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Infinity in Miniature

Charles Matton

THE FIRST MAJOR UK RETROSPECTIVE OF WORK BY FRENCH ARTIST, CHARLES MATTON, PRESENTS HIS MINIATURE ENCLOSURES CONTAINING PAINSTAKINGLY EXACT REFLECTIONS OF REALITY.

In his influential study of the poetic implications of our interactions with buildings and spaces, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard observed that it is "reasonable to say we 'read a house' or 'read a room', since both rooms and houses are psychological diagrams that guide writers and poets in their analysis of intimacy." Bachelard's interest is in the powerful correspondence between the spaces we live in and our psyches, the ability of rooms and buildings not only to reflect our personalities and imaginations, but to affect them, and the ability of spaces to harbour our most intimate and deeply personal memories: "Of course, thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated. All our lives we come back to them in our daydreams."

Bachelard's observations are useful when understanding the work of the French artist, Charles Matton, (1931 - 2008); the major retrospective, *Enclosures*, presented by All Visual Arts in London opens this autumn. Matton made work in many media. A talented draughtsman, he was an illustrator for *Esquire* and designed sets for films. Throughout his career, he worked in photography, painting, sculpture and film, but it is the remarkable series of *boîtes* that he created from 1985 until his death, for which he will be remembered. The *boîtes* are small enclosures measuring approximately two cubic feet in which he built miniature replicas of real spaces, ranging from exacting models of the studios of artists such as Courbet, Vermeer and Francis Bacon to intimate bedrooms and bathrooms and the vast book-lined spaces of the New York Club's Library. Presenting 40 of a total 72 boxes that Matton made during his lifetime, the exhibition provides a comprehensive introduction to the work of a little-known, but strikingly original artist.

One of the most immediately impressive aspects of Matton's miniature boxes is their magical or bewitching quality, inviting the viewer into their spaces with a virtuoso technical skill. Through the subtle and precise use of mirrors and lighting effects, Matton is able to create the illusion and the suggestion of spaces much larger or smaller than his two cubic feet enclosures. Inside the box *Boulevard Saint Germain* (1991), there's an exacting miniature replica of a Parisian interior, the corner of a room opening onto two half open doors, behind which sit two other rooms and further doors. As you peer into the space, the room creates the illusion of opening outwards in multiple directions into further doors and further rooms. It has a magical, uncanny quality that makes you wipe your eyes in disbelief. You know there's only this small enclosure, but you lift your head to check anyway, enchanted and bewitched by the realistic but otherworldly quality of what you're seeing.

Corridor Library (2000) creates the illusion of an infinitely long corridor lined with books, their tiny spines fastidiously stacked, conveying a sense of great expansion and scope that transcends the work's miniature scale. In other works, such as *Mirrored Cupboard III* (1999), Matton makes use of painted glass to give the appearance of a mirrored cupboard door reflecting objects within the room of the box, but which does not reflect anything outside of the box, helping to maintain the illusion of the box's self-enclosed space. Curator, Joe La Placa, acknowledges Matton's technical achievements, but believes that his work is distinguished by its content rather than the meticulousness of its form: "With Matton, many people pay attention to the technical aspects of his work, which are extraordinary. But there are many other artists who work in miniature, and it's what he depicts that is important: moments in time, moods, qualities of light at particular times of day, a certain kind of metaphysical feeling that the boxes exude; that is what makes his work so captivating."





Self portrait with *The New York Loft*, 2001. Screen, Charles Matton Estate, courtesy All Visual Arts.

Many of his boxes have an extremely personal, emotional and intimate quality. *Debussy's Poisson D'Or* (2004) depicts a room with faded wallpaper and a slightly worn oriental carpet. In the centre of the room is a grand piano. Using a video projection, the piano stool is inhabited by a young man playing Debussy. The young man is in fact Matton's son, shimmering and not quite there in the projection, haunting and beautiful. This box has the atmosphere of a particularly vivid memory; a particularly resonant dream. Matton's box suggests, as Bachelard also argues, that it is our spatial awareness that most vividly suggests memories.

Even the boxes without figures seem haunted by intimacy and particular emotional timbres. Matton created a long series of hotel corridors and lobbies. *Hotel du Lac* (1994) shows a hotel lobby with faded but lavish curtains and a

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large bookcase. In the middle of the box there's an open door, through which, with the use of mirrors, Matton creates the effect of a never-ending corridor. The work has a personal basis in Matton's biography in the sense that Matton grew up in hotels because his father worked as a hotel manager. This was an uncertain time, the occupation, and the family's hotel was occupied by soldiers during the Second World War. The doorway to infinity, then, suggests an invitation to escape to the world outside the confines of the space. *Hotel du Lac* has an enchanting, wondrous quality, while also suggesting extreme loneliness and the sensation of being trapped.

In contrast, many of the boxes exude a playful spirit, suggesting a network of childhood associations such as dolls' houses, model-making and the surreal, "nonsense" literature of authors such as Lewis Carroll. As La Placa explains:

"Matton was a very, very playful character, and that spirit of child's play is part of the spine of his work." In order to emphasise this quality, and encourage visitors to enter into this spirit, the exhibition is being held in a specially constructed labyrinth near King's Cross. The labyrinth will consist of a room within a room. On the outside, the boxes will be displayed alongside preparatory material in a ring around a central room. The central room will contain a large two-way mirror very like the ones used in Matton's boxes to create the illusion of deep, never-ending space. The experience of walking into the room within a room, then, will approximate the experience of entering into one of Matton's boxes. As La Placa explains: "Looking through this mirror will hopefully give you the same effect as looking into the boxes, only on a life-scale." This effect of being inside one of Matton's boxes is heightened because the inner room

will also display a larger-than-life-size sculpture entitled *La Grande Lulu* (2000), a playful bronze with round cartoonish lines of a woman running, while a miniature version will also be displayed in one of the boxes.

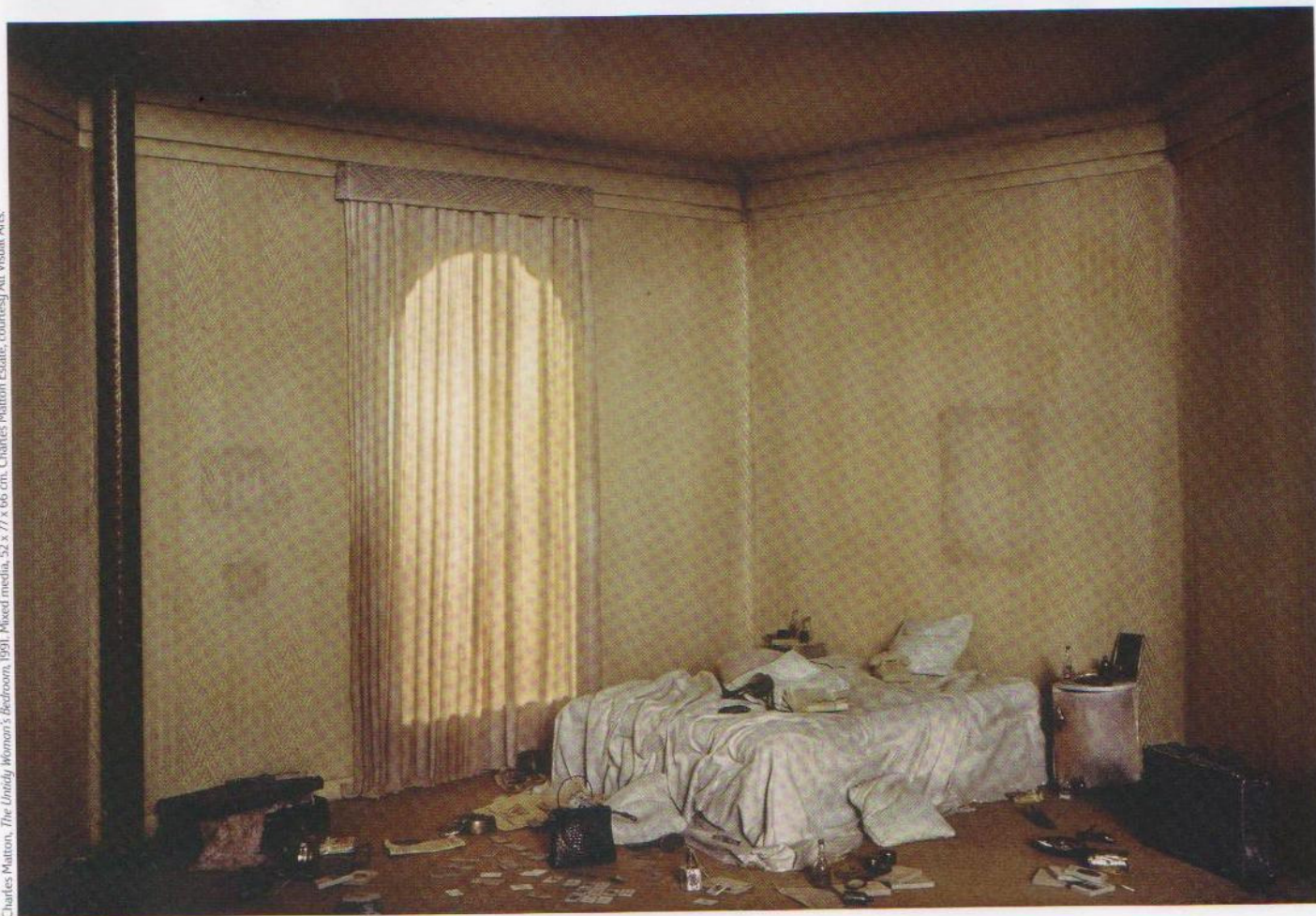
Many of the works have a dramatic quality, as if they are dioramas or stages on which something is about to play out. In some cases, the drama is well known, but the setting perhaps less so. In *Paul Bowles's Bedroom Tangiers* (1998), the particular quality of the light and furniture of the room offers a kind of relic of the dramatic, bohemian life lived within its walls. In other cases, such as *Untidy Woman's Bedroom* (1991) and *Collector's Bedroom* (2002), the occupiers of the rooms are more anonymous, and part of the enjoyment of these works is in supposing the drama of the rooms' absent characters.

Homage to Edward Hopper (2002) portrays a dusty room in an apartment block draped in evening sunlight streaming through half open windows, which borrows and recaptures the sense of empty tension and anticipation that so inhabits Hopper's paintings. There are cracks and fading marks in the wallpaper. The floorboards are exposed. There is a pile of newspapers in the middle of the

Charles Matton, *The New York Loft*, 20th Street, 1986. Mixed media, 83 x 165 x 86 cm. Charles Matton Estate, courtesy All Visual Arts.



Charles Matton, *The Unlady Woman's Bedroom*, 1991. Mixed media, 52 x 77 x 66 cm. Charles Matton Estate, courtesy All Visual Arts.





Charles Matton, *Studio (Doul)* 2002. Mixed media, 57 x 71 x 55 cm. Charles Matton Estate, courtesy All Visual Arts.

floor. It's a near-empty room, but it's filled with an atmosphere of foreboding, the viewer can't fail to be captivated with a sense of drama about to unfold. Propped up against the wall is a canvas painting of the same room; a Hopper painting, just finished, or in progress. Through his masterful manipulation of light and space, Matton almost enables the viewer to feel what compelled Hopper to paint the scene, what atmosphere he felt there that he conveyed in his painting. Hopper is only one of many artists to whom Matton paid homage in his *boîtes*. They provide a fascinating document of his influences and concerns. In his miniature versions of the studios of artists such as Alberto Giacometti, Francis Bacon and Vermeer, one can see his recurring interest in scale and in the relation of interior and domestic spaces to the interior spaces of psychology.

The preparatory materials that will be shown alongside Matton's *boîtes* consist of drawings, paintings, photographs and sculptures and are remarkable artworks in their own right. They occupy a curious relation to Matton's miniature boxes because the boxes themselves were originally created as preparatory material for large scale realist paintings. He would create meticulous miniature models of rooms and spaces, which he would then photograph, blow up to a large scale and convert into a realist painting on a canvas. At some point while engaged in this process, Matton decided to reverse the order and make the *boîtes* the finished artwork, for which he made drawings and photographs as research material. This reversibility of process means that the artworks have a complicated relationship to the idea of a finished piece and to the idea of concrete reality in general. The photographs, drawings, sculptures, models and boxes are intertwined in a complex relational web, in the tangle of which reality dissolves or disappears.

One of the richest and most interesting aspects of Matton's work is how in-tune it is with much 20th century French philosophy and cultural theory. His circle of friends included Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, both of whom championed

his work. Baudrillard's writings on Simulacra seem particularly relevant. Baudrillard thought that our contemporary experience is so dominated by images, simulations, replicas and references that we have lost our ability to experience what the images are meant to depict: reality. While Matton's work makes a concerted effort to approximate reality as closely as possible in the boxes, by the act of doing so they also articulate a drama of the hyper-real, where the distinction between reality and replica blurs. For example, Matton's meticulous recreation of a particular moment in time in the Nice bedroom of Nobel Prize winning author J.M.G Le Clezio (1999) is more real to the viewer than the actual room, which might never again experience quite the same effect of light shining through half-closed jalousie blinds which is captured in Matton's box. Once we have seen Matton's box, that virtually becomes the reality of the space depicted and we lose touch with a sense of what the real space might have been.

When Alice hit the ground from what seemed like an endless tumble down the rabbit hole, she was first contracted like a telescope, shrinking so that she thinks she might disappear altogether. Shortly afterwards she's stretched again (like a Giacometti sculpture) so that she thinks she'll never see her toes. It's as if her size is refocusing to deal with the strange and uncanny qualities of her surroundings. *Enclosures* enacts a similar readjustment of focus on the part of the viewer, as if by refocusing our attention on the miniature we're able to stretch it liberatingly outwards again. At the core of Matton's work are questions of scale, and part of the triumph of his art is its ability to open up spaces much larger than the everyday spaces we inhabit, in spite of and in fact because of the miniature platform on which he worked.

Enclosures runs from 9 September until 7 October at All Visual Arts, London, www.allvisualarts.org.

Colin Herd



Charles Matton
A Newborn Sculptor's Studio I, 1990.
Mixed media, 57 x 46 x 40 cm, Charles Matton Estate,
courtesy All Visual Arts.