

## GRADUATE SCHOOL REVIEW COMPETITION

# 'Edgar Martins: This is not a House', The Wapping Project Bankside, London, May 9 – June 30, 2012

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Edgar Martins's photographs do not imply hostility. They are dripping with it. A chair dangles atop the corner of an open door. A ceiling has been destroyed. And in a set of two prints, entitled *Cannibalism* and *Cannibalism II*, blocks of foam and concrete have been inexplicably stacked on top of each other, anticipating an inevitable collapse. These staged acts of destruction generate significant unrest for the viewer, who has been enveloped in a landscape of manufactured tensions.

But 'This is not a House' is also grounded in some very real tensions beyond the gallery walls. In 2008, *The New York Times Magazine* commissioned Martins to document the economic collapse and its impact on the real estate market. Martins proceeded to photograph abandoned properties across the United States. The photos were published on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009 as part of a picture essay in *The Times*, which prefaced that no images had been digitally manipulated. Several readers were immediately skeptical – the photos had clearly been altered. On July 8<sup>th</sup>, *The Times* retracted the essay from its website, replacing it with an editor's note stating that if the magazine had known of the manipulations prior to publication, the piece would have been pulled. Martins defended himself, argu-

ing that *The Times's* photojournalistic standards policy was never made clear and that he never misrepresented his work, despite previous assertions that he does not resort to digital methods. But whether opinion in this case sides with *The Times* or Martins, one thing remains clear: the subject being documented has been obfuscated by the ensuing dispute.

This is the fundamental glitch for 'This is not a House'. The aim of the initial project – to investigate the impact of the financial collapse – has been conflated with *The Times* controversy, the photographs having since been marketed and repackaged for this exhibition as a challenge to the veracity of photojournalism. The resulting show lacks succinct focus, as it seems wholly dependent upon the adjacent debate rather than its visual content. If, as the exhibition's textual components implore us to, we assume that the reliability of photojournalism lies at the heart of Martins's works, the violent acts of demolition depicted throughout 'This is not a House' seem disproportionate to its intended target. Furthermore, if the manipulation of compositional symmetry or the addition of foliage in the foreground of an image are the rebellious digital fabrications Martins employs to counter the credibility of photojournalism, these alterations seem too slight to have much impact.

There is an argument to be made about media-created spin regarding the financial meltdown, but that is not addressed here.

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Instead, the exhibition's protestations against photojournalism seem divertive, opportunistic, and unconvincing. If one views the exhibition in the hopes of either gleaning insight into the economic crisis or encountering a critical investigation into photojournalism,

neither request will be met. In the end, what remains of Martins's commissioned photographs is a cleverly packaged subterfuge that has shrewdly embedded itself underneath the floorboards and within the walls of 'This is not a House'.

**How to cite this article:** Gilbride, M 2013 'Edgar Martins: This is Not a House', The Wapping Project Bankside, London, May 9 – June 30, 2012. *Opticon1826*, (15): 10, pp. 1-2, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/opt.bh>

**Published:** 20 August 2013

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