

Thursday July 04 2024, 12.00am, The Times

From a tin can in the sky to understand the world

The chance to appraise from above is rare, but an aerial view is both a joy and an introduction to an untravelled land

Gabriella Bennett |

For many years I've coveted Houses, Gardens, a painting by the Glasgow artist Carol Rhodes. She was preoccupied by non-landscapes — airfields, service stations, factory roofs and so on, usually encircled by green fields and always seen from above. Vast postindustrial places are usually Rhodes's thing but Houses, Gardens is something else. A suburban neighbourhood, domestic and unpeopled, each property fringed by manicured bushes that rise from the canvas like lettuces. The palette is warm, almost autumnal. Shadows from pitched roofs cast haloes on tarmac.

And yet we know it's a Rhodes piece because of the aerial view. It's a scene from any old commuter belt town, I know. What makes it special is the perspective. You look down on parts of the world that are off-limits unless you're a crow or in a hot-air balloon. You discover solar panels where you had no idea they existed. You begin to understand the connection between road, home and green space, to acknowledge there was a master plan all along.

So it goes: the joy of appraising from above. The opportunities come seldom, but when they do it is cause for celebration. On a Loganair flight from Dundee to Heathrow last week I found a new city from the window seat. Picture the scene: 6.55am, heading cloudwards in a tin can with wings. Angel Delight colours on the horizon and below a tight grain of grids and fields.

I think I know my surroundings until I'm airborne. Then all bets are off: my perceptions come undone. An aerial view is an introduction to an untravelled land. The descent to Torshavn, for instance, helped me build an idea of the Faroes before I'd explored the turf-roofed houses and restaurants serving whale blubber. The idea was this: a treasure island rising from the North Atlantic, its edges laced with ocean foam.



Houses, Gardens by Carol Rhodes, 2007 © CAROL RHODES ESTATE COURTESY CAROL RHODES ESTATE AND ALISON JACQUES, LONDON

Really, though, it's the cities that get me going. From above they reveal hidden histories. Take Dubai: a citadel of sand. Photos show honey-coloured high-rises clustered around the deep green marina. Every now and then ring roads appear — essential connections between A, B and C — echoing the shape of the man-made sea line. Or Mexico, somewhere I've never been. Bird's eye pictures make me feel as if I have. They show a radial street pattern emanating from a small square, creating complex geometric shapes. Those triangles remind me that Mexico was born in the 14th century when nomadic Aztecs found somewhere to put down roots. A city of symbols, then.

Aerial views also pull back the curtain on misguided ambition, even avarice. In 1950s Arizona, thousands of acres were sold to a development corporation for \$20 million. The goal was Sun City, the world's first supersized retirement complex. From above it is an astonishing ecology of concentric rounds, perfect and inflexible, repeating over and over like crop circles. Ancient cities were encircled by curved walls for defensive reasons, but this was something different. Sun City's circles are thought to be ornamental. Without intention its layout has become a cheap gimmick, a hollow attempt at identity. It is a desert shrine to artifice.

I have never wandered down Sun City's streets — only glimpsed the bigger picture. Is

it possible to know of the blueprint from ground level? Your own road feels ordinary when you drive down it every day. Reading it from the air reveals a relationship with what's around us. No man is an island and neither is a city. Experiencing aerial views is a relatively recent development. Drones make it easier but so too does human bravery. In 2015 the photographer Vincent Laforet was strapped into a body harness and dangled over the edge of a helicopter to capture night-time shots of global cities. Through his lens, New York City skyscrapers appear like tiny Monopoly pieces wrapped in multicoloured fairy lights. Las Vegas is an urban playground, a funfair of chaos. Chicago's downtown district emerges as if laser-cut from fine metal. All strangely beautiful except for the process — the harness and the dangling. I get the horseradish



The Palm Islands in Dubai. ALAMY

nose rush of take-off just thinking about it.

Instead, I am content in my role as watchwoman. Aerial photographs are a benign panopticon, the ultimate expression of a surveillance state. Perhaps an artistic rendering is less intrusive. Like Rhodes's painted neighbourhood, which now hangs on my living room wall. After many months of dithering I finally bought a screen print — a 50 by 57cm rectangle redefining what it means to be suburban.



Torshavn in the Faroe Islands is a sea of green and red from above. ALAMY