ARTFORUM

Marcel Storr

ANDREW EDLIN GALLERY

Marcel Storr (1911–1976) was a self-taught, so-called outsider artist who lived and worked in Paris, initially at Les Halles food market, later as a street sweeper in the Bois de Boulogne. Abandoned by his mother at the age of two, he became a ward of the state. He was sickly and never sent to school, grew deaf either from beatings or illness, and was unable to write anything but his own name. But with the exquisite, meticulously executed drawings of cathedrals and "Megalopolises" in the exhibition—thirteen of Storr's sixty-three surviving works are on display—it is clear his name will not be forgotten.

The inspectors who tracked him through childhood and adolescence noted his skill at drawing, and in adulthood, he continued to draw, working secretly, indifferent to public acclaim, as if it might interfere with his creativity. Five of the works in the exhibition have no dates, and another five are dated 1964; one is dated 1968, another 1970; and another 1971. Two unfinished drawings—works in progress—show us Storr's technique. The first, drawn in graphite, is undated, featuring a shadowy, sketchy building with one of its four towers rendered in colored pencil. The second, dated 1971, displays an incompletely penciled structure partly filled in with colored ink. Real cathedrals took a long time to build, and Storr took a long time to finish his pictures of them. His technique was additive: He piled detail on detail, carefully, even obsessively, filling in every bit of space, including the sky, which he transformed into a plane suffused with luminous color. All the works are framed in black and some are covered with a layer of varnish, thus preserved forever and signaling that the buildings pictured are permanent. The installation here was brilliantly intimate—the gallery was turned into a kind of sacred space—even as it conveyed the uncanny grandeur of Storr's drawings.

In the past, writers have designated Storr's buildings "improbable," "outlandish," and "fantastical"—yet they are grounded in reality. He incorporated details from structures both well known—the Cologne Cathedral, St. Mark's in Venice, Barcelona's Sagrada Familia, Paris's Sacré Coeur—and less familiar—the churches of rural France, the buildings of La Défense business district. Toward the end of his life, Storr became paranoid—he believed that Paris would be destroyed and that the American president would need his drawings to rebuild it—and was hospitalized in an asylum, suffering from megalomania and inconsolable grief over his wife, who died in 1972. Paranoia, as Storr's life and work demonstrate, can be both inspiring and self-defeating.

Marcel Storr, *Untitled (unfinished work)*, 1971, pencil, colored ink, and varnish on paper, 24 × 19¾".

Anne Doran, the writer of the catalogue essay for this exhibition, states that "Storr was neither religious nor a mystic," but his images suggest that she's wrong. The cathedrals and Megalopolises—at once awe-inspiring and urgently present—are unmistakably symbols of transcendence. They are what Rudolf Otto calls "'numinous' object[s]," embodying and conveying a sense of the "*mysterium tremendum*," that is, "the deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion." If the urge to create such images reflects the particularities of Storr's situation—his humbling by life and society, his wish and determination to escape his physical and social condition—it also speaks to something much broader: the universal need for transcendence.

—*Donald Kuspit*