Urban sprawl; land of dreams

Alex Slade’s career has been defined by an odd balance between detail-trapping, large-format, view-camera photographs and vaguely referential sculptures. At Mary Goldman Gallery, he displays a handful of his attempts to give image and form to a preoccupation with the Inland Empire.

Slade’s subject matter is utterly mundane—the slow development of Southern California’s until recently untapped inland real estate—but he finds within it images that are bizarre, uncanny, in some cases difficult to believe. There are no big shocks, just odd hints of the unexpected.

A suburban parkway that seems to define the boundary between somewhere and nowhere is completely built up with new housing on one side of the street. On the empty land opposite, construction of a high school is just beginning, like a wildfire that has jumped the road or a societal prophecy unfolding ahead of schedule.

In “Centex Homes: Millbrook at Coyote Canyon, Fontana, CA” (2005), a foursome of mini-mansions under construction, the apparent first installment of a subdivision, looks oddly pastoral shot from an open green and under a soggy sky—castles on the heath, SoCal style.

The exhibition’s lone sculpture, a low-slung painted wood abstraction with lines and shapes based on unidentified real estate developments and connector roads, is simultaneously eerie and playful.

“Sprawl” is a word of dread for many of us, but also a word of dreams. Slade’s works call up the mixed feelings, from worry to reverie, that come with it.

Mary Goldman Gallery, 532 Chung King Road, Los Angeles, (213) 627-8121, through Dec. 3. Closed Sunday through Tuesday. www.marygoldman.com