

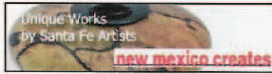
PRESS COVERAGE



Michael Wolf: The Transparent City

November 14 — January 31, 2009

1. Art Forum, 11.14.2008
2. Chicago Life, Holiday 2008
3. Chicago Life, Spring 2009
4. Chicago Tribune Magazine, 11.9.2008
5. Newcity Art, 11.17.2008
6. Photo-eye Magazine, 11.17.2008
7. Time Out, 12.11.2008



ARTFORUM

login | register ADVERTISE BACK ISSUES CONTACT US SUBSCRIBE

search

ARTGUIDE DIARY PICKS NEWS IN PRINT FILM 500 WORDS VIDEO PREVIEWS TALKBACK A & E BOOKFORUM 中文版

500 WORDS

RECENT | ARCHIVE

Photographer Michael Wolf speaks about "Transparent City"
 Gary Garrets discusses "Oranges and Sardines" at the Hammer Museum
 Jake Chapman discusses his novel *The Marriage of Reason & Squalor*
 AA Bronson discusses the NY Art Book Fair and ARLIS Artists' Books Conference
 Adel Abdessemed discusses his new exhibition in Cambridge, MA
 Edmund White talks about his biography of Rimbaud



NEWS | DIARY | PICKS

Newest Reviews

Morgan Fisher
 Joe Bradley
 "After October"
 Ryoji Ikeda and Benedict Gross
 Richard Serra
 Aleksandra Mir
 Vibeke Tandberg
 Vik Muniz
 "The Spajani Collection"
 "Salud, Deporte y Control"
 Nick Lawrence
 Sharon Core
 "Hubbard/Birchler: No Room to Answer"
 Dionisio Gonzalez
 "Looking at Music"

Michael Wolf

11.14.08



Left: Michael Wolf, *Untitled*, 2007, color photograph, 40 x 53 7/16". Right: Michael Wolf, *Untitled*, 2007, color photograph, 20 x 25". (Both works from the series "Transparent City.")

The Asian- and European-based photographer Michael Wolf is known for his fine-art and editorial photographs depicting rapid growth in Asian cities. A new series of photographs made in Chicago, "Transparent City," goes on view this week at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago and is collected in a book just published by Aperture.

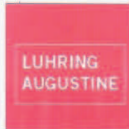
THE EXPERIENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHING in America was not much different from photographing in Asia, really. The challenge was more conceptual: After working so long in Hong Kong and China, I wasn't sure I was capable of working somewhere else. I feel in tune with what is happening in the East, and am so inspired by the architecture, food, people, and flux of life there, that I was afraid I'd feel disconnected from an urban landscape in another part of the world. Luckily, when I came to Chicago in 2006 to install some photographs, I rode an elevated train into downtown from the airport. It was a wonderful visual experience, looking out and seeing everyone through the office windows. I remember arriving at the museum and meeting the curator, and by my third or fourth sentence they asked whether they could arrange an artist residency for me. A year later, the deal was done.

I had thought about working in New York, in part because I've worked so long with what I call "architecture of density" in Hong Kong. But there are logistic problems in New York that don't arise in Chicago. In Chicago, the buildings are spread out, they're more loosely structured, and ten- or twelve-story parking garages are interspersed between them. From the garages, you can look into buildings. I would go up onto the twelfth floor of a parking structure and get a nice view into the neighboring building. To prepare, I went onto Flickr and printed out every photo of the city's downtown Loop, then drew red arrows pointing to all of the roofs to which I wanted access. In Hong Kong, every building has guards and you must apply for permission to get onto the roof, but researchers at US Equities, who supported my residency, were able to get me access to 99 percent of the rooftops from which I wanted to photograph.

I began my series "Architecture of Density" by photographing close-ups of vernacular subjects in the back alleys of Hong Kong's downtown high-rises. I enjoyed the photographs but thought the series of seventy or so images was conceptually one-dimensional. I felt the series would be enriched if I could bring in another layer of meaning, so I began to take photographs of the buildings from a distance. In Chicago, I worked in the opposite direction, beginning with the architecture. I felt, however, that I was bumping up against the same problem. Then one evening I was looking at a photograph I had shot and I saw in it a man giving me the middle finger. In the exact moment he made that gesture I pressed the shutter, even though I had probably been standing there for twenty minutes.

It set off a chain reaction in me, and I began to look through every file at 200 percent magnification to see what else was going on in those windows. I saw hands on computer mice and family photographs on the desks of CEOs; I saw people watching flat-screen TVs in the evening. It was a bit lonely, particularly when I was photographing corporate office towers during the first banking crisis in November–December 2007—I could see through my telephoto lens the tension and stress those bankers were feeling. By zooming in on details, I manage to introduce a certain vernacular visual language as well as balance the faraway with the up close.

I don't consider these works portraits; I'm not doing a portrait of Chicago. In fact, the city's characteristics don't really figure into my discussions of the series. It could be any large urban city. I simply proceeded by answering the question, Which vantage point gives me the ability to look into a building? One building that fascinated me was the very big courthouse downtown. The judge's rooms are in the corners of the building, and I wanted to catch a moment when lawyers were standing in the hallways of seven or eight consecutive floors so that the image would depict them locked into little cells, like a Robert Wilson stage design. Despite the unpredictability of my process, I have very specific images in mind as I work. Edward Hopper was a particular inspiration for this series, and I was looking for the types of images he specialized in. I was trying



links



events



MUSEUMS

Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Ave., 312-443-3600, presents *Drawn to Italian Drawings: The Goldman Collection* through Jan. 18. *The Divine Art: Four Centuries of European Tapestry* runs through Jan. 4.

Arts Club of Chicago, 201 E. Ontario, 312-787-3997, presents work by Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers through Dec. 19.

Chicago Architecture Foundation, 224 S. Michigan Ave., 312-922-3432, hosts *Shanghai Transforming* through Jan. 9.

Chicago Botanic Garden, 1000 Lake Cook Rd., Glencoe, 847-835-5440, presents *Wonderland Express* through Jan. 4.

Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., 312-744-6630, presents *Made in Chicago: Photographs from the Bank of America LaSalle Collection* through Jan. 4. *Gauri Gill: The Americans* runs through Dec. 28. *Hidden Treasures: The Lane Tech Murals* continues through Dec. 31.

Chicago History Museum, 1601 N. Clark St., 312-642-4600, presents *Catholic Chicago* through Jan. 4. *Chic Chicago: Couture Treasures from the Chicago History Museum* runs through July 26.

DePaul University Art Museum, 2350 N. Kenmore, 773-325-7506, presents *Reverence*

Renewed: Colonial Andean Art from the Thoma Collections runs Jan. 15 through Mar. 20.

Field Museum, 1400 S. Lake Shore Dr., 312-922-9410, hosts *Nature Unleashed: Inside Natural Disasters* through Jan. 4. *The Aztec World: A Unique View of a Mighty Empire* runs through April 19.

Hyde Park Art Center, 5020 S. Cornell Ave., 773-324-5520, presents *Mark Booth: Spanish Still Life or A Large List of Merged Animals* through Jan. 4. *Omar Vera: Cold Eels and Distant Thoughts* runs through Jan. 11. *Elke Claus: As Above, So Below* continues through Feb. 1.

International Museum of Surgical Science, 1524 N. Lake Shore Dr., 312-642-6502, presents *Sculpture as Medicine: Fetishes, Physiological and Healing Actions* and *CORPOreal*, both running through Jan. 9.

Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, 756 N. Milwaukee Ave., 312-243-9088, features *Sunday Painters: Discarded Paintings by Gifted Amateurs* through Jan. 3. *Finding Beauty: The Art of Lee Godie* runs through the same date.

Kohl Children's Museum of Greater Chicago, 2100 Patriot Blvd., Glenview, 847-832-6600, presents *Let's Play Railway* through May. 4.

Loyola University Museum of Art, 820 N. Michigan Ave., 312-915-6394, presents *On the Same Map: Hope is a Human Right* through Jan. 4.

Dreamscaping: The Therapeutic Photomontages of Nancy Gershman runs through the same date.

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, 40 Arts Circle, Evanston, 847-491-4000, hosts *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Reality of Dreams* through Dec. 14. *Polaroids: Mapplethorpe* runs Jan. 13 through April 5.

Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, 3001 Central St., Evanston, 847-475-1030, presents *Transcending Boundaries: American Indian Traditional and Contemporary Art* from the June and Bernard Kleban Collection through Dec. 24. *On the Plains: The Art of Potawatomi Artist Woody Crumbo* runs through Dec. 24.

Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave., 312-280-2660, presents *Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect* through Feb. 1. *Joseph Grigely St. Cecilia* runs through Feb. 22. *USA Today* continues through Mar. 15.

Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 S. Michigan Ave., 312-663-5554, features *Michael Wolf: The Transparent City* through Jan. 31. *Work/Place* runs through the same date.

Museum of Science and Industry, 5700 S. Lake Shore Dr., 773-684-1414, hosts *Smart Home: Green + Wired* through Jan. 4.



From left: *Domestic Vacations*, Julie Blackmon, **Catherine Edelman Gallery**; *Ship of Patience*, Peru, Cuzco, 18th century, oil on canvas, *Reverence Renewed: Colonial Andean Art from the Thoma Collection*, **DePaul University Museum**.

Civil Vision

Artists explore the hazards of excessiveness in the city

In 1909, architect and visionary Daniel Burnham published a new plan for the Chicago region. His bold plans and big dreams created Chicago's sweeping lakefront, leading to a new tradition of thinking in urban planning. Today, Chicago is searching for inspiration. The Burnham Plan Centennial is a year-long opportunity for the region to engage in a broad-based conversation about the future. The celebration features hundreds of high-profile events that provide an opportunity for communities, leaders and institutions to come together and ensure that Chicago continues to be one of the world's best places to live and work.

From May 1 to July 5, the Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP) at Columbia College will be showing *The Edge of Intent*, a group show focusing on utopian aspirations of urban planners. The exhibition will present 10 artists whose works offer diverse perspectives on urban planning. The works selected by the curator warn the viewers of the hazards of excessiveness and consider the centrality of dynamism in successful urban design.

A few years ago artist Christina Seely (b. 1976) observed the NASA map of the world at night, and reflecting on the beauty of the light on the map, she noted its remarkable complexity. The areas of light dominated the map and appeared to the artist to resemble the spread of bacteria. Seely learned that three regions on the NASA map were significantly brighter and identified them as the United States, Japan and Western Europe. She began to explore the complexity of excessive urban energy requirements and how it reflected on our relationship with the planet. Historically, man-made light represented progress, beauty, innovation and prosperity, but statistics have demonstrated the negative impact of lighting due to high levels carbon emission. Through a series of large-scale photographs she entitled *Lux*, the artist photographed the brightest cities on NASA's global night map. In her work, she aimed to illuminate the beauty and danger of lighting in our global environment.

Seely first photographed London. After a few nights and about four shots that had been taken from within the city as well as from a distance, she chose one for her series.

By Sigalit Zetouni

The shot that was taken from a distance linked into the concept of the city as a point on the map. Seely continued the series with portrait-like shots that exposed the relationship of the cities to their natural terrain. She also entitled each work with the city's latitude and longitude, so that the viewers would refer to the NASA map key in order to identify the cities. Her 2006 photograph *Metropolis: 36°10'N 115°8'W*, taken from the surrounding desert, is a portrait of Las Vegas looking radioactive. A light beam extends from the top of the Luxor hotel pyramid, eliminating any traces of natural stellar existence.

Actively committed to brilliant simplicity, Berkeley-based Seely has been a member of Civil Twilight, a design collective. In 2007, the group won *Metropolis Magazine's* Next Generation competition



Chicago Images—Wacker and Wabash, 2005, Simon Menner, Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College.

with a proposal for lunar-resonant streetlights. The project proposed a new way of thinking about urban light, through the dimming and brightening of available moonlight. It illustrated how beauty and ambiance of moonlit cities could couple with energy saving and reducing light pollution. Seely says that she hopes these projects will inspire the public and motivate changes for a greener economy. In Chicago, on Friday, May 1, at 5 p.m., Seely will discuss her work on view with MoCP Associate Director Natasha Egan.

German artist Simon Menner (b. 1978) photographed homelessness in the cities of Bombay, Chicago and Paris. His project *Metacity* probes the connecting elements of poverty in different cities around the globe. Menner is interested in the single homeless person and how he or she inhabits the modern city. His large-scale photographs document the quiet nightlife of brightly lit streets in great cities and the shadowy existence of the homeless under the glitz.

Menner's Chicago images were shot between August and December of 2005, while the artist attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He photographed street corners in the Loop and the Mag Mile. Each photograph shows at least one homeless person. In his artist statement, Menner notes, "All the images of this series show sleeping homeless persons. On one side because homelessness is most visible while people are sleeping, and on the other side this is the most intimate moment where it is most obvious if there is any chance for these people to find some privacy." On May 27, Menner will be in Chicago for a panel discussion on urban planning and sustainable human settlements. □



PORTFOLIO

MICHAEL WOLF

Windows to their worlds

ARE WE SIMPLY bees in a hive? We build high rise offices, hotels and homes to protect ourselves from the elements. Yet, in these photographs of Chicago skyscrapers by Michael Wolf, they seem our prisons.

Wolf cracks this reading overt in "The Transparent City" (Aperture, \$60), from which these images are taken. The book's frontpiece is of a 15-story section of the Harry Weese designed Metropolitan Correctional Center, the federal prison in the Loop. It's a concrete facade with slit windows. What you'd expect for a jail.

The scores of other structures caught by Wolf's camera, whether downtown or along the lakefront, don't look like jails. Indeed, the floor-to-ceiling glass walls of many appear to bestow on office-workers and condo residents a freedom of spirit. They can look up from their desks and kitchen counters, and the world is theirs.

Although, of course, it isn't. Just as they look out, Wolf looks in and records them in close-up, living their mundane lives—holding their meetings, sipping a before-dinner cocktail, staring into the eye of a computer. In the context of these huge towers, each individual life is tiny and inconsequential.

There are great architectural rhythms in these images—all those patterns of windows and steel framing, all those straight, straight lines. The business guy holding a green stress ball (seen in close-up and framed by his window and drapes) is a blob of protoplasm. In a day or a year or 30 years, he'll be gone, and another blob will replace him.

His building, these photos seem to say, will remain.

—PATRICK T. REARDON

Wolf's photos will be on exhibit from Nov. 14 until Jan. 31, 2009, at the Museum of Contemporary Art at Columbia College Chicago, 600 S. Michigan Ave.

NOVEMBER 9, 2008 | 17

PORTFOLIO



Photos: © Michael Wolf, from "The Transparent City" (Aperture) and "Aperture of Contemporary Photographs of Chicago" (Chicago, November 2008)



<p>Graphic Design Program Pursue Your Passion at The Illinois Institute of Art - Chicago. Apply! www.artinstitutes.edu</p>	<p>Art Galleries & Dealers Chicago art galleries & dealers. Find local businesses on DexKnows. www.DexKnows.com</p>	<p>Contemporary Art Gallery Free 50MB Portfolio for Artists Share Your Images + Video + Audio culturehall.com</p>
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

[Home](#) | [About Newcity Art](#)

Reviews, profiles and news about art in Chicago (BETA)

NOV 17

Eye Exam: On the Hunt

Drawings, Garfield Park, Photography, South Loop

[Add comment](#)

By Jason Foumberg

Our eyes, so careful to speak the mind's intelligence, can easily regress to bestial instincts. They slim to a predatory shape, scan and hone. The café-set call it people-watching, but really it's just a form of animal intelligence. When you walk down a busy sidewalk and set your eyes on another, then look away, then look again, away, and eyes brush past each other, it's like dogs tracking fear, sex, competitors. The optic nerve stabs through the brain's pearly pith, darting straight for the primitive core. Yes, it's base, but even the most refined prepared meal satisfies the gurgling stomach.

It's with these eyes that I went looking for art with my teeth bared, and found Michael Wolf. The Museum of Contemporary Photography, which recently opened an exhibition by the German artist, paints him as a jet-setting photographer of serious architecture who could respectfully represent our city to itself. The work in the show tells another story. Wolf got caught up with what's inside the buildings—people, alone, unaware that they're being photographed, making dinner, working on a computer, languishing in their solitude. It's as if Wolf were combing the beach for beautiful seashells, and dug his snout into something meaty. He discovered that buildings are the decorative shells within which people take off their clothes, lie down and sleep. Welcome to the big city, Michael.



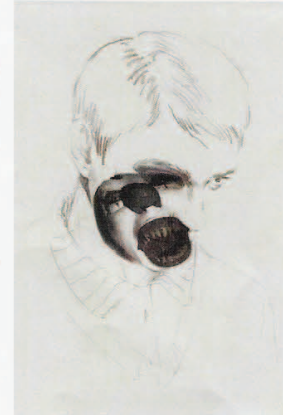
Now, it's the unwritten rule of living in proximity to so many people, fishbowl style, that you don't look at them and they don't look at you. The point is hammered home in Hitchcock's "Rear Window," where the hero has a hobby of spying on his neighbors with a telephoto lens, and assumes witnesses a murder. Wolf is very aware that he's enjoying the same pastime. In one grid of windows Wolf sees someone watching this very same film on a big-screen TV. By staging this act of recognition, Wolf hopes to undercut any criticism of scopophilia—the joy of peeping. It's as if his creepy

intrusion is undercut by an awareness of it, but self-consciousness is no excuse for animal desires.

A dog can understand you, in its own way, simply by smelling you. Bypassing any sort of refinement, if they have any, dogs go straight for the ass, which seems to be the ID spout. Humans, too, pick up traits about others in a glance or even using periphery vision. How do you choose which stranger to sit next to on the train? The decision is made in a split-second. Threat level or even date-ability is calculated. "Hell is other people," says Sartre; but then why the hell do we care what other people look like when they think they're not being looked at—as in Wolf's photographs?

These drooling eyes hit the road for other toothsome sport. At the Suburban in Oak Park, author Jonathan Safran Foer's friend, Sam Messer, exhibited portraits of the writer. Expressionist profiles of Safran Foer were punctuated with scribbles about the sitter's receding hair, dry skin and intellectually couth but self-deprecating 'look' that made him seem twenty-five years older than he really is. There was no sport to be found here.

"There is even something absolutely inhuman about the face," wrote philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in teaching us about faciality, or face perception, one of the few instincts attributed to humans (it is said that there are no true human instincts, or actions that we follow irresistibly). Such inhuman faces are to be found in Iv Toshain's drawings at Dan Devening's gallery. Here, beautiful people—the idea of which is questioned by the artist—have horrific devils grafted onto their faces. Toshain uses transparencies on top of drawings, effectively having the demons and beasts emerge X-Ray-like from the smooth skin and groomed hair. I prefer not to see these images as commentaries on beauty or ugliness as manufactured by fashion magazines, for beauty and ugliness need as few words as possible to make their strongest statement, but rather these are illustrations (in that they're not realistic), like anatomical charts or Freud's funny little drawings of the ego, of the primeval tar pits and genetic cesspools that distance humans only several degrees from hirsute wolves. It's kind of scary.



Michael Wolf shows at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 S. Michigan, through January 31. Iv Toshain shows at Dan Devening Projects + Editions, 3039 W. Carroll, through January 4.

[ShareThis](#)

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

2

photo-eye MAGAZINE

The Transparent City

REVIEWED BY CHARLES DEE MITCHELL, PUBLISHED ON SEPTEMBER 22ND, 2008

[VIEW COMMENTS \[0\]](#)

Michael Wolf | **The Transparent City**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL WOLF,
ESSAYS BY NATASHA EGAN AND GEOFF
MANAUGH

Aperture, New York, 2008. Hardbound with
dustjacket. 112 pp., 60 four-color illustrations.
10½x13¾"e.



The Transparent City Photographs by Michael Wolf, essays by Natasha Egan and Geoff Manaugh, published by Aperture, 2008



Modern physics teaches us that what we perceive as solid mass is composed mostly of empty space. It's a difficult concept to get your mind around, especially when you stomp your toe or fill a cup with coffee, but the photographs German photographer Michael Wolf has taken in Chicago depict our urban skyscraper environments as a model of that concept. Working from rooftops that allow him to eliminate the street and often the sky from his straight-on shots, and waiting for autumn afternoons when lights illuminate occupied offices, he offers us porous images of a city that is more air than mass. Wolf's earlier work from China featured monolithic

apartment blocks that he flattened into abstract patterns. Even though in Chicago he occasionally shoots a brick façade or takes a bird's-eye view that emphasizes the interlocked masses of the city, what catches his interest time and again are shots where we peer with him into offices and apartments where he discovered what he admits to be the rather mundane drama of everyday life. When he chooses to zoom in for a close-up, he works with the digital files of his larger images and produces still lifes and portraits where the pixilation echoes the gridded structures of the buildings themselves.

Wolf says his first close-up resulted from investigating an image in which he discovered a man in a window opposite the rooftop he was working from giving him the finger. Wolf might be flattering himself here. Perhaps this man stands in his apartment window every afternoon and flips Chicago the bird. The hints of narrative in these images encourage such speculative scenarios. The images themselves have not been manipulated. Wolf has not required digital cutting and pasting to produce the juxtaposed architectural styles, nor has he staged the scenes taking place in the interiors - even when they seem too good to be true. The executive practicing his putt, transformed into a blocky robot by pixilation, was apparently doing just that. We can

imagine Wolf's delight when he found, among the dozens of condos visible in one night shot, a man watching Rear Window on an enormous plasma screen.



The Transparent City, photographs by Michael Wolf, published by Aperture, 2008.

That Hitchcock film hovers over this project as a sort of tutelary spirit. People likely to encounter these images, which were first exhibited at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Photography, are probably comfortable with their voyeuristic tendencies and are more than willing to accept Wolf's invitation to indulge them. We are often told that the excitement of living in a city comes from the street. Wolf removes himself from that noisy world and makes his case for the cooler pleasures of observing from a safe distance the almost glacial stillness of urban life.

—CHARLES DEE MITCHELL

[purchase book](#)

CHARLES DEE MITCHELL is a freelance art writer based in Dallas, Texas. He is a regular contributor to the Dallas Morning News and Art in America.

© photo-eye Magazine. This article is printed from photo-eye Magazine (<http://www.photoeye.com/magazine/>) and is intended for personal use. Please contact us if you would like permission to reprint this article for commercial or educational use. Text © by the author, all images © their respective owners. All rights reserved.

Robie House

5757 S Woodlawn Ave at 58th St (773-834-1847, wrightplus.org). El: Red, Green to Garfield. Bus: 6, 55 (24hrs), 59, 170. Sat 11am-3:30pm. \$12, youth ages 11-18 and seniors \$10, kids ages 4-10 \$5, kids under 4 free.

Frank Lloyd Wright called this Hyde Park home "the cornerstone of modern architecture." Though it fell into disrepair and was slated for demolition on more than one occasion, it's in the midst of a ten-year, \$8 million restoration overhaul. One of the last buildings conceived in Wright's Oak Park studio, it's considered a prime example of Prairie-school architecture. The house is by tour reservation only; tours take place Saturdays 11am-3pm.

Shedd Aquarium

1200 S Lake Shore Dr (312-939-2438, shedd-aquarium.org). Bus: 12, 130, 146. Mon-Fri 9am-5pm; Sat, Sun 9am-6pm. \$24.95, seniors and kids ages 3-11 \$17.95. Discounts for Chicago residents.

Ongoing: **"Planet Earth 4-D: Shallow Seas."** In the 4-D Special FX Theater, this vivid underwater film shows kids what's lurking in Indonesia's reefs, the Atlantic, the Pacific and the Arctic Circle. (Show runs 20 and 40 minutes to the hour; \$5, \$3 at main ticket desk, \$4 members.)

Ongoing: **"Shedd Aquarium's Oceans Kiosk."** An interactive kiosk designed by the Smithsonian keeps museumgoers up-to-date with current ocean news. A similar kiosk will be placed in five other museums around the country, and all are connected by a ticker-tape that streams the latest developments in marine science.

Ongoing: **"Dog Show."** While the white-sided dolphins enjoy a Connecticut vacay (their tank is undergoing an intensive restoration), the Shedd bestows its animal expertise on another mammal group: doggies! Watch dolphin trainers turn their attention to dog discipline to emphasize the importance of health care, nutrition and environment on all animals. Show takes place daily 11:30am, 2:30pm, with an additional show Saturdays and Sundays 4:40pm.

Spertus Museum

610 S Michigan Ave at Harrison St (312-322-1700, spertus.edu). El: Red to Harrison. Bus: 1, 3, 4 (24hrs), 145. Tue, Wed 10am-5pm; Thu 10am-6pm; Fri 10am-3pm; Sat 10am-5pm. \$7, seniors and students \$5, kids under 5, Tue 10am-noon and Thu 2-6pm free.

Ongoing: **"Twisted into Recognition: Clichés of Jews and Others."** This odd amalgamation of art and ephemera comes to the Spertus from the Jewish Museums of Berlin and Vienna. In each display, three unrelated objects or artworks depict a Semitic cliché. In one, an image from a Nazi schoolbook, a Viennese hook-handled cane and Deborah Kass's Warholesque portrait comment on the "Jewish nose" stereotype. Twisted, indeed.

Ongoing: **"Depot Display."** After making a questionable move to close down an exhibit due to "offensive" content, the Spertus shows off an incontestably non-controversial subject: Nuremberg silver.

Woodson Regional Library

FREE 9525 S Halsted St between 95th and 96th Sts (312-745-2080, chipublib.org). El: Red to 95th. Bus: 8AS, 95W, 108, 112. Mon-Thu 9am-9pm; Fri, Sat 9am-5pm; Sun 1-5pm.

Ongoing: **"Chester Commodore, 1914-2004: Work and Life of a Pioneering Cartoonist of Color."** As the Defender's primary editorial cartoonist in the second half of the 20th century, Commodore drew award-winning sketches that highlighted ongoing civil-rights battles.

IS THAT EXHIBIT ONE OR SIX STARS? FIND COMPREHENSIVE REVIEWS AT timeoutchicago.com/aroundtown

Art Reviews

Edited by Lauren Weinberg
art@timeoutchicago.com



Michael Wolf

★★★★★
"The Transparent City"

"Work/Place"

★★★★★
Museum of Contemporary Photography, through Jan 31 (see Museums & Institutions).

Hell isn't fiery. It's an overly air-conditioned place illuminated by fluorescent bulbs, where the walls are an indeterminate color between corpse and bile, and humans languish in cubicles that possess all the comfort and charm of veal crates.

In the Museum of Contemporary Photography's two complementary exhibitions, workplace suffering seems eternal. One showcases German artist Michael Wolf's photographs of Chicago high-rises; the other presents five artists' quirky perspectives on office life in photography and video.

Wolf created his series "The Transparent City" in 2007, when he photographed numerous downtown office buildings and a few residential high-rises, including Marina City. The strength of his work lies in its complete divergence from traditional Chicago architectural photography: Glorifying the birthplace of the

skyscraper isn't Wolf's purpose. Aside from Bertrand Goldberg's landmark, the artist portrays anonymous glass boxes. He gives viewers little sense of the buildings' massive scale, omitting the sky and most if not all of their surroundings.

Wolf makes the people in his images—who wouldn't be allowed to intrude in typical architectural photographs—the real subjects of "The Transparent City." When he calls attention to slick glass facades or dizzying stacks of offices, it's to emphasize how these features alienate the inhabitants from the world outside.

One untitled photograph highlights a company's dozens of identical, wall-mounted bookcases. Employees probably don't notice them, but from Wolf's vantage point across the street, we see the bookcase replicated in office after office on multiple floors until it becomes a creepy symbol of corporate conformity. Wolf's subjects don't realize they're being watched—except for one man, who gives him the finger—which makes viewers complicit in his voyeurism. Yet the sadness on almost every face seems suspicious. Wolf has stated in interviews that he doesn't alter his photos, but "The Transparent City" seems manipulated nonetheless: Enough happy scenes, such as a worker practicing his golf swing indoors or an apartment dweller contentedly eating a snack, interrupt the artist's poignant narrative of

urban solitude to make one doubt whether it reflects reality.

The artists of "Work/Place" display more faith in people's ability to cope with hermetically sealed environments, which come off as downright humorous in Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom's *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg & Moore* (2007). The pair collaborated on this short video with four elegantly dressed real-life lawyers who perform peculiar choreographed movements in front of their office elevators. Their incomprehensible tics and vocalizations make clever substitutes for the bizarre routines familiar to white-collar workers. Karen Yama's photographs of family snapshots in cubicles also position the office as more surreal than boring: Yama erases most of the text from the documents littering the cube occupants' desks and replaces their walls with flat areas of color, making their personal photos seem like the only real objects in her digitally constructed images. Despite the uniqueness of Yama's work, one is frustrated by its lack of a clear purpose.

One man gives Wolf the finger.

Swedish artist Lars Tunbjörk's 12 incredible photographs of American, Japanese and Swedish offices are easier to grasp. Unlike Wolf, Tunbjörk photographs his white-collar subjects from inside the same room, yet they're improbably oblivious to his presence. Though it's hard to believe Tunbjörk hasn't staged these tableaux, their frank portrayals of office hierarchies and tedium appear convincingly candid: In *Lawyer's Office, New York* (1997), an assistant kneels under a conference table; in another photo, a Japanese stockbroker sleeps in his chair. Even in *Accounting Firm, New York* (1997), which depicts nothing unusual, Tunbjörk gives viewers plenty to observe, from the tense posture of a bespectacled employee staring at his computer to the cramped dimensions of his office to the oppressively bland paint. Even so, Tunbjörk's offices are just dreary, not hopeless; the people in them can still stretch, gossip and nap when they feel like it. Neither "Work/Place" nor "The Transparent City" is likely to teach you anything about the workplace that you don't already know; still, they may make your own office seem less Dantesque.—Lauren Weinberg