

THURSDAY, JULY 3, 2008 | SECTION 5

## Arts &amp; Entertainment



Photos courtesy the Museum of Contemporary Photography

Nature is fenced off twice in Shawn Records' "Untitled, E-3/F-3," from the 2005 "Portland Grid Project."

## ART REVIEW

## 'Backyard' images embrace garish smugness

By Alan G. Artner  
TRIBUNE CRITIC

"Beyond the Backyard," at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, is not your usual summer group show. It's better, both because it is large—photographs and videos by 50 artists—and it explores a theme that is particularly American, having been treated by professional photographers here for more than half a century.

Had the work of non-professionals been included, the backyard might have been seen as one of the most enduring of all settings in American picturemaking. Check for yourself. Every collection of family photographs has at least a few taken in the backyard, especially when the families lived in cities; as contrary to the show's emphasis on suburbia, patches of green were even more prized in an urban setting.

But the exhibition is called "Beyond the Backyard," so more public spaces are present, too, and they were as near as Chicago's housing projects and far as Tokyo's parks. Still, images show these places being treated similarly to backyards, as extensions of living quarters wherein unbridled activities, athletic as well as sexual, might be carried on.

A chief difference between the



A Bill Owens carbon inkjet print titled "I bought the lawn in six-foot rolls. It's easy to handle. I prepare the ground and my wife and son helped me roll out the grass. In one day you have a front yard" (1973).

public and private revolves, of course, around the issue of ownership. The interest of many of the photographs on view derives from this issue, for as a possession the backyard reflects as much of the owner's taste as a dwelling, and such taste may be more photogenic out-of-doors because of how dramatically (or comically) it contrasts with nature.

A number of the suburban pictures may look too easy in the way they hold up the American middle class to ridicule by presenting its rituals and possessions. But, without question, the suburban backyard is a showcase for such folly in a way that the yard behind a bungalow or apartment house usually is not. This may be because the suburban backyard from the 1970s and 1980s only rarely appeared threatened and most often seemed a sign of fulfillment. So photographers saw in it a garish smugness.

Now, in an age when human endeavor is measured entirely by money, garish smugness appears in

photographs apart from criticism and backyards displaying many possessions stand in for Eden. It's a strength of the show that such visions can be contrasted with the works of earlier photographers such as Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Harry Callahan and Dorothea Lange, who present a world in which people appear simpler, closer to nature and, not incidentally, to one another.

Any exhibition with a theme that legitimately gathers first-rate pictures by William Christenberry, Jno Cook, Emmet Gowin, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Nic Nicosia and Garry Winogrand, among others, should be seen more than once.

"Beyond the Backyard" continues at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 S. Michigan Ave., through Aug. 23; a gallery talk and curator's tour will take place at, respectively, 6 p.m. July 10 and noon July 17. Call 312-663-5554.

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Photo courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Photography

## Slices of life outside backyard boundaries

"Watering Hole" by Amy Stein is one of the works on display in "Beyond the Backyard," the Museum of Contemporary Photography's summer group show. The exhibit explores themes of leisure time outdoors. **PAGE 3**