rigorous order and intense colors. Among the patterns highlighted in the exhibition were tulips rendered in red and yellow, animal prints in black and salmon, and warped plaid in navy and hot pink. One of the Tilletts’ most popular textile patterns consisted of ripe, oversize strawberries like the ones made possible by the technological innovations of industrial agriculture.

Considering the pedigree of this palette provides insight into its emotional tenor. It was Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes that introduced color as sensual overload in the early years of the 20th century. The painter Henri Matisse commented that the Ballets "overflowed with color. Profusion without moderation. You could say it was slung on by the tubful." The pejorative tone is clear—intense color is equated with moral degradation and vulgarity. These colors were evidence of the depraved nature of humanity uncoupled from (western European) civilization.

Yet the Ballets Russes was also extensively praised for its luxurious costumes and sets. How do we reconcile the Ballets Russes’ critical reception as simultaneously ultranatural and ultracivilized? As Vogue put it in 1913: The barbarism of these Russian dancers is young with the youth of the world... but the technique of their art is trained and civilized. Here, as in the case of Russian music, we observe a huge and lawless impulse reined and harnessed by a sense of law. The message of this art may be semi-Asian; the method is more than semi-European. The material may be barbaric; the craftsmanship, if anything, is super-civilized.

The Ballets Russes’ palette tones produced from industrial dyes forskoosk good taste in order to pursue the exotic, the lawless, and the fantastic. Flash forward 40 years to the Tilletts deploying similar colors, redefining exotic as immigrant, lawless as rebellious youth, and fantastic as the seemingly limitless potential for financial and social gain. What was once perceived as artistic yet vulgarly bohemian has been transmogrified into the American dream eager, young, and hungry for success. The taste that the Tilletts perpetuated wasn’t interested in European tradition; rather, it was defined in opposition to it. Searching for an alternative, the Tilletts relied upon what would become a distinctively American trait: the ability to sort through and repurpose disparate cultural influences in order to yield a hybridized version of cultural patrimony.

—Josh Blackwell

NOTES
2. Ibid.

IMPERFECT HEALTH
PITTSBURGH

Organized by the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), Montreal, Imperfect Health: The Medicalization of Architecture is a substantial, research-led exhibition interrogating emerging urban health concerns and the design strategies that engage them. In the accompanying catalog, CCA curators and practicing architects Mirko Zardini and Giovanna Borasi critically observe that “ordinary problems are increasingly defined in medical terms and understood through a medical framework.” On view recently at the Miller Gallery at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Mellon University (September 15, 2012–February 24, 2013), the show included more than 125 images, objects, architectural models, films, and material samples from the 20th century, through which it charted the development of this therapeutic thinking. The curatorial focus, however, was the present. Approximately half of the show’s works were made or designed within the last decade and, in many of these artifacts, Imperfect Health finds compelling alternatives to the worldview that reduces human conditions to clinical disorders.

Installed in the Miller Gallery over three floors, the exhibition was loosely divided into research areas—including aging, epidemics, allergies, and obesity—that overlapped, both spatially and conceptually. Near the entrance to each gallery were themed collections of Internet printouts and recent magazine clippings suspended between square acrylic sheets. These texts contextualize the show’s historical and contemporary materials within today’s dizzying health discourse. In the galleries, Imperfect Health resembled both a salon-style exhibition and a crammed commercial display. A wall-mounted vinyl and neon sign declares that when hospitals provide views of living plants, patients recover more quickly. Ironically, displayed directly beneath this claim is a suite of botanical drawings by architect Cesare Leonardi: beautifully rendered in ink, Trees (1982) inadvertently glorifies a group of allergy-inducing shrubs. By tracking such often-conflicting associations, various pathways through the exhibition emerge, from blueprints for proposed hypoallergenic parks and actual samples of a new, supposedly safe asbestos (a subject of recent architectural experiments) to artist Geoffrey James’ panoramic photographs of quarries, Asbestos (1992–1993) and long-outdated brochures boasting of that mineral’s multiple uses, for example. The curators’ choice to mix disciplines—and chronologies—jarringly contributed to the exhibition’s anxious atmosphere.

Most of the architecture and design featured in the exhibition was not strictly “medicalized.” Indeed, Bas Princen’s photograph Mokattam Ridge (Garbage City) (2009) spotlights the opposite of nanny-state sanitization: a Cairo settlement economically reliant upon—and physically shaped by—trash picking. Burst, black garbage bags spill over entire streets, rooftops, and apartment balconies, but this disorder misrepresents the Coptic Christian residents’ systematic recycling efforts, in reality a sustainable, cooperative way of life. Some of the exhibition’s most memorable, moving works more subtly defy medicalization in relation to the architecture of aging. An article describing the Massachusetts Institute of Technology AgeLab’s AGNES (Age Gain Now Empathy System) bodysuit dominates the final gallery’s document display. The constricting outfit, when worn, simulates the debilitating effects of old age—providing architects, designers, and engineers a visceral understanding of elderly clients’ needs. A framed image of AGNES sits atop a marble plinth, celebrating its strange social value. Alongside is Jason Rohrer’s low-fi, eight-bit computer game, Passage (2007), which confronts players with their mortal decline over the course of a five-minute play period. In a labyrinth—an architectural metaphor for life’s journey—the player’s pixelated avatar slowly loses his hair, acquires a cane, and eventually dies. The suit and the game each resist the distancing effect of medicalization, which deflects responsibility for life and death onto clinicians. Instead, shared vulnerabilities are radically exposed.

Imperfect Health’s overwhelming scope averts general analysis in favor of steady focus on specific objects and images. What emerges from this unruly meeting of contradictions, however, is a sense of the necessity of communal accountability for our health and environments.

—Becky Huff Hunter

ABOVE: Bas Princen, Mokattam Ridge [Garbage City], 2009, C-print, 152 x 190 centimeters © Bas Princen