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Seeing Things | Reaching for the Sky

By *BROOKE HODGE*

Chicago is a city of skyscrapers. From Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's sleekly modern high-rises on Lake Shore Drive to the soaring Sears Tower (now called the Willis Tower) by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, architects in the Windy City have long aspired to reach ever greater heights with their visionary designs. Skyscrapers have captivated artists too, and a new exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago examines the allure of the vertiginous building type in works from the 1950s to the present.

"*Skyscraper: Art and Architecture Against Gravity*" was inspired directly by Chicago itself, by its skyline and its history as the incubator of the skyscraper, says Michael Darling, the MCA's James W. Alsdorf Chief Curator. "After first thinking it could be an art and architecture show, I found so much work by artists that I decided this would be a more intriguing angle to pursue, especially for a contemporary art museum," he explains. Darling curated the show with Joanna Szupinska, the museum's Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow, and much of the work on view comes from the MCA's own collections.

Artists including H.C. Westermann, Andy Warhol, Thomas Ruff, Isa Genzken, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Jennifer Bolande, Cyprien Gaillard and Kori Newkirk, among many others, have used both the idea and the form of the skyscraper to explore verticality, optimism, power and civic pride, vulnerability, urban dystopia and the anthropomorphic forms of the buildings themselves. The Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building and Chicago's Marina Towers are potent urban landmarks and appear frequently in the exhibition. Andy Warhol's classic 1964 film "Empire" pays homage to the Manhattan icon, as does a photograph by Abelardo Morell, who has used a camera obscura to project an image of the building onto a bed. Michael Wolf's closely cropped photographs explore the density of urban life, secretly capturing the lives of Marina Towers residents and revealing the loss of both individuality and privacy that comes with high-rise living. A section of the exhibition called "Vulnerability of Icons" examines how our relationship to these symbols of power has changed since 9/11. No longer just a testament to optimism, aspiration or technological prowess, the skyscraper is also a symbol of capitalism and global anxiety, and its new status as building-as-target is a devastating reality. Thomas Ruff's "jpeg ny 05," a large-scale photograph from 2004 of the skeletal remains of one of the World Trade Center towers, is a starkly poignant reminder of the vulnerability of these powerful buildings.

"Skyscraper: Art and Architecture Against Gravity" is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago through Sept. 23.

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