

Art that wakes the dead

GALLERY GOING

GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Matthew Sweig at Xexe Gallery
\$600 to \$2,000. Until Sept. 17,
624 Richmond St. W., Toronto;
416-646-2706.

The danger for Toronto-based Matthew Sweig — who is not only a prodigiously gifted painter but also a landscape architect — would be to seek refuge in his astonishing representational ability. The guy can make black-and-white paintings that look remarkably like black-and-white photographs, at least until you get up close.

But Sweig, whose new exhibition at Toronto's Xexe Gallery is called *Foundation*, has a few ideas with which to enrich and enliven what might otherwise become merely a virtuoso painting performance.

He made it clear, for his exhibition at Xexe in February of 2005 — which consisted of painstakingly careful depictions of the demolition of the old Princess Margaret Hospital — that when he painted ruins, he invariably isolated them by painting out everything extraneous in the background with white paint. Then he would draw the condemned building as if it were still intact, and wield the brush in such a way that, as he puts it, "the paintbrush demolishes the building as I paint."

The paintings for *Foundation* are even more complex. Sweig's new subject, as he describes it in his artist's statement, is his former

studio building in the old Parkdale district of the city, shown in mid-demolition. "The paintings," he notes, "will document the structure's last recognizable moment as an artist's studio." But there's more to it than that.

The wrecked studio is caught in what Sweig calls "a metaphorical intersection of two light sources" and their resulting shadows. The first light source presumably illuminates what is left of his beloved studio. The second — and this one must be supernatural — is, Sweig says, "cast upon my ancestors."

Now, wait just a sec. "Cast upon my ancestors"? Where did they come from? And what kind of a "metaphorical" light source is it that peoples — incarnates — as well as illuminates?

An artist's light source, I suppose. For, sure enough, standing solidly amid the ruins are a number of figures who, despite the period dress they wear, look as if they have every right to be there. One longs to know who, exactly, Pauline V. Pfister actually is — an aunt? A great-aunt? Who is the forlorn Helen Hicks? And who are the children, Marion and Margaret Hicks, crouching side by side in the now-Gothicized ruins?

Sweig isn't saying. He talks, with a strangely cold objectivity, about their constituting "fabricated histories." Much like the building, he writes, "the people are translated into artifacts and circumscribed into history while maintaining their universality as abstracted ancestors." Abstracted ancestors? Suddenly the black-and-whiteness of the paintings seems as chilling as it does graphic.



Matthew Sweig's Pauline V. Pfister: paintings in which the artist's ancestors wander his wrecked studio.