

▼ Art

Deep Cuts

Gordon Matta-Clark spelunked the soul of the city

BY R.C. BAKER

There is something both elegiac and death-defying about Gordon Matta-Clark's work.

The short-lived Matta-Clark (1943–1978) is most famous for cutting huge sections out of decrepit buildings, graceful forms achieved through the brute application of wrecking bars, power saws, and sledgehammers. This exhibition reveals that he was also an avid filmmaker; *Conical Intersect* (1975) captures Matta-Clark and his assistants, in hard hats and dust masks, chopping and sawing holes through a pair of Parisian homes originally built in 1690.

Clark's process created lovely juxtapositions: Truncated floor joists form a rhythmic counterpoint to bare walls painted different colors, the separate rectangles of living spaces integrated into one continuum when sliced by Matta-Clark's smoothly chiseled arcs and curves. The framework for the Centre Georges Pompidou rises in the background, and Matta-Clark situated a conical incision so that passersby could observe the new arts center through the lens of history.

Scenes of Matta-Clark's crew perched over sheer drops as they deconstruct the buildings convey youth's disdain for mortality, but a scrim of spirituality and grief overlays much of the work. When a wall collapsed on Matta-Clark, legend has it that a pair of stone hands, a fragment of religious statuary desecrated during the French revolution and stashed in one of the houses for good luck, landed on his chest in the prayer position.

City Slivers (1976) moves the scene to Manhattan, and is perhaps more earth-bound. No one is quite sure how Matta-Clark managed to collage in a single 16mm movie vertical slices of architecture, traffic, and pedestrians; he may have shielded part of the lens to expose only a thin portion of film at a time, shifting the covering before re-running the film through the camera to expose the remaining areas. Whatever the method, he was careful to choose vertical subjects—rows of street lamps, smokestacks—that emphasize the segmented frenzy of New York. The film's

conclusion reveals a personal reason for its fragmented nature: text on an orange strip climbs up the frame, reading, "He just hit the pavement/out good as dead/face down in the mi—" The ending is mysterious, but a gallery handout explains that Matta-Clark's twin brother, Sebastian, who'd had mental problems, jumped or fell from a window of their shared Soho loft that summer.

Clark discovered a different strain of drama that same year, when he took to exploring the labyrinth of tunnels under Manhattan. Pierced by bright shafts from street grates and skittering dots from flashlights, the Croton Aqueduct, with its brick barrel vaults and plunging spillways, resembles a set from *The Third Man*. When someone exclaims that he sees a figure who "scared the living shit out of me," before realizing it is his own shadow projected into the mist, one can easily imagine Orson Welles's villainous Harry Lime scurrying around a corner.



The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York/London

Taking a bite out of Paris

A subway worker informed Matta-Clark, "Most of the hardhats in the tunnel industry are deep intellectuals," adding, "Underneath that verticalism [of skyscrapers] lies a horizontal body of tunnels, much the same as a man lying on his back with his veins and arteries," a notion that recalls the urban vision of another smart guy, T.S. Eliot, when he wrote in "Prufrock": "... the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table."

The fact that Matta-Clark died of cancer a scant two years later, at age 35, is certainly tragic. All the more so when we realize what he didn't accomplish: Shortly before his death he was working on drawings for a vast network of balloons that would support, in the words of a scholar who has closely studied the diagrams, "rigging giving access to a series of circular platforms on which a person could sit, high above the city, as though on a magic carpet or in the crow's nest of an old-fashioned sailing ship."

You can almost picture Matta-Clark up there, with a Sawzall, going hammer 'n' tongs at heaven.

'Gordon Matta-Clark: Above and Below'

David Zwirner
519 West 59th Street
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