

SCENES OF SEVERED NEIGHBORHOODS

By DINAH BERLAND

As Jeff Gates drove from his home in Los Angeles to his teaching job at Cerritos College in Norwalk, he found himself increasingly intrigued by the boarded-up houses along his route, remnants of the troubled Century Freeway project. "I was attracted to the area because it looked so similar to the area of tract houses in the San Fernando Valley where I grew up," he said. "I was also attracted to the idea of the abandonment of suburbia, which is what this looked like to me."

A photographer who had always been more concerned with setting up images to reflect his emotions and personal attitudes rather than documenting the existing environment, Gates didn't know what he might do with this compelling vision of blight, but he decided that he had to photograph the area, even if it meant diverging from his customary way of working.

"In Our Path," at the Downey Museum of Art through Oct. 22, represents the artist's first foray into straight documentation. Before researching the history and issues surrounding the freeway project, about which Gates can now share a wealth of facts and anecdotes, he simply photographed it.

"First of all, I was interested in learning about and teaching myself this new type of photography, which is quite different from the work I've done in the past," he said. But in the same way as in his more synthetic work, Gates allowed his personal vision to be his guide.

"I had never trusted myself in terms of creativity," he acknowledged. "I always felt it came out of no place and that one day I wouldn't have an idea. Finally, I realized that this wasn't the case at all, that I was really a prism. I saw the world in a certain way and as long as the world continued to be the way it was, the information and ideas would continue to filter through me."

In Gates' earlier "Breastplate" series, men posed in front of a gridded background pulling their shirts off to expose their chests to the camera. The large silver prints were solarized, adding an impression of disintegration as the moving figure partially merged into the background. The photographer's intent was to explore the way men related to one another.

"In Our Path" contains no figures, but rather images of box-shaped houses standing propped off their foundations, kidney-shaped swimming pools filled with dirt and clusters of still-occupied tract homes huddled next to blocks of cleared flatland punctuated by occasional piles of rubble. Although Gates' documentation of the disturbance of suburbia initially seems

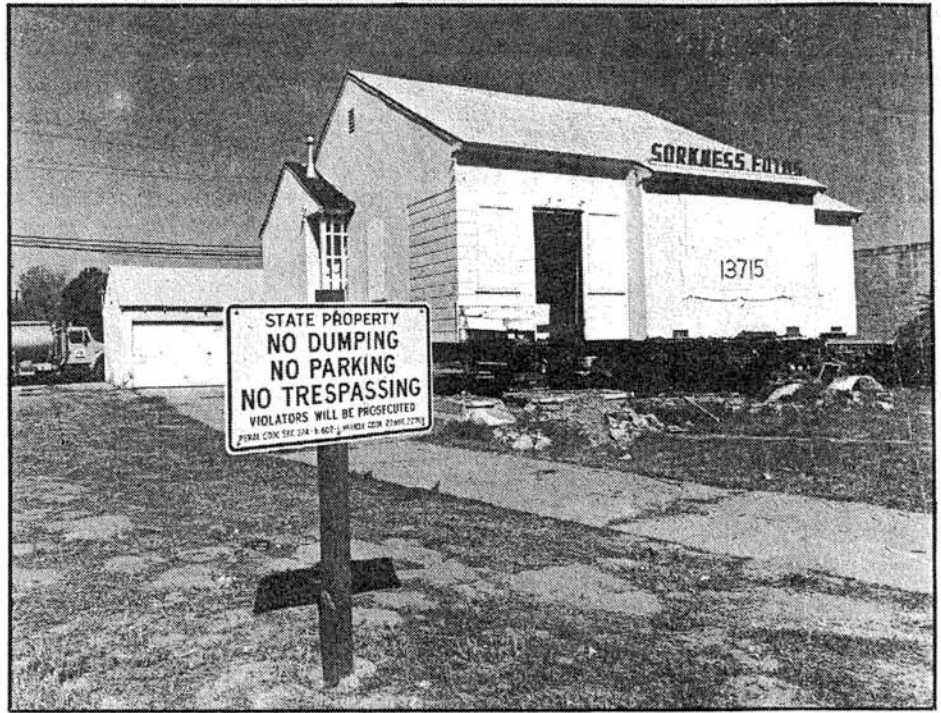


Photo of house waiting to be demolished from exhibit of Jeff Gates' work at Downey Museum of Art.

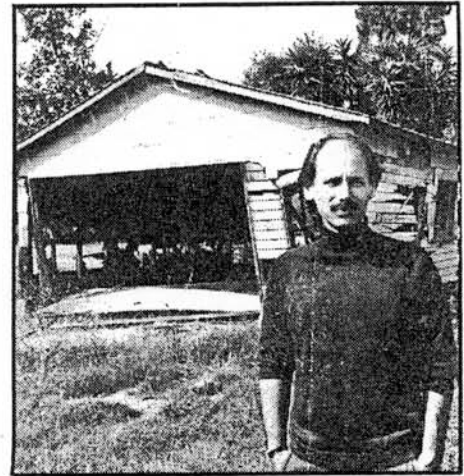
to bear little relationship to his earlier work, the sense of disintegration, isolation and vulnerability persists through the use of subject matter as symbol.

"My work always starts from something personal," he explained, "something connected with my past, with my present, the way that I relate to people. And these photographs do too."

In contrast with the photographs of Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal and others of the urban documentary genre, Gates considers his work to speak more directly to issues of human involvement. "I looked for symbols of the personal, of family, of home. These are not houses as much as they used to be homes." Approaching the subject from several angles, literally as well as figuratively, Gates ventured up in a small plane and made his first aerial photographs in order to show how neighborhoods were being severed.

It wasn't until after he had completed his photographic documentation that Gates began to interview residents, lawyers and city officials to learn the history of the Century Freeway project and its effects on the 17-mile-long swath of neighborhoods it traverses from Downey and Norwalk to Los Angeles International Airport. The project, Gates learned, was conceived in the 1950s, initiated some time later, stopped by injunction for seven years, revised and begun again and continues to affect thousands of people. Using the information he was able to gather, Gates wrote the essay that accompanies his portfolio. Through this more direct involvement, he began to feel a responsibility to carry the work from portfolio to exhibition.

"The construction of this freeway was affecting people in ways that I didn't understand and, I would venture to say, even the experts didn't understand. . . . I used to say that having a show was not important. In this case, I think it might be, since it continues the process of dialogue and understanding. This wasn't my



Photographer Jeff Gates documents impact of planned Century Freeway in "In Our Path."

story as much as it was the story of the people who were really involved."

To further examine the effects of this and other public projects, Gates joined with Candy Lewis from the Foundation for Art Resources and Lukman Glasgow, director of Downey Museum, to organize a symposium on Thursday at 7 p.m. The symposium will take place at the museum, which is near the path of the proposed freeway. Moderated by Dorit Cypis, the panel will also discuss the ways in which contemporary artists have become increasingly involved in issues affecting the larger human community. In addition to Gates and Lewis, participants will include Michael Wright from the Housing Replenishment Program, Charles Gomez, city manager of Lynwood; Jerry Burchfield and Mark Chamberlain, artists who have been documenting the Laguna Canyon freeway project; and Victwa Shakespear, one of the remaining residents of the Century Freeway corridor.

Whether setting up figurative tableaux, manipulating prints or documenting the world outside, Gates considers the promotion of dialogue to be one of the primary functions of his work and of art in general. "The dialogue can be about many things—about the artist, about society. . . . Photographing is, for me, an integral part of the process of understanding." □

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