

Ruth Cleland
Mall Series

Like many of New Zealand's eighties' kids, I grew up with the mall as an extension of our backyard. Toy World and the Pet Shop lined their shelves with objects of my childish fascination, my tween years were spent loitering in the aisles of Kmart and chilling at MacDonald's, and by fifteen I was a part-time employee at the mall. Completely at home in its embrace, we grew up with the mall as a central point of our community. It is, after all, the mighty beacon of Suburbia.

Ruth Cleland is known for her delicate renditions of iconic images of suburban settings, from home interiors to car parks and residential streets. Her photorealist drawings and paintings are infused with an eerie stillness that puts the Suburban lifestyle in the spotlight. Cleland's perspective carefully eschews judgment of her subject, and rather, offers a realistic portrayal of its elements, allowing her viewers to bring to it their own interpretations.

Although a complex structure, Suburbia as we now know it, can be understood by a few integral elements: its housing, buildings and shopping malls. Residents are invariably housed by standalone homes on small plots of land, or in apartment complexes with parking strips that separate each from the next. Properties are often fully fenced or gated, allowing resident only access. Unlike traditional town planning in which buildings were built in prominent places, civic buildings tend to be set off the road behind vast concrete parking lots. Such spaces are indicative of a dependence on cars, which, as amenities tend to be spread apart, and not likely within walking distance from each other, is immanent.

The shopping mall is typically a colossal block building with the prime purpose of retail stores and more recently, also include integrated entertainment facilities such as the cinema and tenpin bowling. The aesthetics of architecture are a waste on malls, as it's what's on the inside that counts. Exteriors are generally uncharismatic and intentionally dull. The interior, however, is dressed to impress and what goes on in there is the true barometer of suburban living.

Malls first opened in New Zealand in the 1970s and were hailed as a fresh and innovative approach to shopping. The average mall now has retail stores for every occasion; food from every continent; and from movies to massage and manicures, the mall fulfills every need. Tweaked to perfection, mall management works hard to keep its punters happy. Spot the abundance of designated car parks for parents-with-prams and the sprinkling of couches for the elderly to pause upon, and it's clear that they understand demographics too. Malls are able to host huge volumes of people at anyone time, our biggest mall has over 2000 car parks (insightful given the likelihood of actually finding one there). Never mind the weather, mall visits are an all weather affair. Thanks to technology and carefully monitored climate control, humid day, winter's day, rainy day, any day

will do. The mall is tirelessly accessible and with phenomenal opening hours, it never seems to sleep (it does two and a half days a year). The mall is a melting pot of cultures and classes, and its ability to cater to such diversity so constantly is second to none. People are comfortable at the mall and it is, believe it or not, a home away from home, for many. At the mall, you see, at everyone is equal.

While this may leave us all feel like cheery and content little shoppers, there is something a little eerie about the feeling of equality that the mall promotes. The concept may be primarily driven by consumerism but it's no surprise that malls are found at the heartbeat of suburban communities. Discredited for its lack of diversity by those who choose not to live it, the suburban lifestyle is embraced by others for exactly that. Where suburban once meant to live outside of the city, it's now associated with a specific way of life that, one can't help but notice, seems to embrace homogeneity.

Without being explicit, Cleland picks up on this homogeneity in her removal of personal details from her scenes. Number plates are subtly blanked out and store signs are pixelated - what were once distinguishing details are no longer relevant. Each car in Cleland's car park could belong to anyone of the suburban residents – if there were any. Her works are void of all human activity. The cars and homes of her potential protagonists are depicted, but their absence suggests that they are not unique, for any person could occupy them.

While she tends to capture her subjects from the same frontal viewpoint but her perspective is not uniform. Not only do her subjects document varied aspects of Suburbia, Cleland's viewpoint is suggestive of many perspectives within it. At times the viewer is invited into the picture frame into Suburbia, up monumental escalators that leave one curious as to where they might lead, or we are taken down the path of a sunny street. At other times her invitation to look into residential homes is interrupted by tinted windows and closed doors that stop the voyeur's urge to pry. The viewers find themselves, in one work, inside the mall looking out through automatic doors, perhaps longing for respite from the mall.

Cleland's personal interpretation of Suburbia is never explicitly clear but perhaps her process is the most telling. Never quite separating the impulses of love from anxiety, Cleland both obsesses over and nurtures her subjects. Echoing the homogeneity embraced by suburbia she minimizes the appearance of hand made marks through a painstaking process, which has her work appear as though it may have been made by a machine. In fact single painting takes many months to complete and in this she captures the essence of Suburbia. Like her chosen technique, Cleland's Suburbia is manicured, perfected and relentless.

At a glance, there is nothing overtly spectacular about Cleland's suburbia – poignantly, that is the point.

- Anna Jackson, 2008

