

A reconstruction of a demolition

GALLERY GOING

GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Matthew Sweig at XEXE Gallery
\$1,300-\$6,800. Until Feb. 26,
624 Richmond St. W., Toronto.
416-646-2706.

A glance at the picture reproduced here — or even a prolonged study of it — will probably not serve to identify it as a painting rather than a photograph. But a painting it assuredly is, a vastly labour-intensive, black-and-white acrylic on canvas of the demolition of Toronto's Princess Margaret Hospital, on its former site at the intersection of the city's Sherbourne and Wellesley Streets.

The artist is a young Toronto-based landscape architect named Matthew Sweig, and he has been painting demolition sites, he says, for a year and a half now. His current exhibition, devoted exclusively to paintings of the demolition of the Princess Margaret Hospital, is called, with appropriate lugubriousness, *Terminus*, and is at Toronto's XEXE Gallery.

Why the old Princess Margaret? Sweig says he doesn't know, really. "I took the photos last August," he tells me. "I was riding by the site on a bus, going to work," he says. "And, you know, I haven't gone that way to work since!"

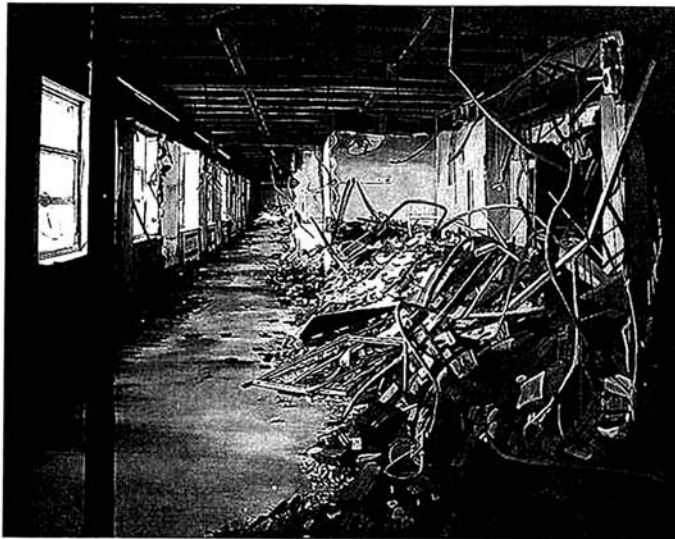
Sweig works from his own photographs. Which he then transforms into these large, painstaking paintings. The paintings are paired, each pair showing first the inside and then the outside of the

same portion of the building.

Now the thing is, I have certain nagging issues with this odd and, to me, cumbersome idea of taking photographs and then carefully making them into paintings. Why not just exhibit the photographs in the first place?

Well, Sweig has given some thought to this very question. And his take on it is intriguing. First of all, the paintings are not simply the photographs blown up into pigment. For one thing, he disallowed anything resembling context from entering the paintings — there were to be no buildings in the background, no bulldozers, no streetlights, nothing but pure subject: building. Then, he replaces this space of context, as well as any patches of sky, with areas of pure white paint. "I paint the sky white as well as anything in the photo that hasn't been demolished yet."

What is even more intriguing is that in order to make such astonishingly accurate paintings of the partially demolished building, Sweig says he first had to "draw the buildings as if they were still intact." Then — and this is why I like the paintings as much as I do — he wields the paint brush in such a way that, as he puts it, "the paint brush demolishes the building as I paint it." The act of painting, in other words, replays the act of demolition, serving almost as a memorial to it.



Matthew Sweig painting of the interior of the Princess Margaret Hospital: 'The paint brush demolishes the building as I paint it.'