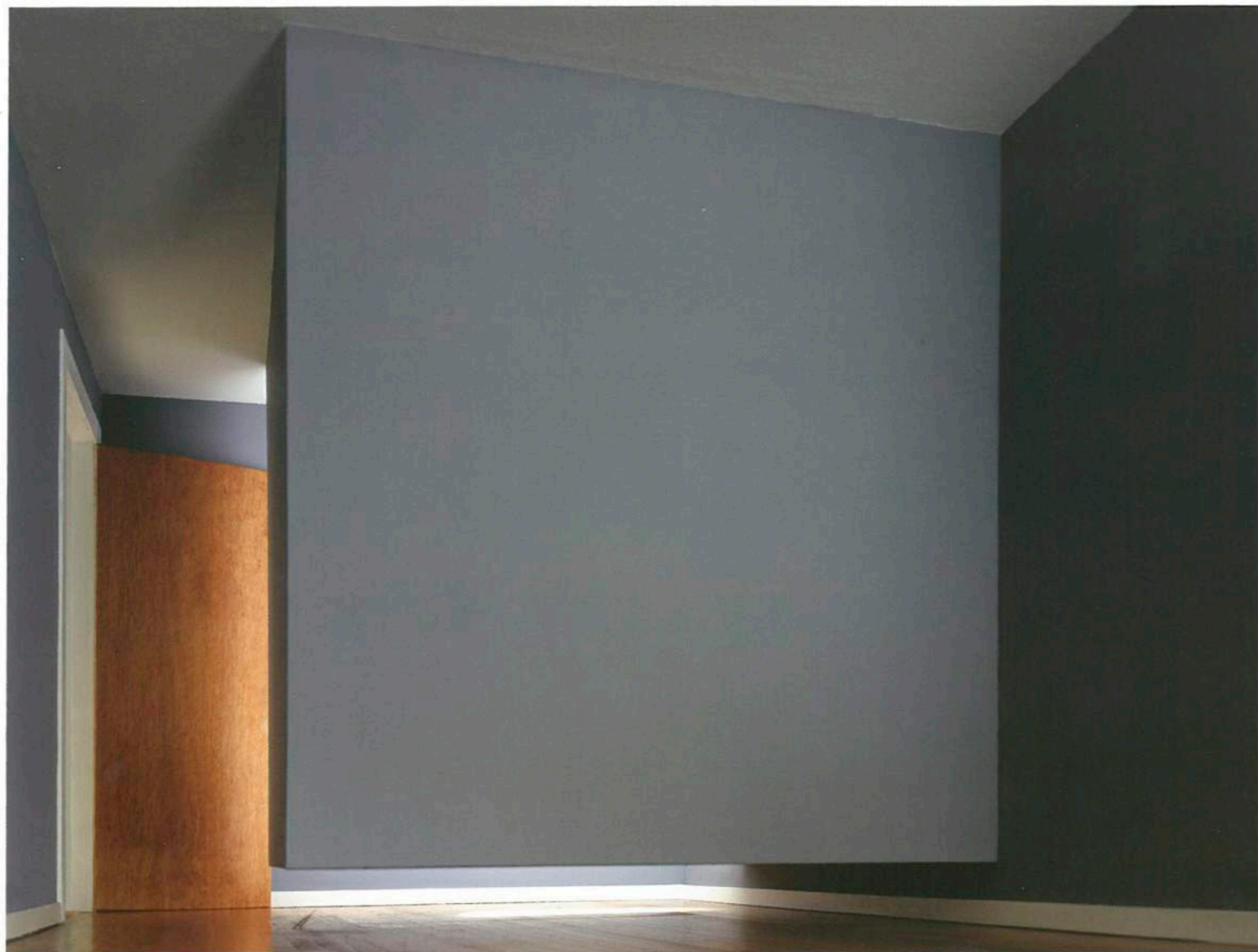


ABOVE *Untitled*, 2009
 COVER *Untitled (Blue, Sky #5)*, 2007



ABOVE *Approximation #7*, 2006

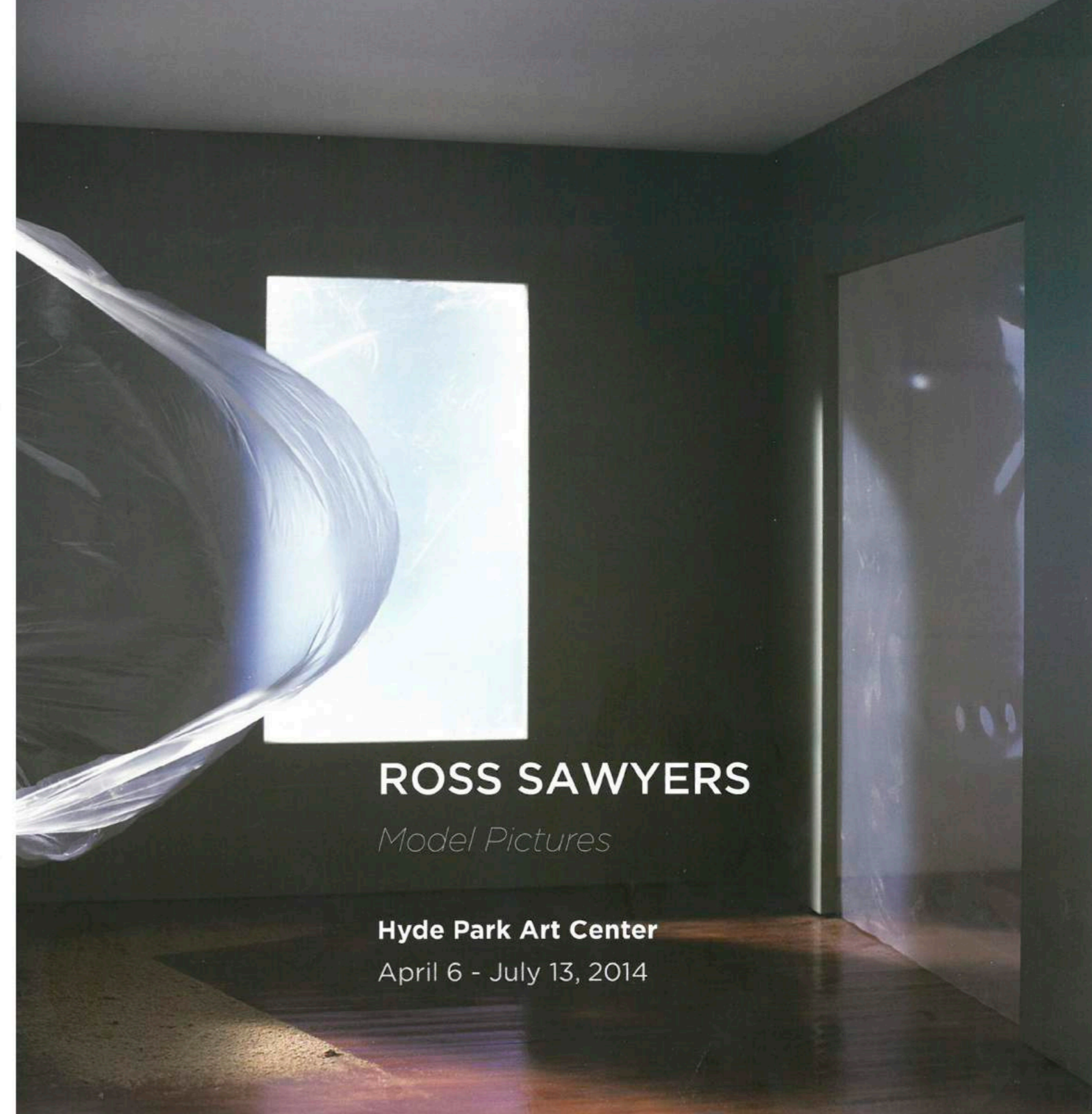
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The David C. & Sarajeun Ruttenberg Arts Foundation



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ROSS SAWYERS

Model Pictures

Hyde Park Art Center

April 6 - July 13, 2014

Model Pictures

Developed over a decade, Ross Sawyers' series *Model Pictures* investigates the rise and fall of the United States housing market. Upon moving to Seattle from Kansas City in 2006, Sawyers was struck by the vastly growing housing stock in Seattle, a typical example of how the housing bubble in America was affecting development. His new environment was a stark contrast to Kansas City, a city that was largely unaffected by the bubble and whose downtown region was suffering from urban decay. Being exposed to these two markedly different environments provided him a perspective that highlighted the nuances of the housing industry.

For Sawyers, framing the photographs in *Model Pictures* entailed developing an interpretative world. Sawyers's method—the process of constructing and photographing dioramic models—has long been used in the world of contemporary photography, by artists such as Thomas Demand and James Casebere. These artists, however, are not as influential in his work; rather, inspiration emerges from the work of Gordon Matta Clark, John Divola, and James Turrell. While the spaces constructed depict the interior of the home, a domestic space of dwelling, they do not focus on how one occupies these spaces. The series focuses instead on the external forces and their environment that are constructing these scenarios.

Sawyers's intention is not to critique the situation created by the

housing bubble or even to make a direct documentation. Rather, he has used the bubble to inspire the conceptual framework and aesthetic focus of *Model Pictures*. The series parallels the rise and fall of the housing market: from the inflation of the housing bubble and increase in quickly built housing stock to the stagnation in sales and construction, the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market, and the proliferation of foreclosures. Three themes emerge within the series—construction, reflection, and destruction.

CONSTRUCTION

The proliferation of home construction significantly impacted large urban regions across the United States. In many cases, the focus on square footage and sales outweighed considerations of space and the relationship of buildings between one another and their overall environment. Interested in these factors as well as the physical quality of the new buildings made with low-quality stock materials and mundane off-the-shelf designer paint colors from Home Depot, Sawyers constructed dioramic models to exaggerate many of these conditions.

Fig. 1 represents many of the details central to the initial development this series. Upon first glance the photograph simply reads as a mundane interior image, yet details specific to this moment are embedded within the model. Rather than framing a view of the surrounding natural landscape, the window of this model frames a neighboring building. With land at a



Fig. 1
ABOVE *Approximation #5*, 2006

premium, projects were built with disregard to their environment and how that might impact the experience of the interior. The small uninhabitable space with a window in the background of the photograph is an exaggeration of how square footage was a driving factor in much of this type of development.

At the beginning of the series Sawyers constructed these models to be pristine, much like the model homes on the market. Influenced by research and touring model homes, Sawyers replicated the banality of the homes and developed nuanced exaggerations in his images. The strong perspective view captured in the first photographs also reflected the images used to market the housing industry—developing depth and an illusion of space extending beyond the frame of the photograph in a space void of personal details.

REFLECTION

As the market slowed, so did construction, causing the building

industry to stagnate. Partially finished homes remained empty, with plastic sheeting in place of windows, while developers struggled to sell completed projects. In Sawyers' series, this incomplete state allowed him the freedom to control the previous models—in both materials and photographic techniques—to capture a reflection of this moment.

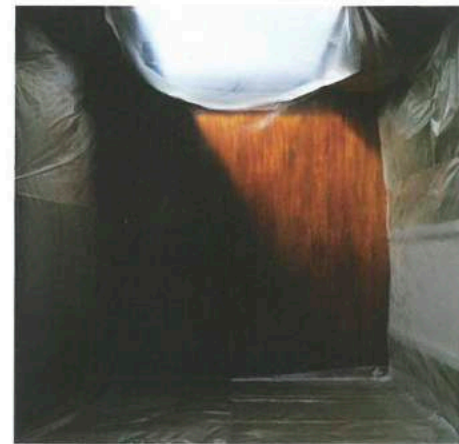


Fig. 2
ABOVE *Untitled (Blue, Sky #3)*, 2007

The bird's-eye view in Fig. 2 breaks from the traditional perspective view used in the beginning of the series, and the materials become less controlled, paralleling the loss of control as the housing boom began to collapse. Fenestrations sheathed in plastic sheeting are indicative of the time: as the economy declined, in many cases developers stopped construction midway through a project.

As materials begin to be more active in the constructed stories, Sawyers also developed another layer into the photographs with a range of marks. In Fig. 3 mark-making is

central to the composition.



Fig. 3
ABOVE *Untitled (Blue, Sky #4)*, 2007

Using tools of the construction industry, in this case a chalk line, Sawyers implied the presence of a window through a square mark, yet a small hole drilled above the mark confuses this message—leaving open the question of whether the marks of the chalk line and hole are part of the construction process. The unfinished quality and strong use of light encourages an eerie, reflective state with hints of destruction.

DESTRUCTION

Foreclosed homes and the collapse of the subprime mortgage market underscore the works created toward the end of this series. Many foreclosed homeowners would bash the walls of their home as they were forced to leave—leaving marks of frustration and aggression. Parallel to this loss of control, the photographs relinquish control and allow the material and light freedom to contribute new layers to the image.

Light is at the forefront in Fig. 4, and the influence of James Turrell is apparent as the light shining through

the deconstructed corner of the model creates a volumetric form. The destruction in Fig. 5, however, is less controlled. The circle mark of the blue chalk line is partially removed with an aggressive hole through the wall: a treatment of material inspired by Gordon Matta Clark's building cuts.

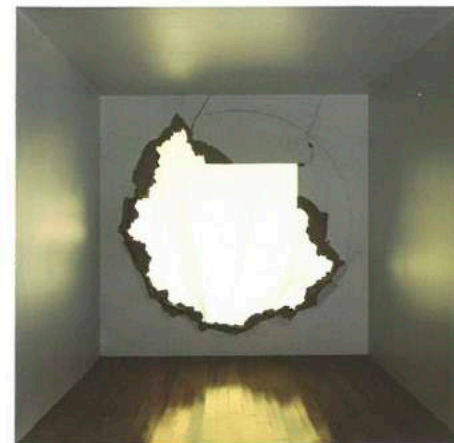


Fig. 4
ABOVE *Untitled*, 2010

Fig. 5
BELOW *Untitled*, 2009

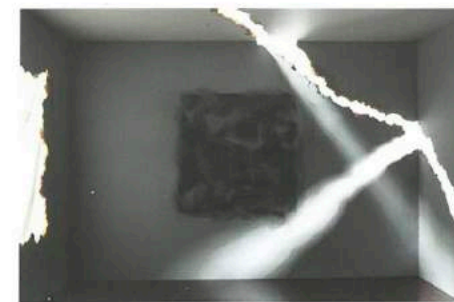


Fig. 6
ABOVE *Untitled*, 2011

As Sawyers loosens his control of the camera, light emanates through these torn marks and begins to take a larger role in the composition of the photograph. The light is liberated in Fig. 6 and shines out of a cut across three surfaces to appear as a two-dimensional line. The multiple approaches to mark-making are layered within this photograph and inject a new energy to an otherwise banal space.

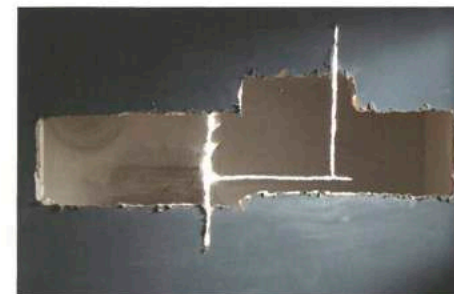


Fig. 7
ABOVE *Untitled*, 2011

As the series progresses, the construction for each photograph is a less literal depiction of a room, while the mark-making has a more specific intent. In some cases, layered and manipulated two-dimensional planes create the illusion of a room rather than

of a constructed diorama. In Fig. 7 the example above, spatiality is no longer implied with the use of a direct perspective view; however, in this model Sawyers explores mark-making as a formal mode of communication and inscribed glyphs from hobo code into the walls of the model.

As the series transitions to focus on the deconstruction and destruction of foreclosed homes, especially moments where transient communities or former homeowners use the surfaces of the wall as a mode of communication, Sawyers' process also reflects this destruction. No longer are the photographs in *Model Pictures* focused on meticulously labored and detailed models. Instead, space is indicated and the camera is free of constraints—capturing the volume of light and lens flares layered through more abstract spatial constructions.

Throughout the series of *Model Pictures* and its progression of shifting ideas, from construction to destruction, there is no indication of human interaction. Developed to depict spaces of dwelling—a home—the photographs leave no traces of a life lived within its models. As the series becomes more destructive in nature, there is a noticeable void of debris on the floor of the models from the destruction. This absence draws the focus to the external forces of the housing industry rather than the internal environment of the models. The opportunity presented by this destruction—and captured through the alternate reality of Sawyers'

photographs raises questions as to what follows next.

Karen Kice

Neville Bryan Assistant Curator
Department of Architecture and Design
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Opening Reception:
Sunday, April 13, 3-5pm

Gallery Talk:
Wednesday, April 30, 6pm