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ICONS Updated June 22, 2012, 5:57 p.m. ET

# Skyline Views: Artists Scale the Heights

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By RACHEL WOLFF

From the masterworks by Louis Sullivan, known as the "father of skyscrapers," to the ultrathin Spire project by Spain's Santiago Calatrava that never rose above its foundation, Chicago has remained synonymous with tall buildings.

So it's the perfect place to focus not only on the buildings themselves but on how contemporary artists have looked at such feats of engineering.

"Skyscraper: Art and Architecture Against Gravity" opens next weekend at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. The 70 or so artworks featured span the past 58 years and nearly all media. The interpretations are funny, sublime—and sometimes possess a dark and haunting edge.



Enoc Perez/MCA Chicago

Enoc Perez's vision of Chicago's 'Marina Towers,' part of a residential-commercial complex created in the 1960s.

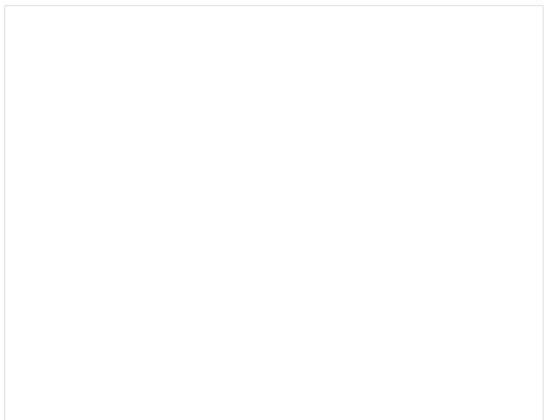
"One thing that became pretty evident was how many artists really anthropomorphize the skyscraper," says Michael Darling, co-curator of the exhibition and chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Some of the renderings, he adds, are plainly meant to be critical, "things that have to do with the inhumanity of the skyscraper, putting people in boxes and stacking them up and all the pathos that comes with that."

It's unsurprising that the skyscraper holds such a fascination for contemporary artists, says David Van Zanten, a

professor of architecture and urbanism at Northwestern University in Chicago's Evanston suburb. Many artists trained as architects. He adds that skyscrapers are worlds unto themselves. "There are all sorts of different people inside them. And they're all too obvious a symbol of social hierarchy—the up and down makes that very clear."

Each of the exhibition's five sections tackles a theme. "Urban Critique" includes Michael Wolf's "Transparent City #6," from 2007-08, a cropped photo of Chicago's own Marina Towers that looks almost abstract—a tapestry of sorts woven from apartment windows in a style typical of this Hong Kong-based photographer. In a 2011 piece, New York artist Enoc Perez, known for a brushless technique that positions his work somewhere between paintings and prints, depicts the same towers as a pair of striking red monoliths.

A section titled "Improvisation" is anchored by a room-size piece by the French artist



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Kader Attia. His "Untitled (Skyline)," from 2007, includes 80 refrigerators of various sizes, blanketed with thousands of tiny mirrors.

“ *Skyscrapers are worlds unto themselves. And many artists trained as architects.* ”

Another section, titled "Personification of Architecture," includes Madelon Vriesendorp's 1975 "Flagrant Délit," which roughly translates to "Caught in the Act" and cheekily shows a skyscraper catching two fellow towers together in bed. The image graced the cover of "Delirious New York," a well-known 1978 manifesto written by her husband, the architect Rem Koolhaas.

The proverbial elephant in the gallery is the 9/11 World Trade Center attack, tackled in the exhibition section "Vulnerability of Icons."

For "Exploded City," a cluster-like installation from 2009, Turkish artist Ahmet Öğüt crafted scale models of all of the buildings that were attacked by terrorists in the years leading up to and following 9/11, including the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the Oberoi-Trident Hotel in Mumbai.

Erier yet is Robert Moskowitz's "Skyscraper," from 1998, which presciently depicts the matching behemoths as two solid-black fields of color—dark shadows set against a bleakly gray sky.

*A version of this article appeared June 23, 2012, on page C14 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Skyline Views: Artists Scale the Heights.*

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