

# PLATEFORM 6

barbara gallucci : utopiary terrace

*"Mowing the lawn, I realized the first time I gazed into my neighbor's yard and imagined him gazing back into mine, is a civic responsibility."*

Michael Pollan, "Why Mow? The Case Against Lawns," 1989

## barbara gallucci: utopiary terrace

For PLATFORM 6, New York-based artist Barbara Gallucci re-imagines deCordova's third-floor lobby as an indoor landscape with her signature blend of sculpture and design. Comprised of "topiary" beanbag chairs and a three-tiered cork-covered terrace, *Utopiary Terrace* is a fully functional installation that references both manicured lawns and the manufactured landscape (fig. 1). It also reflects Gallucci's long-standing interest in the place of nature in contemporary culture and how Modernist design helped shape that relationship. Installed in a glass-enclosed area of the museum that overlooks the 35-acre park, Gallucci's *Utopiary Terrace* addresses deCordova's site as an indoor and outdoor venue for contemporary art, following the over-arching theme of the PLATFORM series.



Fig. 1: *Utopiary Terrace*, 2011, cotton shag chenille slipcovers, shredded recycled foam filler, plywood platforms, cork tile  
Courtesy of the Artist and Carroll and Sons Gallery, Boston, MA  
Photo by : CLEMENTS / HOWCROFT, Boston

“Topia,” according to Gallucci, is a word fragment derived partly from the word utopia, an ideal but unattainable state which fueled much of Modernist ideology of the early-twentieth century, and topiary, an artificially sculpted landscape. The sculptures’ grass-like chenille covering evokes a mass-produced notion of “nature” and the human desire to control our environment. The cork-covered platforms refer, in equal measure, to tiered, sculpted landscapes and Modernist architecture which first used the durable and natural material as floor covering—a prime example of which can be found in the 1938 historic home of Modernist architect and Bauhaus school founder, Walter Gropius, which is just down the road from deCordova (fig. 2).

In *Utopiary Terrace*, we find nature “behaving” for culture; existing for our pleasure, functioning to bring comfort. One might say these sculptures are “in nature’s image,” but without the muss and fuss of real life or lawns.

The lawn has a storied past in American history. In his seminal essay “Why Mow? The Case Against Lawns,” writer Michael Pollan tells the story of the lawn’s roots in civic idealism and democratic aspirations. In the nineteenth century, Frederick Law Olmsted carved and sculpted green space throughout the nation’s cities with the intent of connecting and greening communal life. As suburbia arose in the twentieth century, Pollan writes, “Like the



Fig. 2: Interior - 1938 Gropius House, Lincoln, Massachusetts  
Courtesy of Historic New England

interstate highway system, like fast-food chains, like television, the lawn has served to unify the American landscape; it is what makes the suburbs of Cleveland and Tucson, the streets of Eugene and Tampa, look more alike than not.”<sup>1</sup>

But what unifies can also restrict, and the ubiquity of the perfectly manicured lawn can just as quickly become rigid convention, squelching innovation and governing one’s relationship to nature. “Lawns, I am convinced,” Pollan concludes, “are a symptom of, and a metaphor for, our skewed relationship to the land. They teach us that, with the help of petrochemicals and technology, we can bend nature to our will.”<sup>2</sup>

In *Utopiary Terrace*, Pollan’s essay provides Gallucci’s starting point—conflating the social symbolism inherent in the modern-day lawn with the conformity of the suburbs. But she fuses his acute observation with a specific design history, which stems from a long-standing interest in the relationship between design and culture.

More recently, Pollan’s article has also spawned a movement of sorts against the decorative function of the lawn. As the politics and environmental impact of food distribution becomes increasingly complicated and clearly harmful, the drive to eat

locally has shifted back into mainstream culture and the green space of the lawn is now targeted property. Movements such as Food not Lawns have sprouted in regional communities to advocate for the growing of fruits and vegetables, not grass, while artists such as Los Angeles-based Fritz Haeg have taken private lawns as a material out of which to create/sculpt sustainable food gardens.<sup>3</sup>

For Gallucci, the lawn presents a social/design problem that she sees as the realm of sculpture. As an object, a sculpture is always ‘of this world’—occupying space much like we do (as opposed to a painting that lives in the discrete margins

***“The belief that standardized parts and modern manufacturing techniques would make great designs affordable to everyone was the cornerstone of a utopian template in which art and design could cross class boundaries and become the great social equalizer.”***

of the wall). The question then presents itself, how does this object work in the world? While for some, the sculpted object remains a thing to be contemplated, Gallucci asks it to be functional and to comment on its surroundings and history. In *Utopiary Terrace*, the chairs and platform reflect on deCordova's rolling landscape—a carefully manicured, cultivated landscape—in the form of comfortable, relaxing seating to offer up, perhaps, another use of the lawn.

In 2002, Gallucci began to document this specific brand of suburban conformity in *Chicago Ranches*, a series of photographs of a 1960s-era Chicago neighborhood (fig. 3). The images were all taken at identical viewpoints, highlighting the manufactured, repetitive nature of homes, while articulating their subtle differences—an off-kilter tree or a flourish of a lighting fixture.<sup>4</sup> Uniformly, each home in the series is preceded by a carpet of green, neatly squared-off grass that serves to clearly demarcate the line between public and private space. The photographs make clear Pollan's observation that half a century later, the lawn's democratic nature has been turned into a yawning moat before each 'castle.'

Modernist design and architecture emerged in the early twentieth century, most notably through Germany's Bauhaus and Russia's Constructivist schools of thought and was born



Fig. 3:  
*Chicago Ranches: Red Light Pole*, 2002  
C-print, 20 x 30 in.



Fig. 3:  
*Chicago Ranches: Green Siding*, 2002  
C-print, 20 x 30 in.

of democratic ideals that design should be for all through modern, industrial materials that could be acquired with little expense. Art and design, in this proposition, should be of its time in every manner of speaking—from materials to process—a marked break from the past. The major architects and teachers of the movement stressed an economy of form and truth in materials, producing such iconic structures as Mies van der Rohe's 1951 Farnsworth House, outside of Chicago, and his 1958 Seagram Building in downtown Manhattan, as well as more modest structures like Walter Gropius's 1938 home, here in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

The streamlined, industrial aesthetic of this radical movement was absorbed very quickly into American corporate culture and converted into what is now known as the International style—a clean, consistent, safe look, rather than a bold, new philosophy. The slab building that now fills most American downtowns is the style's most enduring icon. Gallucci's photographs of near-identical homes make visible the connection between the ideas/ideals behind this period's design—of accessibility to all through uniform, modern means and materials—and conformist American culture that has since become synonymous with "Suburbia."<sup>5</sup>

Following this theme of Modernism in the American lifestyle, Gallucci continued with two other projects, another photo-

graphic series of Levittown houses and sculptures of iconic mid-century furniture.

Gallucci's *RANCH '50 (The Levittown interiors)*, 2003, documents one of the first modern, mass-produced housing communities in the U.S. (fig. 4). Levittown, Long Island was constructed between 1947 and 1951 with 17,000 identical homes to accommodate the housing needs of a post-war population explosion. Again, the themes of repetition, functionality, and economy come into play in the structures, and in Gallucci's photography. She chose to focus on an identical location in the 1950s-era homes—a space left by an original built-in television set—the 1950 Admiral. As the monitors turned obsolete, homeowners were faced with a hole in their walls underneath the staircases. Gallucci documents these spaces 50 years later and the radically different ways people redesigned these once identical spaces. In this, she points to the flaw in the concept of uniformity as an ideal. People, it seems, may not want to be the same.

In addition to the photographs, Gallucci created a set of over-scaled iconic Modernist furniture with basic Home Depot items, to question the lingering mid-century idea of accessible design and material in the 21st century. For instance, Le Corbusier's modular based furniture system—originally designed in leather and chrome—was re-interpreted in plywood and aluminum pipe

at 50% larger size, in part, to emphasize the long shadow this period still casts on sculpture today (fig. 5). In doing so, Gallucci seeks, she explains, to “embody a ‘wrongness’ in scale and aberrant materiality... . The belief that standardized parts and modern manufacturing techniques would make great designs affordable to everyone was the cornerstone of a utopian template in which art and design could cross class boundaries and become the great social equalizer. These objects directly confront the optimism of 1950's with a contemporary example of what is now affordable: doing-it-yourself.”

In her photographs, sculptures, and installations, Gallucci examines the intersections among sculpture, furniture, and interior design, teasing out the incongruities of each legacy through popular culture. *Utopiary Terrace* continues her interest in exploring American culture within a context of design history by fusing the materials of the suburban lawn (the grass-like chenille) and mid-century architecture (the cork floor coverings) into an interactive installation that conjoins the functionality of furniture with the forms of sculpture. In doing so, she proposes a fluidity between built and natural spaces, and between architecture and the outdoors, that presents a new way for art and design to function with and for our environment.

Dina Deitsch, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art



Fig. 4:  
 Ranch 50: Leon and Fran, 2003  
 Ranch 50: Marilyn, 2003  
 Ranch 50: Bob and Jess, 2003  
 All c-print, 20 x 24 in.



Fig. 5:  
*Le Gran Confort* (couch and chair), 2004  
plywood and aluminum pipe  
couch 76 x 40 x 36 in. chair 40 x 40 x 36 in.

- <sup>1</sup> Michael Pollan, "Why Mow? The Case Against Lawns," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 28, 1989.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> See <http://www.foodnotlawns.net/> and Fritz Haeg's ongoing project, Edible Estates at <http://www.fritzhaeg.com/garden/initiatives/edibleestates/main.html>
- <sup>4</sup> The Ranch-style house that Gallucci captures here is a uniquely American domestic architectural style. First built in the 1920s, the ranch style was extremely popular amongst the booming post-war middle class of the 1940s to 1970s. The style was used to build large neighborhoods rapidly to serve the post-War population explosion and corresponding demand for housing. As a result, entire neighborhoods of identical or near identical houses emerged in this era.
- <sup>5</sup> Case in point: Eric Bogosian's 1994 play and 1996 film *SubUrbia*, an account of a group of aimless 20-somethings as they spend a day and night in a 7-11 parking lot, encapsulates the emptiness of an American lifestyle

## BIOGRAPHY

Barbara Gallucci received her B.F.A. at the University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, and M.F.A. at Yale University, New Haven, CT. Exhibitions include Bakalar Gallery Mass College of Art, Boston; Greene Street Gallery, Boston; Kayafas Gallery, Boston; Derek Eller Gallery, NY; Lauren Wittels Gallery, NY; Site Santa Fe, NM; Galerie Les Filles Du Calvaire, Paris; Frac Credac, Paris; Frac Le Quartier in Brittany; Lothringer 13 in Munich, Germany; Tri Gallery, Los Angeles; among others.

She is a recipient of the Pollock Krasner Foundation Grant, the Gottlieb Foundation Fellowship, Joan Mitchell Foundation Fellowship and the International Art Critics Award (IACA) for best solo show in Boston 2004. She is currently a full-time sculpture professor at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and is represented by Carroll and Sons Gallery, Boston, MA.

## PROGRAMMING

### Artist Talk: Barbara Gallucci

Saturday, February 12, 3 pm

### PLATFORM Discussion Series

Saturday, March 26, 3 pm

Join exhibiting artist Barbara Gallucci and landscape architect Michael Blier as they discuss how Gallucci's *Utopiary Terrace* explores issues of landscape, architecture, the great outdoors, and the world of fine art and sculpture.

### Eye Wonder Family Program

Sunday, February 6, 1–3pm

All programs are free with museum admission



*Utopiary Terrace*, 2011, detail

Photo by : CLEMENTS / HOWCROFT, Boston

## **PLATFORM**

**PLATFORM** is a series of solo exhibitions by artists from both the New England and national arts communities. These shows focus on work that engages with deCordova's unique architectural spaces and social, geographical, and physical location. The **PLATFORM** series is intended as a support for creativity and expression of new ideas, and as a catalyst for dialogue about contemporary art.

The 2010–11 **PLATFORM** series is funded by James and Audrey Foster.

deCordova | Sculpture Park and Museum

51 Sandy Pond Road  
Lincoln, Massachusetts 01773  
781.259.8355  
[www.deCordova.org](http://www.deCordova.org)



**JANUARY 29, 2011–APRIL 24, 2011**