



Daniel Oliva's Home Economics

by Andrea Kirsh

an essay for *White Constructions*
a solo exhibition by Daniel Oliva

Daniel Oliva employs an accessible visual language that reflects the breadth of his subject - nothing less than the state of the nation. He makes a plea to understand the injustices of the past as a foundation upon which to build a just future. His newest body of work, *White Constructions*, presents a counter-narrative of U.S. social history of the 1930s-50s with images that might be taken from children's books of the period. He discloses the truth behind the aspirational, post-war rhetoric of victory: that American democracy offers equal opportunities for all and fairly rewards hard work.

WWII was the first time the U.S. Army was integrated and African-American troops fought and died alongside their white fellow citizens. But black men, Hispanic and Asian Americans returned to an uneven playing field that denied them crucial veterans' benefits: subsidized loans for housing and tuition benefits at colleges and universities other than at underfunded, historically black schools that lacked capacity to accommodate them.

Home ownership has been the major source of wealth production for middle-class Americans and education a major means of economic and social advancement. To cite only one region, in New York and New Jersey the G.I. Bill insured 67,000 mortgages, but only 100 were for non-white veterans. The law did not need to specify segregated housing as long as lending policies maintained segregation; and this guaranteed unequal futures for succeeding generations. There is a reason that Dick and Jane in all the school textbooks were white.

Oliva tells these stories in a superficially naive style and in formats that resemble both children's games and picture books. We recognize the generic, brick housing, green lawns and views of both downtown skyscrapers and distant countryside – all under clear, blue skies. These are the sugar coatings which camouflage a bitter history of systemic racism that has been deliberately suppressed. This has allowed the beneficiaries of governmental decisions to believe that hard work alone accounted for their success - and to think as well that laziness or incompetence explains the failure of others, of communities of color.



Detail: *Making Up Their Minds About the House on Deepgreen Lane* (Levittown, PA)

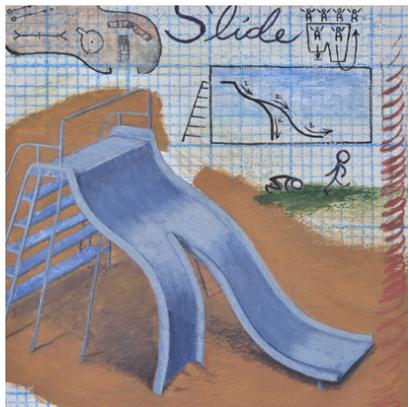
Some of Oliva's paintings refer to specific historic examples. *Making Up Their Minds About the House on Deepgreen Lane* (Levittown, PA) tells the story of a black family who moved into Levittown, Pennsylvania in 1957 to be greeted with overt hostility and violence, including rocks thrown through their windows and a Confederate flag displayed nearby, as well as support from a small number of neighbors. In *Loop*

Drive a black couple pushes their baby in a stroller across the street from Lakeview Terrace in Cleveland, a whites-only housing complex that overlooks apartments for black families built beside the railroad tracks. They know they would not be welcome in the buildings with a view of Lake Erie invisible to the families below.

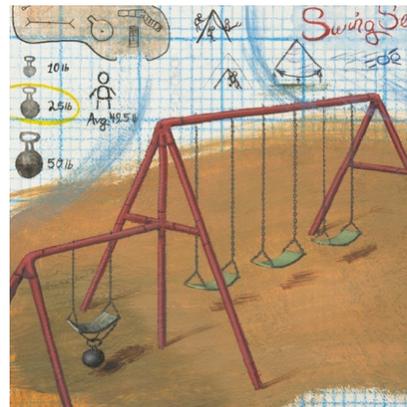


Loop Drive, 15-1/2" x 10", gouache on paper, 2018

Oliva's playgrounds are a metaphor for public programs in general. The five small panels of the playground series, with their partially-obscured substrates of graph paper, reveal the intentional planning behind post-WWII governmental decisions and the social exclusion and civic violence enacted under the guise of public benefits. What lurks behind unequal amenities for children? Why does one side of a slide drop straight into the ground while the other beside it follows a gentle curve and deposits its rider far ahead and on his feet? What will happen to the unfortunate child who plays on the swing that has been booby-trapped with a weight, carefully calibrated to eject her from the seat? Oliva would like viewers to consider that the left-out and injured children are all of ours and that we share a mutual obligation to face the past and provide for all our children; they are our collective future.



Slide, 10" x 10", gouache on panel, 2018



Swing Set, 10" x 10", gouache on panel, 2018

About the Author: Andrea Kirsh is an art historian and arts administrator who has taught at the University of Delaware, Georgetown University and Rutgers University, Camden. She has contributed to Artblog (www.theartblog.org) since 2006 and is co-author of *Seeing Through Paintings; Physical Examination in Art Historical Studies (YUP)*.

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