

# PIN-UP

MAGAZINE FOR  
ARCHITECTURAL  
ENTERTAINMENT  
ISSUE 33  
F/W 2022/23  
USD 30

REM KOOLHAAS  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY FRANCESCO NAZARDO

# NEW AMERICANA



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BARBIE DREAMHOUSE  
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PRECIOUS OKOYOMON  
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USM NYC BY BEN GANZ  
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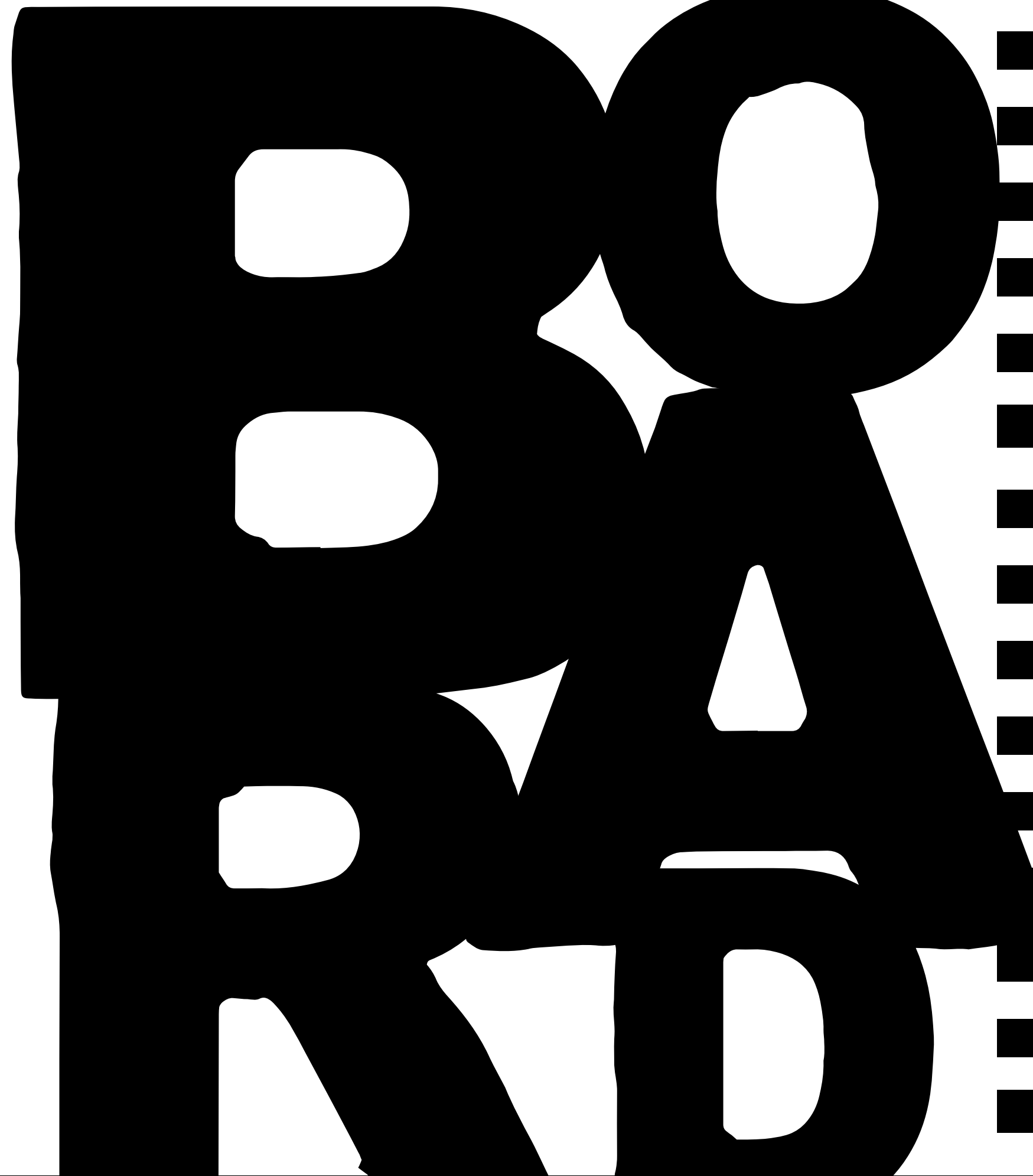


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BOARD





Gazing out at the city, we see three towers in the foreground; behind them, beyond an overpass, a row of exurban midrises, then some blocks of tract housing. Suburban streets eventually flow into highway cloverleaves, paths in and out of town. Roger Brown's painting *City and Suburbs* (1972) is a densely concentrated window into a larger landscape. Then we notice the inhabitants: stylized silhouettes of men and women, backlit by the yellow incandescence of their interiors or cast in white or blue shadow. Their positions and gestures indicate different degrees of absorption — focusing on themselves or others, on what's going on outside their windows or within. They survey the scene as we do. Arms gesture at pointing arms; figures gather, talk, and, in one window, kiss. The buildings organize these bodies, each figure occupying its immediate environment. Rather than perceiving every individual, we sense them all together, a critical mass, as embedded in their own spaces as they are in the city and suburbs those spaces make up.

# MEMORY MAKER

BY JAKE BRODSKY



Roger Brown, *Me's Building High Rise*, 1972; oil on canvas, 60.5 x 42 inches.

Born in Alabama in 1941, Brown moved to Chicago at 21 to study at the Art Institute under artist Ray Yoshida and art historian Whitney Halstead. In the late 1960s, Brown was one of several artists — among them Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, and Suellen Rocca — who showed at the Hyde Park Art Center. They were later termed the Chicago Imagists, a grouping they sometimes bristled at, for, as Brown explained in a 1980 Imagist catalogue, they had “shared attitudes, shared concerns, but different approaches, adaptations, styles.” Among the things they shared was an eye to the material culture around them: the folk and “naive” art, the houses and skyscrapers, the ads and cartoons that make up America.

*City and Suburbs* feels familiar — something about the central Deco crown, the towers' setbacks, the mid-ground pediments, the pitched roofs of the single-family dwellings, the billboards just out of town. When asked, by *Art in America* in 1978, about the déjà vu his paintings evoke, Brown mused, “maybe that's because I deal with things we all know that are from my memory, and my memory is probably very much like everyone else's... All I try to do is deal with those common everyday things we all know.” One of those things is architecture — the structures and aesthetic frameworks that build a regional or national experience of space and place. Brown's use of the first-person plural is crucial: “we” is a political word, it forms the basis of a society; for Brown, it is born of the shared experience — the repetition — of the everyday.

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## BOARD

Roger Brown, *A Rocking Explosion*, 1972; oil on canvas, 72.75 x 48.75 inches.

Brown often cited Robert Venturi's 1966 *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* as a key influence whose attention to the vernacular spoke to his own interests. Toward the book's end, when discussing architect Peter Blake's screed against the visual disorder of the ordinary American town's main drag, Venturi asserts that “the seemingly chaotic juxtapositions of honky-tonk elements express an intriguing kind of vitality and validity, and they produce an unexpected approach to unity as well.” Brown's paintings might be read along similar lines: the “chaotic” juxtaposition of the figures' individual gestures coheres into a visual totality that feels alive and real — even more so because they're living in an environment we may recognize.

Brown's “common everyday” was Chicago, where he kept a home until his death in 1997. By the time Brown arrived, German émigré Ludwig Mies van der Rohe had already made his immense impact on the city with the glass-and-steel monoliths that came to define the American postwar downtown. Brown credits his late partner, architect George Veronda, with drawing his attention to Miesian aesthetics, particularly, as Brown notes in *For George* (a private book he made in the wake of Veronda's 1984 death), “the importance of the pattern and repetition ... how [these elements] reflected the structure but were decorative as well.” The same year he painted *City and Suburbs* — also the year he met Veronda — Brown made a tribute to Mies: *Me's Building High Rise* (1972). With its recessed entryway and HVAC crown, the tower in the painting looks like one half of 860–880 Lake Shore Drive, Mies's iconic pair of Chicago apartment buildings completed in 1951. The work can be read like a comic strip, intimate dramas unfolding in the building's eight stories: at left, a silhouetted romp ends with a post-coital smoke; up front, a somnolent encounter hardly gets going before disappearing behind drawn curtains. Repetition provides a narrative sequencing of the human drama inside the building. The figures outside — the woman sitting alone, the man leering into the bushes, the couple off on their own — belong to the “we” of the larger composition but not to the “we” of the highrise. Buildings allow a story to be told, but they also mark its limits.





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In 1973, *Me's Building High Rise* was shown in *Disasters*, Brown's solo exhibition at Chicago's Phyllis Kind Gallery, in which he subjected his cityscapes to blazes, tempests, avalanches, and earthquakes, e.g. *Midnight Tremor* or *The Big Jolt* (both 1972). In the latter, the catastrophic event has opened a chasm, snapping one building in half, the exterior of another crumbling as its foundation hits the bedrock. The moment the building's façade falls away, the individual figures are shocked into collective being. Unlike *City and Suburbs* or *Me's Building*, nothing now separates the worlds inside and outside the building. The "we" realigns, and the relational texture of the painting shifts — in a crisis, we're all in this together. By depicting events that shatter structures, Brown throws into relief the order those structures provide, be it narrative, visual, or social.

In Brown's paintings, the stories and feelings that come out of these familiar orders belong uniquely to the U.S. In that same *Art in America* interview, he explained that his adopted "Chicago epitomizes the American experience in that it is constantly changing — vital. In Chicago, even our architectural masterpieces are sacrificed; old buildings are torn down to make way for the new." In animating his buildings with the "we" of his paintings, Brown located the political in the vernacular. The way people see themselves is reflected in their surroundings, as much in Modernist masterpieces as ordinary structures. If we look at them the right way, these everyday buildings might tell us who we are.



Roger Brown, *The Big Jolt*, 1972; oil on canvas, 72.25 x 48 inches.