

Plastic Flowers: Overlooking Resource Scarcity in Postwar America

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Abstract

This essay historicizes cultural and psychic economies in the postwar United States under the sign of material scarcity. It situates the proliferation of plastic flowers in domestic space within a context of bureaucratic anxieties surrounding natural resource scarcity, and trends toward ‘outdoor living’ that were an offshoot of the ideology of economic growth. Interrogating repeated, if relatively unexamined, invocations of ‘anxious’ suburban subjects in descriptions of postwar society, the essay suggests that plastic flowers shored up a sense of stability and permanence at a time when nuclear annihilation, Cold War paranoia, and population growth combined to render life uncertain and potentially unsustainable. The essay concludes by reflecting on how legacies of that epoch – and the fiction of permanence offered by plastic flowers – endure in contemporary fantasies of limitless progress.

Keywords

ambivalence, artificiality, cultural studies, environment, psyche, scarcity, visual culture

Minor Objects

In 1964, British science fiction writer J.G. Ballard published an almost elegiac short story titled ‘The Garden of Time’, which represented the aristocracy as a class unable to materially or psychically acknowledge finitude as the foundation of social life. In the story, Count Axel and his wife live in a mansion-like villa from the terrace of which they have a bird’s eye view of expansive, wide open plains all around. Regularly, on the horizon in the distance, they witness barbarian hordes rushing in their direction – leading one of them each time to pick a crystal ‘time flower’ from their garden. When this flower dissolves, the horde disappears. Temporarily. Axel and the Countess know that the resources

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afforded by the garden are not infinite; that with each destroyed flower there is one less left to fight off the invading mass. Nonetheless, one evening, during a walk in the garden, the Countess says: 'What a wonderful display, Axel. There are so many flowers still' – causing her husband to consider how 'her use of *still* had revealed her own unconscious anticipation of the end' (Ballard, 2001: 145). With only a dozen crystal flowers left, her statement foreshadows the couple's – and aristocracy's – fate, pointing to a time to come when the vast empty outside will swallow whole their way of life.

I start with Ballard's story because the function of crystal flowers in it mimics the function of plastic flowers in this essay. In 'The Garden of Time', flowers assume a talismanic quality, holding off the inevitability of a future everyone knows (or should know) is coming. Unable to adjust to the ramifications of this future, those implicated in maintaining the status quo hold on to some fiction of stability; some artifact that will assure them that barbarians from the empty plains will not engulf the present order of things. 'There are so many flowers still': a sentiment that indexes, on one side, an inability to confront limits and finitude, and on the other, a psychic mechanism subjects concoct to convince themselves that things will go on as usual even though the *still* reveals an 'unconscious anticipation of the end'.

The same year that Ballard's story was published, in the 23 August edition of *The New York Times*, journalist Sherwood Kohn announced: 'The age of the realistic, imperishable, inexpensive, pollen-free, flexible, easily obtainable, socially acceptable, detergent washable, artificial plant is here' (Kohn, 1964). Kohn opined that where merely five years earlier few florists would have 'touched a polythene pansy with a trowel', in 1964 even William Fuss – protégé of famous European florist Kasper Fuss – was making 'a comfortable living by renting plastic landscapes to Americans (he thinks of himself as a botanist in plastic)'. In fact, Fuss created a roof filled with artificial plants atop his East 53rd Street shop. Of course, not everyone welcomed the arrival of plastic flowers, as Kohn pointed out by referencing a 'motivation researcher' from Chicago who 'theorized that people buy artificial flowers because they're afraid of death' – an opinion which chimes with anthropologist Margaret Mead's claim that people indulge in fake flora because they 'are unwilling to be at the mercy of a fading flower' (Kohn, 1964).

The article captures a dual sense of enthusiasm and skepticism accompanying the postwar proliferation of plastic flowers in the American public sphere: from office spaces and restaurants to hotel lobbies and suburban houses. Cultural historian Jeffrey Meikle notes that even though plastic flowers were becoming increasingly common in the 1950s – because, according to one promoter, they 'require no care except for an occasional wiping, will last virtually forever, and are highly fire-resistant' (in Meikle, 1995: 255) – they were still painstaking

to produce. However, the development of injection-molded polythene meant that 'by the early 1960s the annual synthetic crop amounted to \$120 million, about a sixth of what people paid for cut flowers' (Meikle, 1995: 255). Meikle points out that the postwar spread of plastic, in both its decorative and utilitarian forms, was complemented by a certain sense of ambivalence about these objects. Expanding an insight in Kohn's article, he argues that by mid-century, plastic's most utopian phase had passed. People's attachment to plastic was, now, mediated by anxieties about inauthenticity, the specter of a surface without deeper meaning.¹ We find such sentiment not only in the quotes from Margaret Mead and the Chicago researcher cited above, but also in a plethora of other arguments against plastic flowers, such as the one offered by Thomas H. Everett, assistant horticultural director and senior curator of education at the New York Botanical Gardens in 1964, who asked Sherwood Kohn: 'Would you give your best girl a bouquet of plastic roses?' A question that neatly gathers concerns around artificiality, intimacy, and the heterosexual order that I spend many of these pages interrogating.

The year 1964 is poised towards the end of a period of American postwar history that begins in 1945 and terminates, we might tentatively suggest, in 1973 – three years into what is referred to as the 'environmental decade' (Buell, 2004), and the year when an oil embargo by the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries brought questions of energy and resource scarcity to the forefront of public consciousness (Lane, 2014; Mitchell, 2011). Historians writing about the era have persuasively shown how the threat of nuclear war, anticommunist paranoia, consumer capitalism, and emergent regimes of medicalization made domesticity a central concern in postwar society (May, 2008; Nadel, 1995; Tone, 2012). At this time, the suburban home became a site where anxieties surrounding these issues were sought to be contained. Though in agreement with many of the insights provided by this literature, I tweak their archives a little to reveal how, in addition to consumerism and Cold War paranoia, the period in question was underwritten by concerns about increasingly scarce natural resources. Particularly, petroleum. Which is to say: if 1945 inaugurated an epoch of commodified excess, it also produced bureaucrats beset by worries about the impending exhaustion of natural resources, corporate executives looking for alternative sources of energy to power the continuation of abundant lifestyles, and policy-makers gripped by anxieties of exploding Third World populations who would soon put tremendous pressure on global resources as a whole (Robertson, 2008, 2012).

In this essay, I am interested in bringing these two scales – postwar social order and its arrangement of domesticity – within the same frame of analysis. To this end, like crystal flowers in Ballard's story, plastic ones in mine embody what Marita Sturken calls 'miniature worlds'.

For Sturken, ‘the effect of the miniature is to offer a sense of containment and control over an event’ (2007: 2). This ‘sense of containment’, like the Countess’s *still*, speaks to psychic strategies by which people manage their lives, but which leave few archival traces in their wake. In a sense, I want to ask: if postwar society was indeed overrun by concerns about scarcity, how could the home remain sequestered from such concerns? Plastic flowers illuminate this gap between governmental anxieties and suburban commodification (which, I suggest, might in itself have been a defense against material finitude). In this context, ‘overlooking’ is a term I am using to index the processes by which plastic flowers stabilized scarcity-induced anxieties in the postwar home.

Overlooking

By overlooking, I mean two contrary optical modes of engaging the world that, in their contradiction, open up an aporia, a space the eye cannot attend to; an analytic ‘blind spot’ (Luhmann, 2012). On the one hand, the word ‘overlook’ refers to a space from where scenes, sites, and landscapes become visible from a height, like the Count and Countess’s mansion. It refers, metaphorically and literally, to an elevated position from where the eye can survey everything that surrounds it to gain a sense of mastery, control, and futurity. On the other hand, however, to overlook something is to miss it, to be inattentive or to not see what is around. Applying these two meanings of the word to postwar society, I suggest that normative (white) suburban subjects occupied an overlook from where the promised abundance of a good life allowed them to repress, to overlook, specters of scarcity, and the limits shrinking resources placed on American futures. The visual logic of this optical mode – occupying an overlook by overlooking scarcity – is beautifully illustrated in a 1963 painting, *Still Life #30*, by pop artist Tom Wesselmann.

Gesturing to Wesselmann’s use of collage aesthetics, female bodies, and everyday objects of consumption, art historians like Cécile Whiting and Nan Freeman situate him as a (sometimes subversive) male pop artist who played constantly with the edges of highbrow and middlebrow art, femininity and the male gaze, and, of course, consumption and its critique (Freeman, 1996; Whiting, 1998). Whiting, for instance, convincingly argues that in *Still Life #30*, Wesselmann appropriates the aesthetics of women’s magazines, presenting ‘the fantasy of completely up-to-date appliances harmoniously and sensibly arranged in a pristine space’ (Whiting, 1998: 57), and combining two oranges on the window sill with a skyscraper as a visual joke about phallic power (Whiting, 1998: 78). The copy of a Picasso framed above the pink fridge next to replicas of 7UP bottles also speaks to the transgression of cultural boundaries where the everyday domestic setting becomes a site for viewing high art.

I have no quarrel with these observations. However, I am intrigued by two aspects of the painting and commentaries on it: one, that the image is perennially read in relation to postwar consumerism, and two, that critics do not have much to say about the pot with bright red plastic flowers in it placed on the window sill next to the oranges.²

My hunch is that *because* Wesselmann is a pop artist, and pop art in general is narrated as a symbolic manifestation of the commodified post-war economy, its artefacts are considered through the language of what Jean Baudrillard (1998) called 'consumer society'. From this point of view, it is important to understand the way pop artists like Wesselmann represent or comment on brands; how they borrow or overturn conventions of interior decoration in the popular press; the ways in which commodities in art stand in for cultural values (Freeman, 1996: 111). The problem is that in such interpretations fake nature or plastic flora fall by the wayside because they function as something other than glitzy commodities. As generic objects, they don't evoke the same sort of mystique or image of luxury as branded things. Of course, plastic flowers *are* commodities in an economic sense. But they are also containers of the postwar resource economy and its implication in petroculture. If the postwar moment was, from its very inception, beset by concerns about material finitude and depletion, then it stands to reason that consumer society took hold in *this* context as well as one of abundance. Seen this way, the plastic flowers in Wesselmann's painting are overlooked because they are not quite commodities. Rather, they manifest a resource economy within domesticity. This resource economy, in turn, though fundamental to the organization of postwar society, escaped historical scrutiny in that moment, since to question it would have been to question the foundational myths of postwar progress.

If we understand plastic flowers in *Still Life #30* to be representing a miniature world that evades easy classification as commodity, then we must ask what the flowers are doing there in the first place. They are perhaps the only presence within the frame too mundane and generic to incite comment. Everything else, from the branded Rice Krispies to the bright blue pattern on the wall above the stove, can be explained in terms of design aesthetics and conventions of decoration dominant at the time. The flowers seem to hold commentary at bay because there is nothing, apparently, temporal about them. They are not of the present: they cannot be scaled up to speak of postwar capitalism, nor are they flashy enough to refer to the desire for good things in suburban houses. Plastic flowers are neither high-tech (the fridge) nor iconic (the Picasso). The flowers are present right in front of those who look at the painting but pass over them in silence. In them, the depletion of postwar culture becomes apparent – as if the bright red is actually obscuring or compensating for some deeper anxiety – but nonetheless escapes comment. Here, we also discover the nub of the trouble with writing about plastic flowers

as a lens for thinking about the social as such. Plastic flowers are neither high art nor mass culture; neither technology nor poetry; neither commodity nor quite stock objects. But by hovering suspended between those categories, they help us put categories into question, to look at the overlooked.

Commenting on the luster and shine fruits have in Wesselmann's works, Freeman connects his playful images to 'crate labels and super-market produce-department decorations, idealizing depictions intended to suggest that the fruit being sold is eternally permanent' (Freeman, 1996: 108). While the organic world is open to such play in the lexicon of pop art, nonorganic floral objects require temporal foreclosure. They require a certain fixity in time that plucks them from the flux of environmental flows to situate them on a window sill where they slip into invisibility in plain sight. The plastic flowers of *Still Life #30*, we should also note, sit immediately next to what Whiting identifies as the jokey phallic assemblage. Turning her formulation around slightly, I would suggest that the window and its opening to the outside world – where a skyscraper towers over the landscape – serves the quintessential function of an overlook. The window gives visual form to the space from which domesticity must disentangle itself. The skyscraper literalizes the notion of an overlook, an area from where everything appears clear, while also demonstrating how such an overlook becomes apparent only when the pot of plastic flowers (i.e. resource scarcity) is overlooked.

In this image, home becomes unstuck from world but maintains, nonetheless, a view of it. So, on the one hand, we see how domesticity is implicated in the larger world. But we also discern how it protects or shields itself from this implication by occupying a space exterior to the external world. A space 'outside the outside' as-it-were. The commodified world of everyday consumer objects, and the corporate world of ever-extending towers reaching skyward, are subtended by the very thing that sits in plain view but evades the eye. To look at the pot of red plastic flora, to look at the overlooked is to acknowledge the finitude, depletion, and limits that the postwar order had to turn away from, what it had to disavow to reproduce horizons of plenitude.

This dramatization of overlooking opens up to a wider consideration of plastic flora as miniatures and speculative objects. Overlooking is therapeutic, consoling subjects against the loss of projected worlds, against the destabilizing notion that progress is, in some sense, bound to fail – that promised futures will never arrive, and will remain, forever, in suspension. Before I make this case through more extensive readings of plastic flowers in cultural artefacts, I want to situate ideas of nature-as-therapy within the matrix of postwar society. Where conventions of interior and exterior design at that time invoked 'real' nature as therapeutic, I hope it will be clear from the following section that such invocations also operationalized space for slippage between real and fake, organic and plastic, death and (kitschy) immortality.

Postwar Hardscapes

We might locate plastic flowers within the home by signposting some broad markers of how the home itself was designed and organized in the period in question. Elaine Tyler May makes a solid case for an ideology of domesticity that saw itself as a ‘buffer’ against political turmoil and sexual confusion but ended up reproducing many of the same things it hoped to critique or guard against: consumerism, conformity, materialism (May, 2008: 13). Alan Nadel offers a similar interpretation of ‘containment’ culture, suggesting that the word designates ‘a privileged American narrative during the Cold War. Although technically referring to U.S. foreign policy from 1948 to at least the mid-1960s, it also describes American life in numerous venues and under sundry rubrics during that period’ (Nadel, 1995: 3). Within this frame, the normative nuclear family emerges as a vanguard securing the American way of life by offering utopian capitalist consumption as a distraction from nuclear war, and an alternative to communism. May extends this argument by saying that postwar television sitcoms, for example, ‘eased the transition from a depression-bred psychology of scarcity to an acceptance of spending . . . Commodities would solve the problem of the discontented housewife, foster pride in the provider whose job offered few intrinsic rewards, and allow children to “fit in” with their peers’ (May, 2008: 163–4).

Extending these observations with reference to psychic economies, Benjamin Mangrum claims that ‘the 1950s mark the apex of the so-called age of anxiety’, an era ‘defined by public fear not only surrounding emerging nuclear threats in the immediate postwar years, but also the popularization of psychological discourse in America’ (Mangrum, 2015: 771). Numerous works on anxiety, family therapy, and countercultural psychoanalysis support this thesis (Herzberg, 2010, 2017; Weinstein, 2013). Andrea Tone’s history of anxiety provides a good overview of the moment, suggesting that ‘middle-class Americans’ responses to tranquilizers in the 1950s determined how successive generations interpreted anxiety as a disorder. In the 1950s and 1960s the everyday meanings of anxiety were defined less by committees of psychiatrists, diagnostic manuals, and corporate agendas than by Americans’ exuberant response to antianxiety drugs’ (Tone, 2012: xvii). She quotes historian Arthur Schlesinger who, in 1948, wrote: ‘Western man in the middle of the 20th century is tense, uncertain, adrift . . . We look upon our epoch as a time of troubles, an age of anxiety’ (Tone, 2012: xii).

Link these comments to the general popularization of Freudian psychotherapy, and we begin to get a sense of the kind of work anxiousness did in relation to the social body. In his reading of Patricia Highsmith’s novels, Mangrum argues that in this period, ‘the ego and its vicissitudes – rather than socioeconomic or structural conditions – became the

normative template for understanding society and the self" (Mangrum, 2015: 770). To show how much Freud was in vogue, he cites a character, Frank Wheeler, in Richard Yates' novel *Revolutionary Road*, who claims: "This country's probably the psychiatric, psychoanalytic capital of the world. Old Freud could never've dreamed up a more devoted bunch of disciples than the population of the United States – isn't that right?" (Mangrum, 2015: 772). Making a case for a 'turn inward', Mangrum suggests that the psyche became a preferred mode of explaining states of socio-political turmoil: 'the circulation of psychological templates for everyday life began to reframe how Americans understood the conditions of possibility for their everyday lives. With the rise of a new science of subjectivity and the popularization of psychotherapy, the idea of structural political intervention became subordinate to the terms of an internal existential drama' (Mangrum, 2015: 794).

Now, surveying some developments within interior decoration, I want to link elements of this 'turn inward' to the normative subject's disavowal of an outside world dominated by flux and turmoil. Nature, especially the fake kind, was not incidental to this theater. Analyzing boundaries between inside and outside in postwar homes, Margaret Maile Petty points out that windows and curtains presented an obstacle to the modern architectural passion to 'bring the outdoors and the indoors into direct communication' (Petty, 2012: 38). Architectural critic Bernard Rudofsky's important 1955 book, *Behind the Picture Window*, criticized both the desire to blend outdoor and indoor spaces, and the sites picture windows opened out to: gardens. For Rudofsky, suburban gardens were a 'melancholic' waste of time (cited in Petty, 2012: 40). Petty argues that although the picture window was intended to bridge indoor and outdoor spaces, it had the opposite effect, and 'often caused a severing of any real engagement between indoor and outdoor life. In putting the garden on display, framed for view from the inside, this space of potential outdoor living became a spectacle for visual consumption rather than ambulatory enjoyment' (Petty, 2012: 42).

The picture window and the display garden are symptomatic of longer histories of design in suburbia where the ideology of 'outdoor living', as Elizabeth Carney has shown, was connected to that of socio-economic growth. As she writes in an important intervention, trends begun in the 1930s had ensured that by the 1950s 'western suburbia epitomized the middle-upper-class good life. Indeed, so many people found the "right mode of life" in the modern West that massive growth became central to the region's increasingly suburban culture' (Carney, 2007: 477). However, specters of dispossession, racism, and environmental damage stalked this growth narrative, which proponents of the good life in the West had to constantly shake off. Carney's essay is worth attending to in some detail because she supplies another historical anchor for many of the tensions discussed in works on postwar domesticity. Her analysis of

lifestyle magazines like *Golden West*, *House and Garden*, and *Arizona Homes* demonstrates how outdoor living encapsulated a ‘great hope for two, sometimes contradictory, pursuits: encouraging growth and defining a comprehensible, commodifiable sense of place for the region’ (Carney, 2007: 478).

Ideologues of outdoor living foregrounded the West as a place that tied together real and imagined cities, homes and hinterlands, and ideals of domesticity, leisure, and nature. Built spaces, highways, agricultural valleys, orchards, and wilderness were all summoned in the service of selling a space where the marvels of modern economic life could coexist with the affordances of a rustic, nostalgic past. This ideology endured well into the late-1950s, promising inhabitants that ‘the undeveloped nature that suburbanites encountered in the mountains (usually on public lands near urban centers) not only constituted something “out there,” but also represented a part of homemaking: *home* was both indoors and out-of-doors’ (Carney, 2007: 480). The rhetoric of psychological and mental development and renewal followed close at the heels in the propagation of such visions. Aesthetically, arguments were put forward for gardens – including ones with decorative rock sculptures – as miniaturized replicas or copies of natural space. Tensions between native and nonnative plants was one clear flashpoint in debates about the organization of domestic outdoor space (Carney, 2007: 480–3).

After the end of the war, as suburbia blossomed, decks and patios extended the concept of outdoor living by creating quasi-exterior spaces where homeowners could dwell on a daily basis: ‘modern gardens were meant to be lived in’ (Carney, 2007: 487). The term ‘hardscape’ captures some of the elements at play. California garden designers, for instance, ‘emphasized the *hardscape* (structural elements such as paving, decks, benches, and walls) and low-maintenance shrubs and trees’ (Carney, 2007: 487). This new kind of garden was

not a garden for traditional gardening enthusiasts. *House Beautiful* advised its readers to avoid troublesome plants and instead to pick plants that would “‘stay put” and preserve the status quo longer’, using language that reflected the values of midcentury containment culture... the ubiquitous lawn, automatic sprinkler systems and preventive garden chemicals took much of the labor and thought out of garden care. (Carney, 2007: 488)

In these gardens, nature was ‘minimized’ and ‘held in stasis as much as possible. Nature had become the backdrop for the central stage of backyard leisure’ (Carney, 2007: 488). Additionally, magazines like *Sunset* encouraged their readers to travel the Southwest creating ‘miniature landscapes out of pieces of wood collected on beaches, in deserts, or in mountains’ (Carney, 2007: 495).

Crucially, this entire physical, architectural apparatus – from miniaturized copies of nature to a hardscape where one could simply step into the outdoors while still being inside – served a psychic function for suburbanites. Thus, when Marshall Sprague, one of the founders of *Golden West*, considered the view of Colorado's mountains from his home in Denver he felt a sense of 'permanence': 'As was true in other Sunbelt cities that grew dramatically, things certainly did not stay put in Denver over the next decades; but what Sprague described was a feeling that Denver's mountain range served as a psychological anchor compared to other landscapes with less obvious markers of rustic nature' (Carney, 2007: 497). Significantly, outdoor living led 'new westerners' to 'invest in the security of nature', opening up 'nature as an antidote' (Carney, 2007: 497). The hardscapes, along with artificially planted trees and the like, 'contributed to the fantasy landscapes of outdoor living. In a sense, Western backyards became private "magic lands," places that, like Disneyland and their other public counterparts, offered therapeutic space for westerners to manage massive cities and dizzying growth' (Carney, 2007: 497). These associations helped 'ease anxiety over the loss of the family farm to modernity' and helped 'maintain the health of the family' (Carney, 2007: 498).

Note these words and phrases: 'psychological anchor', 'security of nature', 'nature as an antidote', 'fantasy of outdoor living', 'a therapeutic space', 'manage', and, of course, 'anxiety'. These terms crop up in Carney's work and elsewhere in the texts I have discussed. But they are rarely commented upon in detail. Without saying that plastic flowers represent a kind of hardscape, I *am* suggesting that the work they do inside the home is *akin* to the kind of psychic comfort these other spaces and architectural innovations provided for domestic subjects. I am also extending my analysis of these objects into the realm of resource scarcity, which is as much a part of the narrative of postwar culture as ideologies of growth. When I refer to the work plastic flowers did in the context of resource scarcity, I am, therefore, trying explicitly to connect administrative concerns around depletion to domestic psychic anxieties. If scholars of the postwar home as a site for the containment of social anxiety are right, and if the postwar order was also one where the fortunes of Freudianism were on the rise, and if domestic subjects turned to the outdoors as a space of therapeutic comfort, then the obvious question is: where did this need for therapy come from?

Nature might have given Western domestic subjects some sense of permanence, and eased their anxieties. But what made them anxious in the first place? Why was any necessity for psychic balance on the table for people whose material, outer lives were nothing short of opulent in the context of a booming commodity economy? Plastic flowers point, I suspect, to an underlying structure of melancholy, a precarious sense of loss and impermanence that required foreclosing. The world could not be

claimed or remade in the image of American domesticity if the interior lives of its subjects were not stabilized. They were, like the Countess in Ballard's story, forever surveying the terrain around them, saying 'still'.

The Plastic Flowering of Sunbelt Capitalism

In 1971, an episode of *The Great American Dream Machine*, a television show telecast on the educational broadcasting network National Educational Television, travelled to Sun City – a retirement community inaugurated in the Arizona desert in 1960.³ Populated largely by elderly white couples, draped in single-family homes, swimming pools, and artificial turf, Sun City strived to represent the essence of luxurious living after decades of entrepreneurial self-making in the postwar economy. My interest in it is less sociological (Gober, 1985; Laws, 1995; Trolander, 2011) than centered on one scene from the episode.

The scene begins with a physically rigid, bespectacled man wearing a plain-white tucked-in shirt and formal trousers, and his effusive wife, adorned in bright yellow, a skirt with floral patterns, and white-framed glasses. The topic of discussion is the room they are in: decorated, most prominently, by a large white sofa, bright blue curtains on windows from where the strong Arizona sun comes streaming in, and a mirror atop what looks like a writing desk in the background of the frame. The couple tell us – it is mostly the woman who speaks – that they have decorated the room in 'French style'. As she walks to the right, the camera pans to reveal a previously unseen area of the room with a one-seater, patterned sofa, and a large wall-mounted shelf on which, the wife says, she has positioned her 'music boxes, that I love'. Gesturing to the wall facing the shelf, she announces that it is vacant because they haven't yet decided what should go on it. What does her husband think? He wants something 'French' – presumably to go with the décor of the rest of the room. She, on the other hand, says, 'let's just get a nice, big outdoor picture'. Then, walking over to a plant we have seen from the moment the camera let us into the house, she announces, gently brushing its foliage: 'We brought the outdoors indoors with our artificial hibiscus plant, here. We like it because it adds pink to this room.'

The unfulfilled desire for a 'nice, big outdoor picture' and the transposition of the outdoors indoors in the form of an artificial hibiscus plant speak to an insulated appreciation of the natural world. The pinkish hue of hibiscus apart, I am struck by how the couple – she, especially – conceptualizes space: their bodies bound on one side by a picture of the outdoors, and on the other by the simulation of natural foliage. In their permanent presence, plastic flowers uphold precisely this sense of boundedness, introducing 'nature' into domesticity once its temporal fickleness is expunged. In the middle of an expansive, luxurious

community where limitations of desert ecology are sacrificed at the altar of an abstract notion of the infinitude of the good life, mundane objects like plastic hibiscus plants achieve renewed significance. They index a miniature's promise of control over contingency, gesturing especially to the possibility that so long as the outdoors endures indoors, they will endure outdoors too.

Now, cut to a close-up: a white woman, looking at an angle slightly away from the camera. She tells us: 'The thing that would make me happy, first of all, would be the casual leisure and not the humdrum of cities, possibly the litter . . . And this is one way to keep America beautiful. This is America the beautiful.' As she speaks, the camera zooms out from a close-up to a shot where her surrounds are suddenly revealed – something like a tennis court or a garden covered quite clearly with AstroTurf. Cut to a group of old people exercising next to a swimming pool. The camera surveys their smiling faces and swinging arms, keeping up with the rhythm of the routine, while a resident offers voice-over commentary: 'Conditions in America today are frightening. I don't care whether a man or a woman is black, white, yellow, pink, red, brown or polka dot. Poverty is no excuse and we simply have to do something drastically different from the do-gooding that has been going on all over this nation. We found what we consider a haven in Sun City.' When he finishes talking, we find ourselves facing a woman, legs outstretched, on a beach chair by the pool: 'Somehow or other, out here in Sun City, we feel very safe, protected, and yet we've only got about three or four sheriffs. But it's a true utopia, I think, as much as one can find anywhere in the world.'

Artifice is everywhere in Sun City, from individual houses populated by fake flora to communal spaces covered in plastic grass. The community is itself a miniature, a model. It delivers to residents a utopian sense of security. Law and order, distance from urban disturbance, garbage, violence – the 'frightening' conditions in 'America today'. It goes without saying that our masculine narrator can confidently say he doesn't care about the color of people's skin because in Sun City he is isolated from racial others. Conservative tolerance can take hold in islands segregated from heterogeneity. Everything Sun City affords is premised on its hermetic isolation structuring white experiences of utopian retirement. If the pink, plastic hibiscus inscribes the home as a domain outside the world of natural turmoil, then the synthetic pleasures of Sun City situate it away from the world in general. In the testimonies cited, the outdoors gain a spectral quality, a presence that, though constantly invoked, is suffused with violence, terror, disorder. Utopia exists only when the outdoors is brought in and its contingencies are miniaturized. Understood this way, utopia represents a different space and a timeless time where the outside world is reproduced inside through petrochemical products like plastic flowers and fake grass, but the finitude of that world is held at bay.

In her work on modernist poetry's preoccupation with the genre of still life, Bonnie Costello outlines the stakes of carving out miniature worlds that uphold 'the value of containment' through 'small orders to satisfy for a time in a world that can sometimes seem overwhelming' (Costello, 2008: 11). In such cases, the still life – or the miniature – mediates between large-scale events of global importance and individual attempts to live amidst the fallout of those events:

The still life/landscape trope answers our need for intimacy and connection with an object within our immediate range and scale, and at the same time our desire to escape, to move out into deep space. The trope reminds us as well that our cultural organization of the material world is a continuum, an arrangement set against flux – something taken from or put into the landscape, something that has a human touch, even if only the touch of symbolism. (Costello, 2008: 176)

This stabilization function is important to Sun City, not least because of its location outside Phoenix. Matthew Huber has made a case for how, in Sunbelt cities, 'landscapes of suburban social reproduction also tended to reinforce the entrepreneurial logics of Sunbelt capitalism' (Huber, 2013: 63). Others have shown how intimately entrepreneurship in Sunbelt cities like Phoenix were entwined with racialized urban planning, patterns of white flight, and the distribution of environmental toxicity to low-income nonwhite geographies (Bolin et al., 2000, 2013; Cunningham, 2014; Goldfield, 2003). The vignettes of Sun City in *Dream Machine*, alongside Huber's identification of optimistic, entrepreneurial sensibilities underpinning the postwar suburban order, demonstrate how spaces like these were quite literally sustained by a fantasy of utopian separation from exhaustion, scarcity, and generalized violence. If, in the home, plastic flora was corralled to build a protective wall against exteriority, then (as I argue in the next section) their status as miniatures impervious to time made them what David Theo Goldberg, in a discussion of securitized communities and abandoned wastelands in the Californian deserts, calls a 'prophylactic borderline' (Goldberg, 2008: 76–7): objects creating segregated geographies where (settler) liberal fantasies of utopian toleration flourish in the manufactured absence of racial others.

Feminine Economy, Imperial Domesticity

Television, 1959. An advertisement in black and white. The opening shot: roses, framed at a mid-to-high-angle against a (presumably) blue, clear sky. The composition bequeaths the frame a sense of romantic naturalism as, for instance, one might find in nature paintings. A masculine voiceover: 'Now you can keep summertime beauty in your home all

year round – with beautiful, lifelike, artificial roses, as a dramatic mass of color, a delicate arrangement, or a single accent.’ As he speaks, the camera cuts from the opening frame to a housewife carefully arranging a large fake bouquet in a flowerpot. Having shown viewers images of what a ‘delicate arrangement’ and ‘single accent’ might look like, the camera offers a close-up of lush roses, zooming in as the narrator talks over the movement – ‘Now get these lovely, washable roses free’ – and the word FREE appears at the very center of the frame superimposed on the roses. Narrator: ‘Now get these lovely, washable roses free when you buy these favorite Procter and Gamble household helpers.’ Cut to packs of detergent: Cheer, Joy, and Ivory Snow. The advertisement instructs its audience about the kinds of plastic roses (one-bud, two-bud, three-bud) appended to different sizes of the products on sale, ending by exhorting women to start building ‘a bouquet today’ while supplies last. And then it’s over, at just a second under a minute. What does one make of this celebration of domestic routine and the bounties of artificial nature in the historical context of scarcity?⁴

The advertisement claims one can access permanent summers by purchasing plastic flowers that protect against changing seasons: ‘Now you can keep summertime beauty in your home all year round.’ The opening shot deceives viewers into thinking that the roses on display in relief against a splendid sky are real, idealized, and natural. Until their plasticity is verbally announced, it isn’t entirely clear the flowers are plastic. Visual invocations of organic materiality thus frame one’s reception of the fake roses. The narrator’s repeated reference to color reinforces links between natural abundance and ideals of interior decoration. The eventual recognition of their plasticity doesn’t detract from the flowers’ desirability because visual associations between nature, sky, and color have already framed one’s reception of the sequence. Repetitions of the nature motif give the plastic roses a quality of natural beauty without burdening them with the fickle temporality ontological to organic matter. Accepting plastic roses in the home, placing them on tables or next to music boxes and bookshelves, offers the possibility of turning away from organic time, orienting subjects towards the promise of permanence ensconced in mid-century imaginations of plastic. As decorative background, plastic flora elevate the home beyond nature. Artifice isolates domesticity from worldly turbulence. Investing – financially and emotionally – in these miniature worlds is akin to expressing a desire to control the great outdoors. The home maintains a sense of coherence amidst scarcity by, first, incorporating elements of the very resource economy that threatens its sustenance, then turning away from the finite temporal horizon of that economy.

In his work on the Dutch still life, Norman Bryson points out that the genre reflected early capitalist plenitude. To depict social abundance, artists resorted to painting flowers. Many works represented material

wealth in the form of overfilled vases. But ‘the abundance is, surprisingly, not that of nature’ (Bryson, 1992: 104). These ‘non’ or ‘anti’ pastoral paintings didn’t represent wild flowers, nor seasonal ones, so much as a hodgepodge selection of flora that defied biological temporality. In them, Bryson reads a ‘refusal of natural time and of seasonality’, something that ‘breaks the bond between man and cycles of nature’ (Bryson, 1992: 105). In this respect, the flowers Bryson discusses are historical antecedents to plastic flowers in their desire to overcome nature by effacing seasonality. If the artistry elevated Dutch painting beyond time, then plastic’s material mutability did the same for the industrial objects I have been discussing. Postwar plastic utopianism – whether curtailed as in Meikle’s reading or boisterous as in others (Phillips, 2005) – effectuated a cut between materiality and temporality. In making this separation, plastic freed itself from time in popular, governmental, and cultural imaginaries. As Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis note, plastic became unstuck from its implication in petroculture (Boetzkes and Pendakis, 2013). Thus, even when oil was thought scarce, plastic retained its magic of infinite reproducibility.

The question of reproducibility opens out to accumulation, a theme that runs throughout the advertisement. By goading (female) consumers to collect all the flowers and build magnificent fake bouquets before stocks run out, the ad establishes a link between accumulating plastic roses and accumulation structuring the postwar suburban economy.³ In Paul Preciado’s words: ‘Postwar white men and women are biotechnological beings belonging to the sexo-political regime whose goal is the production, reproduction, and colonial expansion of heterosexual human life on the planet’ (Preciado, 2013: 119). Or: the heterosexual machinery of postwar normativity sustained itself by eliminating time from domestic space, because making the home appear immune to worldly instability naturalized the settler domestic order as eternal and timeless. By expelling time, the home protected itself from threats posed by global resource scarcity. But a-temporality was also a method for colonizing time: if the American nuclear family could serve as the norm for what *all* families should look like, then any expansionist project to exploit global resources could be justified as an effort to protect that familial ideal. From this we can extrapolate that the settler heterosexual order was propelled by an endless drive to constantly remake the world in its own image.

These mechanisms replicate logics of what Amy Kaplan calls ‘manifest domesticity’, where the double meaning appended to domesticity – the home and the not-foreign – ‘not only links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual borders of the home’ (Kaplan, 1998: 581). Her essay addresses antebellum America to discern the modalities by which an imagination of ‘the nation as a home’ helped the country achieve coherence during a period of imperial expansion (Kaplan,

1998: 583). She identifies a ‘paradox’ within ‘imperial domesticity’ in which women’s retreat from the public arena of business or commerce allowed feminine subjectivity to frame the home as crucial to a national-imperial project: ‘The outward reach of domesticity . . . enables the interior functioning of the home’ (Kaplan, 1998: 586). Underwritten by frontier imaginaries of Manifest Destiny, rhetorics of domesticity simultaneously allowed the United States to conceive of the world as its “‘home” and project the home as “coextensive with the entire world”” (Kaplan, 1998: 588).

Kaplan’s history speaks eloquently to the reordering of the postwar world when a new phase of American imperial ascendancy was on the rise. In the face of resource crises, intensified exploitation of natural resources made it imperative for the administrative apparatus to devise new rhetorical devices justifying American intervention beyond its borders and in the interests of a world community. The domestic sphere was essential to the American ideological project after 1945. But if the home was going to be thrown so centrally into the turbulent world, if the home was going to become *the* visual icon of abundant life, then how could it not be affected by the crises engulfing the world it was being plunged into? How could resource scarcity be held at bay, especially when it was precisely those resources thought to be scarce that powered the postwar home? In plastic flowers, we find a stabilizing mechanism for sustaining a fantasy of the home as external to the world-in-crisis. The effacement of organic time, excision of material decay, and the promise of permanent summers functioned as the flipside of catastrophic images of nuclear winter. Where the latter filled domestic space with dread, the former elevated the home beyond the wider world even as it became increasingly entangled with it.

Plastic flowers came into the home with twin guarantees: permanence (immunity from the whims of the natural world), and non-labor (the lack of need for regular upkeep). Moreover, the two guarantees were interconnected. Despite the shield of protection they offered against nature, plastic flowers would perhaps not have invaded domestic life so thoroughly if they required constant attention. That they could be overlooked without being regularly tended to was integral to their promise. In the advertisement, all talk of bright redness, washable flowers, and bouquet building deemphasizes the fact that consumers could only accumulate roses by buying detergent. The products marketed by Procter and Gamble aided repetitive female domestic labor – doing dishes, washing clothes, keeping the home clean – but the ad asked viewers to overlook the dreariness of those tasks in favor of plastic nature’s generous bounty. Both the visual logic of the sequences and the narrator’s words direct viewers’ eyes towards abundant plastic roses: collect them all, accumulate more, make a large bouquet, so that you might arrange fake flowers in ever more imaginative ways.

In this sense, the superimposition of FREE on screen isn't entirely arbitrary on two counts: first, it is plain that the roses aren't really free because the consumer is paying for detergent and getting a substitute for nature tacked on at no extra charge. And second, the FREE roses are used in the advertisement to sell another normative ideal underpinning the accumulative, reproductive edifice of heterosexual family life – free domestic labor. In much the same way that fake plastic flowers were sold as idealized versions of nature evacuated of natural temporalities, women's labor – given free of charge in the domestic sphere – was naturalized by the rhetoric of bouquet building. Even though the commodities being sold in the advertisement were things one needed to maintain households on a day-to-day basis, we could be forgiven for thinking that the star of the show was the red plastic rose. That which is merely a FREE accessory to the 'real thing' on sale became, in effect, the thing itself. The effacement of women's labor reflects the other side of the entrepreneurial suburban subject, which Matthew Huber locates within the oil economies of the Sunbelt cities. If self-making informs one element of petrocultural fantasy, then the stabilization of the interior self by denying organic time, manual labor, and the finitude of earthly matter informs another.

Conclusion (On Finitude)

I began this essay by suggesting that the Countess's 'still' in Ballard's story speaks powerfully to a culture's inability to acknowledge finitude and scarcity. Like crystal flowers holding off the threat of barbarian hordes, plastic flora attempted to immunize the home by elevating it to an overlook from where material limits could be overlooked in the service of ideologies of growth and progress. In this respect, it is worth noting that as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, many aspects of cherished postwar ideologies were questioned. From the Club of Rome's report on the *Limits to Growth*, to economist Kenneth Boulding's juxtaposition of 'cowboy' economies with 'spaceman' ones, and demographer Paul Ehrlich's paranoid projections of exploding populations in the Global South, the 1970s marked 'a wholesale crisis in the realm of reproduction' where 'the continuing reproduction of earth's biosphere and hence the future of life on earth' was felt to be at stake (Cooper, 2008: 16; see also Boulding, 1993; Ehrlich, 1971; Höhler, 2012; Meadows et al., 1972). But if ecological consciousness subjected postwar fantasies of progress and growth to scrutiny, then how did we end up on the verge of a sixth mass extinction helmed by a rapacious American state's continued relentless search for extractive frontiers?

Avital Ronell has helpfully suggested that the words 'finitude' and 'limits' have very different valences, attending to which could be instructive on this count. My interchangeable use of the two has, I admit, blurred

these distinctions. Extending an insight from Jean-Luc Nancy, Ronell claims that the word 'finite' already contains within it an orientation to infinity. It would be foolish 'to imagine that *finitude* designates an absolute limit, if only because the concept of limit often reverts to the simplicity of linearization. An absolute limit – if it were possible to imagine such a thing – would be a boundary without an outside, without a foreign, neighboring land, an edge without an outer dimension' (Ronell, 1994: 4–5).

The proposition is enticing because it indexes how limits discourse can, paradoxically, feed narratives of limitlessness. Ronell opens up space for thinking about the ways in which awareness of limited resources, space-man economies, and material exhaustion can spur dreams of fracking, Arctic drilling, and Mars colonization that leave the logics of scarcity uninterrogated. Seeing limits and boundaries can reveal the earth as a node in the cosmic interior, where every space is open for profitmaking. By contrast, for Ronell, finitude 'is not about the end in terms of fulfillment or teleological accomplishment but about a suspension, a hiatus in meaning, reopened each time in the here and now, disappearing as it opens, exposing itself to something so unexpected and possibly *new* that it persistently eludes its own grasp' (Ronell, 1994: 5, emphasis in original). In this view, finitude assumes an aporetic quality, hinting at moments of fatigue, futility, suspension, and non-closure, which also contain the potential for something unexpected – an openness to the future.

The visual dynamics of overlooking through which I have analyzed plastic flowers expertly foreclosed this latter possibility. Plastic flowers played their part in articulating fictions of stability that lent permanence to a heterosexual, suburban order, the reproduction of which was critical for sustaining another fiction – that of an American way of life. As the first volume of *Resources for Freedom*, a report produced by the President's Materials Policy Commission tasked with taking stock of postwar resource scarcity, concluded in 1952:

greater and greater drafts of ingenuity will be called for in the future, to compensate for the slow failure of what used to be supplied us, more or less to our needs, by 'nature.' New societies, new economies – such as ours was two centuries ago – can perhaps afford the luxury of drifting. Established societies and economies have developed values we insist on preserving and so we are forced to take longer thoughts of the future. We are no longer vagrants on a continent, but established householders. (USPMP Commission, 1952: 169)

In the Commission's statement, we find all the major claims of this essay miniaturized. Here, administrative authority flexes its muscles to claim

ownership over a continent – in the name of its future – by leveraging the domestic as a key metaphor in its arsenal. Unlike dispossessed vagrants who have no right to stake a claim on the earth, householders, in this scenario, have won the right to use the planet as they see fit. Already we find in these words the transformation of limits discourse into novel fantasies of limitless growth powered by human ingenuity. Is it any wonder, then, that by the 1970s – as social and environmental turmoil became increasingly pressing matters of concern – the American administrative apparatus tried to compensate for nature’s exhaustion by seeking out new avenues for expansion? And is it any wonder that the (settler) state invoked an image of propertied domesticity to buttress its vision of the future? For this state, crystal, or plastic, ‘there are [always] so many flowers still’.

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Notes

1. The writer Norman Mailer was one of the most prominent and polemical critics of plastic in this vein, often comparing the material to the devil’s work. A small sample of these views can be found in books like *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1968) and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1970). For a good interpretation of his antipathy toward plastic, see the epilogue of *Fighting Words: Polemics and Social Change in Literary Naturalism* (Wells, 2013).
2. The red plastic flowers in this painting are identified as plastic by the artist, as a glance at the page dedicated to the work on the website of the Museum of Modern Art in New York substantiates (https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/tom-wesselmann-still-life-30-april-1963).
3. *The Great American Dream Machine*, broadcast on PBS between 1971 and 1972, was a gently satirical, subversive television show that combined funny skits, musical interludes, and dramatic performances in a style that was often meant to be a send-up of mainstream American culture in an age of countercultural revolt. As media historian Allison Perlman points out in an online discussion of the show on the occasion of PBS commemorating its 40th anniversary: ‘The commemorative broadcast of *The Great American Dream Machine* is interesting, especially since it came on the heels of the re-broadcast of *An American Family*, which itself coincided with the telecast of HBO’s

fictionalized account of the series, *Cinema Verité*. The period of NET/PBS shows of which both series were a part was so brief, but arguably was the most creative – and least politically timid – era of public television programming. In gesturing back to this period, PBS seems to be both celebrating its past innovations while also only drawing attention to the more conservative (in every sense!) cast of its contemporary programming strategies.’ (The discussion is available at: <http://mediacommons.org/imr/2011/09/27/great-american-dream-machine>). As ought to be clear from my interpretation of one fragment of one episode, I am not attempting a history of the show. Nor am I commenting on its political and satirical intention – the presence of which, I would argue, bolsters my reading of *Sun City* as a peculiar representation of mid-century American suburban normativity.

4. At the time, it was not uncommon for plastic flowers to be sold with detergent. They repeatedly surface, for instance, in the late British poet Adrian Henri’s work, often touching on similar themes as the ones I am exploring here. To take just one example, in the poem ‘I Want to Paint’, Henri writes of ‘The first plastic daffodil of spring pushing its way / through the OMO packets in the Supermarket’ (Henri, 2008: 110). When asked about his fascination with these objects, Henri told an interviewer about a trip to a supermarket with a counter stocked with artificial flowers: ‘and I said, “Can I have some daffodils please?” and she said, “You can’t – they’re out of season.” And I just thought: that’s the most incredible thing. And that’s a paradox if ever there was one: the idea that you could actually only buy them when they were in season’ (Henri and Bateman, 2001: 89–90). Commenting on Henri’s penchant for plastic daffodils, the critic Peter Barry claims: ‘Likewise, the cultural artefacts that would be despised as inauthentic by High Modernists schooled by Adorno... are here salvaged and embraced. They are recommended not so much for study as for contemplation... The plastic flower, for instance, is to be genuinely admired: in another of Henri’s poems the first sign of spring is the appearance of plastic daffodils in Woolworths. The flower is not despised as inauthentic, nor – heaven forbid – regarded as a symptomatic simulacrum of the postmodern identity’ (Barry, 2001: 26–7).
5. Heather Davis’ work on the dense imbrications of plastic, sexualities, and environmental politics offers allied reflections on the ways in which toxicity queers normativity (Davis, 2016a, 2016b), while Melinda Cooper’s recent work shows how – for both left and right – since the mid-20th century, the family has been an index for gauging the impact of sociocultural transformations (Cooper, 2017). Her argument about the centrality of the nuclear family to neoliberal rationality also speaks to some of my concerns here. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for bringing the relevance of both interventions to my attention.

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