

white columns

## Art

### Project Spaces at Location One and White Columns

Follow us, dear reader, into the secret annexes

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Shed-ward ho!: Oliver Wasow's Topeka, 2007

Oliver Wasow: 'Expansible Catalogue' White Columns 320 West 13th Street Through July 26

The project space in a gallery or nonprofit is a bit like a backyard shed: You generally can't see it from the street, and plenty of people visit and leave without knowing it exists. It's not quite like the teenager who built a nuclear reactor in the shed behind his house in suburban Detroit, but two current project-space shows share a bit of that quasi- clandestine, science-experiment approach.

In the project room over at White Columns, Oliver Wasow works more like an archaeologist, sifting through annals of recent photography. Just as archaeologists favor ancient garbage dumps for the mother lode of information they provide about a past culture, Wasow's "Expansible Catalogue" also focuses on junk—or at least the kind of photography that doesn't make it into art-history books.

Wasow's photos, displayed in a hodgepodge of sizes and frames, are hybrids of pictures he took and joined digitally with images cribbed from unidentified sources. Certain themes repeat: the digits of historically significant years ("1945" looming tall over a heap of rubble); an abandoned wagon wheel surrounded by tufts of prairie grass; a retro-futuristic landscape with domes protruding from the ground.

Some of Wasow's interventions are so subtle that it's hard at first to tell what he's done, though others contain more obvious fantastical elements (like a landscape lodged in a living room). But what's funny is how we often know, intuitively—or, more precisely, through repeated exposure to pictures in books or media sources—what many of these images are supposed to "mean." The isolated wagon wheel signifies the sacrifice and hardship of our western-bound forebears; the huge year dates and the domes, some kind of post-apocalyptic future.

What's also interesting about Wasow's project, though, is what it tells us about how we read photography. Art photography was and is about staking out a signature style, while vernacular photography is interesting for almost the opposite reason: Certain weird tropes get codified and repeated over and over. Only, in Wasow's work, the familiar and the strange mix together to create a new, expanded (expansible!) vocabulary of images.

Wasow borrows the title of his project from Wallace Nutting, an early-20th-century photographer who sold his photographs in department stores. He's also borrowed Nutting's distribution system: Images here are sold, in signed, unlimited editions, for only \$10 to \$100. Now, virtually all of us can be collectors. If only we all had those backyard sheds to house our private museums.