorabilia gleaned from junk shops over the years, but on closer inspection it is compromised and placed in jeopardy, by various painterly devices – architectural elements that flatten and abstract the space in icy blues, a suburban sky glimpsed blood-red through the trees.

That colour also tinges Red Interior, with suggestions of the undisclosed world outside seeping in through restlessly patterned brush mark on the blinds covering the picture window, and turning the room into the scene of some great crime or passion, not yet known and not yet happened. What Gottgens presents us with is a perspective on ordinary suburban life just slightly off its orbit, suddenly threatening, supercharged and alien, concrete and abstract, real at the same time as it is the stuff of dream.

In these worlds it makes a kind of sense to wake up one morning and find a swimming pool dug out beside the curve of a highway into the forest. Or for a disembodied black hand to snake around the waist of a cocktail girl perched on the knee of a tuxedo-clad man whose other hand, holding a cigarette, is of Caucasian pigment.

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