



Edith Amituanai
The House of Tiatia 2007
 from the series *Dejeuner*
 C-type print
 1010 x 1210mm

Courtesy of the artist and Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland

New Zealanders prefer suburbs. Low-density housing—typified by the postwar ideal of the ‘half-gallon quarter-acre pavlova paradise’—has long fulfilled our need for freedom and privacy. However, with increasing population and escalating house prices, this lifestyle is no longer available to many ordinary kiwis. Some will argue that suburbia is homogenous, yet each suburb has its own social and political makeup. Certainly, the artists in *From the Depths of Suburbia* are not bound by a single perspective. They draw on many genres of photography and film to explore both universal and particular aspects of suburban culture.

Born in West Auckland to Samoan immigrant parents, Edith Amituanai addresses cultural migration and the formation of identity. She describes her work as autobiographical. As such, sincerity is paramount. ‘I do have to live with this work, with my family and friends, so I have to remember that I can’t make work that they don’t believe and I don’t believe.’¹ Amituanai’s carefully arranged scenes range from compressed social dramas to studies of unpeopled living rooms. Her interiors offer a strong sense of the people who use them, particularly as family photographs often appear within them. The small size of her photograph *Fipe’s*

Lounge (2003) recalls such domestic family portraits, while *House of Tiatia* (2007) is ‘museum scale’. Amituanai plays with ideas of public versus private, and ‘art’ versus ‘non-art’.² The strong presence of her subjects is undeniable.

In contrast, Conor Clarke seeks suburban sameness, hunting down fastidiously manicured suburban gardens all over the country. The deadpan uniformity of her *Trellis Series* heightens even the slightest divarication between nature and imposed geometry. In *Fan-Shaped Trellis, Grey Lynn, Auckland* (2008), a grapevine rests upon the wooden grid like a herbaceous amputee—the severity of its pruning is

perverse. Manipulation of nature is also evident in *Rose Standard (Pukekohe)* (2007) and *Archway (Cambridge)* (2006), which not only recall Granny’s garden but also address wider themes of social conditioning.³ Clarke’s manicured exotics recall an imposed colonial past.

Describing himself as a ‘collector of imagery’, Samuel Hartnett—like Clarke—travels seeking subjects.⁴ Shooting intuitively, he finds beauty in unexpected places: in backyards, on pavements, and on street corners. Having previously made social documentary work, his shots often have a backstory. For example *Derby Champion—Hikurangi* (2008) features a homebuilt racing car, emblematic of the kiwi DIY mentality, taking pride of place in its owner’s front yard. In it he reached 70kmph, winning the Hikurangi Hills Derby Championship two years in a row.

Steve Carr shares beautiful little moments. He loves to play. His ostensibly simple films and photographs keep the viewer waiting for a punch-line. He films himself playing in the backyard with kids and with a dog

called Tyson, in the midst of a pillow fight with little girls, and handing out ice creams. Carr enters these scenarios as enthusiastically as those he plays with. His *Grandpa series* (2005) which features seven grandads seated in their living rooms appears deadpan, until we notice that they are all wearing ill-fitting prosthetic teeth. The series stems from a practical joke regularly played by Carr’s uncle, who would bring Carr cups of tea while wearing plastic Dracula teeth. Both refused to acknowledge the peculiarity of this; therein lay the humour.

Geoffrey Heath meticulously restages mundane moments from his past. He grew up in Glenfield on Auckland’s North Shore and hated it. ‘As a child I used to think the whole world was like the North Shore; I used to get depressed about that.’⁵ Despite its banality, the Shore proved fertile ground for his work and, in hindsight, his recollections are often tender. He observes that, ‘many of us are trying to escape from our past. I am no longer embarrassed to own that time in my life and can even laugh at it



Yvonne Todd
Frenzy 2006
 Lightjet print
 1080 x 1350mm

Courtesy of the artist, Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland and Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington



Geoffrey Heath
Sunday 2005
 from the series *Circle of Love*
 Lightjet print
 1200mm x 1000mm

Courtesy of the artist, City Art Rooms, Auckland and McNamara Gallery, Wanganui

now. But I don’t think I would want to live there again.’⁶ In *Sunday* (2005), a hairless young man reclines on an ugly velour sofa, lazily channel surfing on an unseen television using an outdated remote. Behind him, vertical cream blinds and a rubber plant complete the scene.

Like Heath, Yvonne Todd is North Shore born and raised. Her photographs exude Sweet Valley High melodrama and middle-class aspirations epitomised by fake nails and fake tan. Her unfortunate subjects are not quite right. The odalisque in *Frenzy* (2006) evokes a brilliantly bleak meanness. The scene is filled with glaring incongruities; *Frenzy’s* unfortunate teeth and monstrous tartan dress are at odds with her classical pose. Perhaps the most unsettling aspect is the location: she lies amidst treated timber and carpet underlay in a concrete-block suburban basement. Her situation is made all the more perverse in the light of the discovery of Josef Fritzels’s protracted abuse of his daughter in an Austrian basement bunker.



Ava Seymour Valley of the Fruitcakes 1997 from the series Health, Happiness and Housing colour photomontage 735 x 920mm Courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland

EDITH AMITUANAI
STEVE CARR
CONOR CLARKE
SAM HARTNETT
GEOFFREY HEATH
AVA SEYMOUR
YVONNE TODD

PHOTO-MEDIA
FROM AUCKLAND
**From the
Depths of
Suburbia**

Suburbia is where bad things happen behind closed doors. This is taken to the extreme in Ava Seymour's photomontages. Disrupting our desire for reassuring images of home life, her series *Rubber Love* (1995) relocates a troupe of rubber-clad deviants cut from fetish magazines into elaborate 1960s and 1970s domestic interiors, thus 'collapsing the distinction between the conformist and the deviant.'⁷ The artist first began making photocollages while living in East Berlin in the early 1990s. Unlike her Dadaist predecessors (think Hannah Hoch and John Heartfield), Seymour is not politically motivated. Many assumed her 1997 series *Health, Happiness, and Housing* was a critique of state housing and its inhabitants.⁸ Seymour had travelled the length of New Zealand photographing 1950s-style state houses in pastel colors. These shots, which she described as 'bad real estate advertisements', became backdrops for a cavorting gang of bizarre social rejects lifted from medical textbooks.⁹ She said, 'the works are fictitious ... no slight is intended towards the residents of these or any other



Sam Hartnett Derby Champion - Hikurangi 2008 C-Type print 450 x 450mm Courtesy of the artist



Conor Clarke
Fan Shaped Trellis, Ellerslie, Auckland 2007
C-Type print
650 x 550mm
Courtesy of the artist

state houses.'¹⁰ Nonetheless, critic T.J. McNamara described the work as 'singularly offensive, patronising and snotty.'¹¹ Seymour had hit a nerve.

New Zealand is often idealised as a 'classless Utopia'¹², yet Seymour's freak show reminds us that, however reluctant we are to admit it, we do not live in a classless society and all is not well in Godzone.

01. Edith Amituanai in conversation with Ed Hanfling, 'Am I Making Art? The Photographs of Edith Amituanai, Art New Zealand, Issue 130, Autumn 2009, p21.
02. Ibid, p23.
03. Conor Clarke, email correspondence with the author, 28 April 2009.
04. Sam Hartnett in Te Tahi Maui/The Left Side, 20 Years of Unitec Photography Graduates, Auckland, 2008, p10.
05. Geoffrey Heath in conversation with Janet McAllister, 'Snap,' Metro Magazine, June 2008, p109.
06. Geoffrey Heath, Forever, ex. cat., Roger Williams Contemporary, Auckland, 2007.
07. Robert Leonard, 'The end of improvement, in defence of Ava Seymour,' Art Asia Pacific, Number 23, 1999, p58.
08. Major state housing programmes were started in 1937 to provide disadvantaged New Zealanders with subsidized accommodation.
09. Ava Seymour in Charmian Smith, 'At the cutting edge,' Otago Daily Times, 15 February 2001.
10. Ava Seymour, 'Health Happiness and Housing,' Health Happiness and Housing with the support of Creative New Zealand, Toi Aotearoa, 1997.
11. T.J. McNamara, 'Purity and Patronising Snottiness,' New Zealand Herald, 12 July 1997.
12. Louise Clifton, 'A Review of Health Happiness and Housing 15 works by Ava Seymour, New Zealand Journal of Photography, Summer, 2002/2003, p6.

From the Depths of Suburbia

PHOTO-MEDIA FROM AUCKLAND

EDITH AMITUANAI, STEVE CARR, CONOR CLARKE, SAM HARTNETT, GEOFFREY HEATH, AVA SEYMOUR, YVONNE TODD

CURATED BY SERENA BENTLEY

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Steve Carr Grandpa No6 2005 from the series Grandpa
C-Type print
300mm x 250mm
Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland