

# Notes Around an On-Ramp Accident

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## Abstract

David Salomon, author of “The Highway Not Taken: Tony Smith and the Suburban Sublime” (*Spaces Journal*, September 2013), wrote the following essay after seeing some early photographs of Michel Tombroff’s *Suburban Sublime* artworks during the summer 2022.

### **1. Interchange**

I spent a large part of my late teens and early twenties in cars. One could often find me on the controlled access highways in northern New Jersey. Among other things, I became very familiar with a variety of interchange designs. My first car accident happened on one. It was a pre-dawn Saturday in the winter of 1985. I picked up two friends and we drove to the local mall to buy tickets for a U2 concert. Headed down a cloverleaf ramp onto Route 17 in Paramus I turned the wheel, but the car kept going straight. It was dark. It was snowy. It was slick. It was scary.

### **2. On/Off**

A few years later in 1991, when my wife and I drove across the country on our way to graduate school in a shag-carpet-lined Ford Econoline van, we had a book with us that documented what you could expect to find at every exit on the interstate system. I became, and remain, a little obsessed with ones marked “Easy On-Off.”

### **3. Standards**

At some point in my architectural education, I learned that there was a whole industry and discourse around highway interchanges. They had been studied and standardized. There were books and conferences about them. There were protocols for their construction. There were clear formulas for defining their speed-to-size ratio. There were many diagrams and animations outlining how they worked.

### **4. Turnpike**

I didn’t learn about Tony Smith’s clandestine drive from Newark to New Brunswick on the unfinished New Jersey

Turnpike until I was a PhD student in the late 1990s. I’m sure it resonated with me because of my own intimate experience with the Turnpike. I (often recklessly) drove on it regularly when I came home from college on Fridays to sell fish off the back of a truck. More than a decade later all these experiences came together when I wrote the essay for Places about Smith’s sublime suburban encounter. You know what they say, write about what you know.

### **5. Stella**

Though I knew Michel Tombroff’s recent work was inspired by Smith’s wild ride and my paper about it, when I first saw his Turnpike series, the parallel lines, offset curves, and dark tones reminded me of Frank Stella’s work. This impression was reinforced when I realized that the pieces were relief sculptures. Not just any relief sculptures. The lines one sees are made from the aggregation of numerous 1970s era slot car racing tracks. That is, they were made from toys.

### **6. Toys**

Toys are everyday objects. They are also enchanted ones. Anything can be turned into a toy and toys can be turned into anything. They are often miniatures. Stuffed animals. Doll houses. Legos. Race car sets. Such things repeat reality at a size that can be manipulated and/or dominated by children (and adults).

A key feature of slot car sets is that they are made to scale. For example, the Scalextric brand Tombroff uses in his work are at 1:32 scale. My own Tyco set from the same era was 1:87

(HO) scale. This means they are tiny but accurate replicas of the cars and tracks they mimic.

## **7. Work/Play**

The relationship between scale and precision is also important to those who design architectural and infrastructural artifacts. However, in design the sequence is reversed. While toys shrink what already exists to create an imaginary world, designers imagine new worlds using small, dimensioned drawings and maquettes. Although we play with toys and work with designs, both require acts of abstraction and invention to take things out of one context and put them in another. What toys and diagrams of highway interchanges share is the relative unimportance of their literal dimensions. What matters is the size we imagine them to be.

## **8. Sublime**

There is a thrill in using and making things that are too small or too big. For a child (or an adult) pretending to drive a race car can be an ecstatic experience. The only risk when your car careens off the track (i.e. when it goes straight even though you turn the wheel) is that your game will be interrupted. There is no threat to your life. The encounter and enjoyment of certain forms of danger - of the too big, of the too fast, of the unknown, of the larger than life - from a safe distance is a hallmark of the sublime. This too is a form of abstraction, i.e., a release from reality and into our (darker) imagination.

## **9. Models**

Another concept that contains the capacity to both shrink the present and enlarge the future are models. Models are both miniature versions of exemplary objects (e.g. a model airplane), and condensed representations of things that could exist in the future (e.g. a model of a skyscraper, a model of a hurricane's path). We use models to both identify and imagine other worlds.

One could understand Tombroff's Turnpike pieces as models of surreal and sublime highway interchanges, of impossible on/off ramps, flyovers, and cloverleafs. Or, they could be seen as models of intense slot car racing tracks. As interchanges they appear as fragments, with roads entering and exiting to and from nowhere. As tiny racetracks, they are loops within loops; an endless topological surface. They depict possible if not practical situations, incomplete but not impossible scenarios. They are at once intense and playful.

## **10. One-to-One**

These allusions and associations are reliant upon a reading of the work as being abstract and conceptually elastic. Such

interpretations are accurate, but they are also incomplete. What they ignore is the fact that these multi-layered, scored, linear, modular surfaces are not miniatures. Nor are they toys. Nor are they designs. They are not representations of something that already exists or will one day come to be. They are already at full scale. They are what they are. They are, like the Turnpike Smith encountered, art.

## **11. Art**

To imagine that something large can be made small is to think with toys. To think that the small can become large is to think with design. To think with the actual size of things is to think with art. The artist asks: what can be done with the stuff in front of me? What object, what experience can I have with this stuff? This is what Tony Smith recognized on the unfinished Turnpike. It was a release from abstraction and associations and an entrée into the experience of things as they are. He recognized that to drive at fast speeds, on a large road, in the dark is an inherently intense experience. That we often take such experiences for granted is all the more reason for artists to remind us of the power embedded in everyday objects and experiences, everyday objects like toy race tracks.

## **12. Real**

Tombroff's work is nothing if not art. Its complex surfaces, shapes, and lines are captivating. They also require sophisticated spatial skills to comprehend and create. They are also models. Not models of past or future racetracks or highways. Nor models of ideal or dystopian landscapes. Rather, they are models of intense, confusing, intoxicating, mischievous, but real objects and experiences that are possible when one creatively reconfigures (and multiplies) the existing elements we find at our disposal.

## **13. Accident**

When my car hit the curb of that on-ramp, the impact ruined the rim of the front left wheel, but not enough to prevent it from limping to our destination and for us to buy tickets to what would be a very memorable show. This story, and the other events (and associations/allusions) described above, are true. If there are any embellishments they were not intentional. They happened. They are facts. They are what they are. But they are also something else. They too are models, models for how everyday objects and experiences can serve one's craft, one's life. We should pay more attention to them. They might just turn into art.