

WHEN FREEWAYS COME

Downey / Marlene Laskey

Jeff Gates's series *In Our Path* is a radical departure from his previous series, *Breast Plates*. *Breast Plates*, a study of how men relate to men, used solarization and symbolism to deal with specific inner conflicts.

Although technically different—*In Our Path* is a beautifully conceived, straightforward photographic study—the portfolio is actually a continuation of the artist's searching to understand his own relationship to his world. He has

moved, now, from an internal consciousness to an external one. The debate is no longer private; others are involved. *In Our Path*, on view at the Downey Museum of Art, documents the struggle of a small group of people who were being displaced by a public agency "for the general good."

The exhibit's specific focus is the land-condemnation proceedings instituted by Caltrans (the California Department of Transportation) to make way for a seventeen-mile stretch of freeway

through southern Los Angeles. The land in question was occupied by lower-middle-class suburban tract houses of a type for which the area is notorious. But notorious or not, this was home to many. Having nowhere else to go, some of the dispossessed fought back. It was a long and messy battle lasting many years. Inevitably, Caltrans won, but there were small victories that would make the inevitable more bearable in the future. The results of this struggle is what Gates studies.

These are not dispassionate photographs. He was not "taking pictures" in the reportorial sense, and certainly not in the vein of the "new topographics." Detachment, coolness and isolation from the subject is not what *In Our Path* is about. Light and shadow are used to evoke strong emotional feeling. Also, it must be noted that though this study deals with the human effects of bureaucratic decision making, there are no people in any of the selected images. This choice by Gates ultimately adds a surreal quality to the work.

The sequencing of the *In Our Path* photographs is most important to the total understanding of the exhibit. Each photograph tells a different story; and, in toto, the viewer is taken on a long journey. The journey begins pleasantly enough: a clapboard-and-stucco cottage, neat and trim and white. It is also up on rollers, but so discreetly that one hardly notices. It is the California Dream uprooted. Aerial shots, which are used to put the project in perspective, give "the path" the look of a game board lined with Monopoly-like houses. In a sense, this is indeed a game board, with real people

and real houses as pawns in a political squeeze play.

Two identically boarded-up, mirror-image houses symbolize endless rows of mirror-image houses—all boarded up. A filled-in swimming pool next to a wall of abandoned houses leads your eye down a wild-flower-covered path lit by filtered sunlight and to a scene of emptiness and neglect.

Midway through the show, the chiaroscuro begins to work its sinister effect. The empty shadows seem menacing. Lawns are gone; houses are gone; people are gone. These are the ruins of a modern city without the charm or mystery of past ages to cover the skeletons. The pictures become bleaker—a house split in half, its insides hanging out. There is a tree in shock. Its bare branches frantically reach out in all directions, but most are bent down toward the ground as if looking for a way to become whole again. Toward the end there is a wryly amusing photograph of the abandoned carcass of an easy chair, looking in perpetuity at an equally abandoned, small Mission-style house. Finally, there is death—the decomposing body of a small dog that still has its collar on. The journey has been a descent into despair.

The abandoned houses, the dispossessed and the rotting streets, as well as the new freeways and towers, are our urban landscape as much as the Sierras are our wilderness landscape. It is well that our artists do not overlook them. They represent a part of our lives. □

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Jeff Gates, untitled from the *In Our Path* series, photograph, at the Downey Museum of Art. ©1982 Jeff Gates.