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Childlike drawings of home inspire photographer

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By **Steve Bennett** - Express-News

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Ask any 5-year-old to draw a house, and chances are you'll get the industriously crayoned upright rectangle with the pointed roof, a suburban rocket, with a door in the lower center flanked by a couple of windows. The inevitable brown-trunked, green-canopied tree provides shade from the ubiquitous smiley yellow sun in the corner. A couple of cottony clouds float overhead.

The image has become an American icon of the Beaver Cleaver school.

About a year and a half ago, photographer Libby Rowe began playing with the simple geometric shape of a childhood home in her work, locating it in the world she saw around her.

Hanging from a clothesline, a man's white dress shirt with the cutout image became "Dirty Laundry"; a house-shaped wasp nest was obviously "Abandoned"; a cat's cradle string pattern recalled the lullaby "When the Bough Breaks"; a house-shaped pillow on an orange couch represented "Domestic Bliss."

Rowe says her domestic situation was more stressful than blissful when she built the house of cards that became "Modular Dwelling," the first image in the series, which she calls "Dwellings."

Violet, her baby girl, was 6 weeks old, and she and her husband, Ken Rowe, a sculptor, were contemplating uprooting a comfortable life in Nashville, where Rowe was a senior lecturer of art at Vanderbilt University.

Texas — and UTSA, where Rowe is now in her first semester as an assistant professor in the art department — was a big step. An obvious irony is that Rowe was selling one house and searching for another. (It didn't help that the family arrived during a historic heat wave followed by what promises to be a painful allergy season.)

"Everything was compounding chaos," Rowe said during a recent introduction to her new work at the UTSA Satellite Space at the Blue Star Arts Complex. "And I tend to be a person who likes structure."

The exhibition of Rowe's 18 digital chromogenic prints in "Building Vernacular Imaginations" shares space with another set of iconic images: Paho Mann's parking lot views of Circle K stores that have evolved into other commercial enterprises, from tuxedo to tattoo shops. The show, part of Fotoseptiembre USA in San Antonio, continues through Sept. 20.

"I like the fact that both of these artists are using conceptual icons that we live with every day," says curator Scott Sherer, associate professor of art history at UTSA and director of the UTSA Art Gallery and Satellite Space. "Both artists present the fullness of an idea and explore it in multiple ways. But the work is very artistic as well. There's a creative inventiveness with these icons."

Pun intended or not, Rowe says she is someone who tends to "dwell on things." "But," she adds, "I also tend to find a humorous, or sardonic, bent to things. That's my coping mechanism."

Speaking of sardonic, "Pink," Rowe's ongoing exhibition that defines her view on women's issues — a piece called "Perfect Posture" involves pink pumps, teacups, a broom and viewer participation — informs the new work. It says that the ideal home, like the perfect wife or mother, is not always what it seems, or within grasp, or the way we have drawn it in our minds and through the media.

"Homeland Security," for example, finds a beagle-ish dog sitting at attention in his backyard, viewed through a chain-link fence. He is framed by the house icon cut out from green tape woven through the fence links.

"What is a symbol of safety and security for many people — now, it's out of many people's grasp," Rowe says. "There's no security here, in the dog or the fence, no protection."

"Building Vernacular Imaginations" continues through Sept. 20 at the UTSA Satellite Space in the Blue Star Arts Complex. Hours are 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday; noon to 6 p.m. Friday-Sunday. Call (210) 458-4391.

Visit Libby Rowe's Web site at www.libbyrowe.com and Paho Mann's www.pahomann.com.

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