

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Critical Play: Picturing Playgrounds in Central Park

by [Laura Mallonee](#) on June 17, 2013



Erik Benson, "The Park," installation view at the Arsenal Gallery (all photos courtesy Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art and the artist)

The name [Robert Moses](#) has become synonymous with the type of city planning most sentient New Yorkers hate. If he'd had his way, the legendary architect of mid-20th-century New York would have replaced Greenwich Village with a 10-lane highway, much like he razed neighborhoods in the South Bronx to build the Cross Bronx Expressway — an act many believe contributed to its decay. But to his credit, when Moses became Long Island State Park Commissioner in 1934, there were only 119 city playgrounds. When he retired in 1960, there were 777, which he hoped would deter juvenile delinquency by offering "clean, wholesome play" to children.

Many of those playgrounds are now on their last legs, as Erik Benson's current show at Central Park's [Arsenal Gallery](#) reminds us. For the past decade, Benson has been creating collaged paintings of man-made blight. Highways, strip malls, and sprawling office complexes — the focal points of the 21st-century landscape — are simplified to the point of abstraction, belying Benson's complex creative process. The artist begins by pouring a thin coat of acrylic paint onto a sheet of glass; after allowing it to dry, he then cuts shapes — hundreds of tiny bricks and leaves — with an exacto knife and pastes them to the canvas. He does this over and over again, sometimes painting between layers that crescendo into a wildly textured surface.

For the Central Park show, Benson turned his attention to the parks near his Bushwick, Brooklyn studio. The one in "Playground (Weeds)" (2013) is an urban eyesore cordoned off by torn orange construction netting. Unruly weeds consume the ground; whatever noble plans existed for restoration seem forgotten. Graffiti tags, the only indicators of a human presence, confirm that the park is no longer a children's play zone, while a gray housing project looms in the background, conjuring Le Corbusier's failed [Unité d'Habitation](#). Yet there's something beautiful about the image. The playground's brightly saturated reds, yellows, pinks, and blues pop against the dismal landscape. This isn't, however, a sentimental celebration of the mundane. Behind the painting's eye-pleasing veneer, dystopia throbs like a rotten tooth. Given New York's recent bouts with playground violence, Benson's image can only be read as one of protest.

As a refresher, last July a three-year-old boy playing in a Bed-Stuy park was [shot in the leg](#). Later that month, [a four-year-old was also shot](#), and died, in a Morrisania playground. In August, four teens — including a 13-year-old girl — were injured in a [Brownsville playground shooting](#). In hopes of discouraging crime this summer, officials in Mount Vernon are [installing cameras](#) in their parks, though many residents have pointed out the obvious — that money spent installing them could be better used to rehabilitate the playgrounds, which would in turn discourage crime. This train of thought follows the "Broken Window" theory, laid out in a 1982 [Atlantic article](#), that says if one window in a building is broken, all the rest will soon follow.



Erik Benson, "Playground (Weeds)" (2013), acrylic on canvas over panel, 64 x 72 in / 162.6 x 182.9 cm



Erik Benson, "Playground (Steps)" (2013), acrylic on canvas over panel, 54 x 60 / 137.2 x 152.4 cm

Not only does the theory suggest that one's environment directly influences everyday life; it also shows that by improving our environment, we can transform our future. Benson's playground paintings corroborate this view, and their location in what is essentially the Parks Department's break room is well-calculated. The Central Park Conservancy, the private nonprofit that manages the park, is now campaigning to raise \$40 million to restore its 21 playgrounds. As Benson's work shows and as a recent *New York Times* op-ed [pointed out](#), Manhattan parks aren't the only ones that need fixing, but perhaps it's a problem that can be approached as Benson does: brick by brick.

[Erik Benson: The Park](#) continues at the Arsenal Gallery (64th Street and Fifth Avenue inside Central Park, third floor of the Arsenal Building, Midtown, Manhattan) through June 20.