



s p a c e



MILES
COOLIDGE
finds a form of
contemporary *vanitas*
in the iconography of
the everyday. Kathleen
Magnan watches
this space.





Commercial Building, Capitol, Highrises. C-print, 30 x 38 in.



Telephone Switching Building, Toys-R-Us. C-print, 30 x 38 in.



Police Station, Insurance Building, Gas Station. C-print, 30 x 44 in.

All is not well in Safetyville. Trees loom over shrunken corporate facades, having won the victory over industrialization. Roadways threaten to engulf the sidewalks as curbs slide onto manicured front lawns. Logic and proportion are up for grabs in this scaled-down version of middle-class America.

Located in Sacramento, California, Safetyville's undersized buildings stand between streets that have been created for the sole purpose of teaching children the rules of the road. The whole town has been built to one-third of human scale in order to accommodate small-fry, so this scenario looks strange to adults. But Miles Coolidge's camera has an equalizing effect on the dwarfed landscape. His recent eponymous photographic series Safetyville (1994–95), like much of his work, provides an unlikely commentary on American consumerism.

Safetyville is a "theme park of the normal or the everyday," Coolidge says, although this park has "no history or romance to it." A tiny sapling towers over a bunny-mascoted insurance building in *Police Station, Insurance Building, Gas Station* (1994–95). The red curb is distinctly oversized. As Coolidge aptly describes, "Safetyville makes the everyday strange."

Urban renewal does indeed happen in Safetyville, as in 'real' life. Buildings – bearing the logos of various corporate sponsors, including McDonalds and Chevron – get torn down and rebuilt; or logos change, all contributing to the appearance of what Coolidge calls an "evenhanded representation of an ordinary environment." In this iconography of the everyday, Coolidge unwittingly provides a contemporary version of the *vanitas* theme – that imagery used by artists in the Middle Ages to signify the evils of bland

greed and desire. Each photograph of Safetyville portrays an ever-changing presentation in sync with the corporate shifts that incessantly alter the appearance of the American landscape. As corporations grow, downsize and dissolve, so do the surrounding neighborhoods flourish, suffer or die. Essentially, the businesses that develop around these areas provide a suburban panorama against which we measure status and worth.

Coolidge has also wrenched this concept of *vanitas* into an updated portrayal of brilliant excess in his Garage Pictures series, from 1992. In this, Coolidge has chronicled the tendency of suburban L.A. homeowners to open their garage doors in order to show off their collected tools, toys and gadgets to passers-by. But while a painting like Pieter Aertsen's *The Meat Stall* (1551) shows a side of beef, a plate of fish, and freshly killed fowl to satirize the gluttonous lives of

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peasants, Coolidge's imagery is a tad more pristine. Displayed in triptychs, the Garage Pictures surround the viewer with someone else's belongings, projecting calculated character portraits of the owners.

From *Home of Mr. and Mrs. E. O. Cronkite* (1992) with its hanging clamps, a work bench, screws, pins and nails displayed in an immaculate toolbox, portrays the owners as fix-it types. A wealth of woodstrips protruding from plastic pails suggest that the 'handyman' has been idle as of late, save for the scattered wood shavings that serve as traces of prior activity. For Coolidge, "the arrangement of these items is important since the garages represent the keepers of this stuff."

From *Home of Haig Balian* (1992) portrays a different type of inhabitant – the self-conscious bachelor. A 10-speed bike and a Kawasaki jetski bask in the glow of the meticulously organized, all-white garage. In another view, various sports jerseys hang close to

From *Home of Mr. and Mrs. E. O. Cronkite*; left wall, 1992. C-print



Elevator Pictures, 1993

Hilton Garden Inn, color photograph, 29 x 39 in.



L.A. Department of Cultural Affairs, color photograph, 29 x 39 in.



606 South Olive, color photograph, 29 x 39 in.



CaJArts, color photograph, 29 x 39 in.



L.A. Museum of Natural History, color photograph, 29 x 39 in.



UCLA Research Laboratory, color photograph, 29 x 39 in.



Photos courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, NY

one another, ready for a quick game of hockey or a night at the local sports arena. A small boom-box with a tower of tapes, a beer cooler and music-equipment boxes all reveal that this guy is on the road to what he considers a successful life.

In Coolidge's view, the spaces he has chosen are "tangential to a broader concept. The automobile is implied off-camera, yet the purpose of the garage is to shelter the family car." As time passes, garage collections may acquire an inch of dust, rot and eventually be replaced with something else. Meanwhile, as we systematically peer into the garages housing troves

of goodies, we confirm that our own 'private' spaces are also susceptible to another's pleasure – but only because we make them so.

Coolidge's fascination with the mechanization of the everyday is also evident in his series of Elevator Pictures (1993). Framed in steel, and looking every inch as powerful, these lush, chromogenic prints of elevator interiors portray an industrialization unexplored by Coolidge's photo-documentary predecessors – most notably Bernd and Hilla Becher. But unlike the Bechers, Coolidge's highly subjective approach to photography treats viewers to a fanciful disclosure

of interior beauty. The abstract quality of this work almost functions as a stage for the absent players. Every detail, scratch and dent makes up the character of these elevator 'portraits' and is assimilated into the larger picture, not unlike the cycle of urban renewal in Safetyville.

"Where the garage interiors have more to do with the vernacular aspect of a given space, the elevators are about institutions," Coolidge maintains. His telling photographs probe the spaces we create and those that are created around us. For him, it seems, space is the new frontier. 