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Design Culture

Opening the Road

Joseph Carroll

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Fine Art in Boston.

Asphalt. It covers our streets and driveways, our sidewalks and playgrounds. We drive on it, walk on it, play on it. When we think about asphalt, it is most likely related to potholes and parking lots, not to art. Yet more artists than you might realize have been using images of asphalt in their work, a fact that inspired me to curate a show for Elias

Asphalt is an unusual theme for an art exhibition, one that has particular meaning for me. Over the past several years, I have divided my time between an art gallery and an urban planning firm. In the planning profession, the word asphalt is shorthand for the unsustainable, oil dependent, status quo practices of urban development. Asphalt is the material of urban sprawl, the banal material of environmental destruction. As Joni Mitchell sings in "Big Yellow Taxi"— "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot."

Images of asphalt in art are more ambiguous. In the fall of 2001, I entered a darkened gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. The space reverberated with the baroque sound of Wanda Landowska on the harpsichord playing Bach's "Goldberg Variations" as images of soap bubbles cascaded across the walls. The suds glided over hopscotch lines and other markings of a playground, picking up leaves in their path as the rivulets branched and rejoined. I sat there mesmerized by *Blacktop*, the 1952 film by Charles and Ray Eames. In the twenty-minute span of the film, the Eameses' playful and witty work added a new association to asphalt: joy.

Blacktop also presented dissonance, a gap between a homogenized understanding of a word and the possibility for an individual understanding. I realized that we get into a mode of visual and verbal shorthand, which restricts our way of looking and thinking. It's no wonder; we are bombarded with images and information and we have less and less time to decipher them. Watching *Blacktop* slowed that process down. I wanted to explore that gap, to encourage the expansive qualities of communication.

Curating a show is in part the chance meeting of ideas and images. And, as in collecting, it takes at least two images to begin the process. Having seen *Blacktop*, I knew I wanted to use the film, I just didn't know how. Months later, I was waiting for a friend in a bookstore and picked up a copy of *Polaroids*, a collection of photographs by Walker Evans. Late in his career, Evans used the portable instant camera to capture fragments of the urban environment including the stripes of crosswalks, directional arrows and the dashed lines of lane markings—the graphic language of the street. The book reminded me of the contrast between the diminutive size of the photographs and the bold scale of the street graphics.

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They were simultaneously little gems and expansive formal compositions. They were also images of asphalt, which together with the Eames film, aroused my curiosity to see how other artists used the material.

Having the beginnings of a theme, I kept my eyes open for asphalt as I traipsed from gallery to museum to art fair, writing down names of artists, titles of works and sources along the way. As the list grew I realized that the images that held my attention had qualities in common with the Eames film. Like *Blacktop*, the photographs challenged my preconceptions of asphalt, they favored ambiguity over didacticism and they were visually alluring. There is no denying the appeal, the beckoning of *Highway 50, Nevada #1*, Doug Hall's archetypal view of the American open road (figure 1). Yet there is also no denying man's desire to control nature in the Euclidean geometry of a highway stretched across the Nevada desert. Similarly, the "what a cool idea" aspect of Edward Ruscha's book thirtyfour parking lots, which consists of 34 aerial photos of Los Angeles area parking lots, is countered by the near complete lack of trees, let alone nature, and the oily black stains of the lots' auto inhabitants.

A group show relies on the quality of the individual works and also on the relationship between them. Ruscha's cool, conceptual approach may be shared by N.E. Thing Company and Robert Smithson, but with totally different results. The N.E. Thing Company (pronounced "Anything") was the collaborative effort of Iain and Ingrid Baxter working out of their suburban home in Vancouver, British Columbia. Their image of a directional arrow pointing to the entrance of a 1960's shopping center in *ACT 130—Big Arrow, Park Royal Shopping Mall* was taken during the suburban ritual of the Sunday drive. The Baxters packed the kids in the car and drove around Vancouver "Aesthetically Claiming Things." Asphalt Rundown documents Robert Smithson's use of asphalt in its liquid form. Outside of Rome, Smithson poured truckloads of asphalt down the sides of a quarry, filling the fissures in the earth with the hot liquid. The subjects of all three works highlight banal aspects of the everyday with a distaste for the commercial aspect of artmaking and for the role of artist as an independent individual, a genius.

In some cases, I selected work that shares an approach and an outcome. Echoing the concern with abstraction of *Blacktop*, the photographs of Aaron Siskind and Clay Ketter both deal with the formal overlap of painting and photography. In *Providence 92 and 104*, Siskind's loopy lines of asphalt over pebble-encrusted tar immediately call to mind Abstract Expressionist painting. From the same camera angle, Ketter's image of lane markings and grass growing in the seams of an asphalt roadway has a more minimal effect. The Siskind and Ketter images look like paintings. Siskind's photograph could just as easily be a close-up of a Jackson Pollock drip painting while Ketter's relates to the spare, pastel stripes of Agnes Martin.

The process of curating a show about asphalt was essentially private, driven by my personal interest. The dissonance between my preconceptions of asphalt and the ambiguity of the images, and the possibility of finding beauty in that which is overlooked, are themes resulting from individual experience. The installation of the objects, photographs, films and book took the ideas and process public. I wanted to create, through placement, the same possibility of expanding the realm of experience that the Eameses had provided me, to provide a space for contemplation and individual connection.

Next to Doug Hall's majestic image of the Nevada desert, I placed *Grass Over Asphalt* (figure 2) by Boston photographer Oscar Palacio. Palacio's image of a hopeful sprinkler perched on sod rolled out over an asphalt drive is in stark contrast to Halls' pæan to wanderlust. Yet on their own scale, each image is concerned with control of nature. Palacio's

lush, dark image with its edge of comic relief reminds us that what goes down so easily is harder to remove. I realized that what Palacio captured in his image was what I hoped to capture in the show—beautiful images, depth of meaning with a sense of humor. And maybe the ideas and images of asphalt I offered in the show were easier to take away.

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Notes:

Blacktop and the films of Charles and Ray Eames are available for purchase from the Eames Office at www.eamesoffice.com or by phone at (301) 396-5991.

Walker Evans: Polaroids by Walker Evans and Jeff Rosenheim is available in bookstores and from amazon.com.

Rundown is available for rent and purchase from the Museum of Modern Art, (212) 708-9532.

For information regarding the other artists mentioned in the article, contact Elias Fine Art at elfiar@aol.com or by phone at (617) 783-1888.

Editor's note: The process of developing an exhibit is one in which the curator discovers, explores, develops and articulates an idea. Joseph's article—and the theme of "Asphalt"—shows us that an exhibit can also encourage each viewer to explore an independent, unique and personal interpretation.

—Wendy Richmond