

the guardian

Richard Forster: Levittown review – little boxes remade with love

De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea It took 17 minutes to erect a Levittown prefab: 70 years later, Richard Forster has spent months painstakingly resurrecting that American Dream in pencil

Sunday 3 April 2016

You know Levittown, you've seen it in the movies: thousands of neat little houses radiating out across the suburbs in the fresh morning dew. Pop leaves for work in his gleaming new Oldsmobile. Mom waves the kids off on the yellow school bus. A freckled boy cycles past, tossing newspapers on sprinkled lawns.

It's the American Dream: or its hellish opposite. But either way, it is far more than an opening-credit cliché. For Levittown is a real place, a community of 20,000 houses built on Long Island for the benefit of veterans returning to a severe housing shortage at the end of the second world war. The units arrived prefabricated and the builders – William Levitt and co – eventually became so skilled they could put one up in under 17 minutes. Each house was tiny, identical and came with the new-fangled television set ready installed. Levittown was the original mass-produced American suburbia.

And it is the utter strangeness of these rows of ticky-tacky little boxes on a hill – to quote Malvina Reynolds's famous ballad satirising Levittown – that has inspired the 50 works in Richard Forster's compelling new show. Fittingly, each image is small and appears almost identical at a distance; and each looks superficially like a black-and-white photograph. But these first impressions are entirely wrong: for every work is in fact an amazingly skilled graphite drawing.

This feat – to render photographs of Levittown from the 1950s in all their faint blurs, inky contrasts and silvery halations – is so remarkable as to capture the viewer's attention right away. For you cannot see the movement of Forster's pencil or hand; you cannot see how they were made. But that is a way of holding your eyes fast to the subject matter of these teeming rows of tiny boxes. Are they quite identical, what size are they really, are there any people, how could anyone navigate these regular grids stretching into the nameless distance without so much as a landmark?

Each picture is a microcosm in itself, dense with tiny details, that slows the eye and draws the mind into this extraordinary project where everyone was effectively encouraged to do the same thing at the same time. Above all, with their curious edits and perspectives, and super-

smooth draughtsmanship, these images make the horror of town planning into an eerily graceful abstraction.

Richard Forster was born in Saltburn, North Yorkshire in 1970. He found form with these meticulous graphite drawings some 10 years ago, specifically with images of the former GDR, with East German novelty shops, Bauhaus housing estates and alienated figures nostalgic for pre-communist days. Sometimes his images partake of that nostalgia, one feels, in themselves.

A few years ago he made a long sequence of drawings of the sea at Saltburn, or rather the line of the tide, ever-changing and yet always repeating its movements, that seemed to fuse both the living moment and the seas of the ancient past.

In this show he tells a story about Levittown that runs from horror to fear and nostalgia, even through just the slightest shift of perspective. At first the houses are shown at ground level, regular and secure, so that one might well imagine the newspaper boy doing his rounds. But then they are shown at an oblique angle, from a distance or from so high above that they begin to look like something else altogether – cell structures, Aztec monuments, bunkers, even DNA strands.

Levittown slumbers, its subconscious a low-lying grey pall. Then the scene darkens, complicated by shadows, and history seems ingrained in the drawing. Are we looking at the building of a house or its destruction? Levittown, depicted in a certain light, looks like bombed-out Dresden.

These images are both intensely intimate – keyhole glimpses into Levittown's grids – and at the same time offer no entry into the actual buildings themselves except by way of blueprints measuring the narrow bedrooms and kitchens. But then the external scale of these boxes will become suddenly apparent when the occasional tree or parked car gives a sense of their drastic limitations.

These were not just physical but social; not all veterans were allowed. The Levitts would not sell to black people and, even though William Levitt was Jewish himself, he wouldn't deal with Jewish buyers either. So there are no black people in Forster's images. In fact there are scarcely any people at all. This is the symbolic revelation of these drawings. Look into them and it is as if mankind has simply vanished from the Earth, leaving these boxes behind. Human beings do not count.

Two of Forster's drawings were made on the same day; the exact times are given in the titles, indicating that it took him eight hours of intense labour to complete each work. This throws the focus on the act of drawing to an unusual degree, reminding the viewer that although these images may sometimes look as real as the original photographs themselves, they are in fact handmade.

Why then does Forster make them? The answer lies in the infinitely subtle nuances he is able to create with his pencil. Photographs that

lora reynolds gallery

were taken for the architectural archives acquire a human subplot when filtered thought his imagination; bland and formulaic housing becomes mysterious. What the camera presented as fact half a century ago, he questions now with his pencil.

And this is to do with time, in the end. Photography extracts a moment and holds it forever intact; but it also freezes that moment, pushing it back into the past. Forster is effectively reanimating old photographs, bringing them back to life as unfinished stories through these deeply worked and pensive drawings.

At the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex until 5 June

- Laura Cumming