John Marin, *Brooklyn Bridge and Lower New York*, 1913, etching and drypoint on paper, 6 3/4 × 8 1/2". From "New York, New York."

"New York, New York"

CRAIG F. STARR GALLERY

In a 1965 interview with critic Calvin Tomkins, Marcel Duchamp declared—with characteristically ironic nihilism—that "the only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges." Well, we know he took to its sanitary installations, as his *Fountain*, 1917, makes clear. (Having lived in Paris in 1953 and having experienced the holes in the ground that passed for urinals, I perfectly understand the artist's adoration of Uncle Sam's pissoirs.) But he never did make (or should I say appropriate?) any bridges. I think he would have admired the elegant lines of New York's Queensboro Bridge, completed in 1909; but it is unlikely that he would have appreciated the Brooklyn Bridge: Built in 1883, it boasts gothic arches too reminiscent of the gothic cathedrals of Europe, whose art, Duchamp said, was "finished," "dead." It is, however, the Brooklyn Bridge, in all its medieval-style grandeur, that is the subject of *Gates of the City*, 1922, an etching by John Taylor Arms, which makes an appearance in "New York, New York" at Craig F. Starr

Gallery, a wonderful online exhibition of early-twentieth-century prints that depict Gotham's extraordinary—and frequently terrifying—architectural landscape.

Even more than John Marin's energetically abstract and schematically expressive *Brooklyn Bridge and Lower New York*, 1913—which makes the titular structure seem as though it's disintegrating right before our eyes—Arms's modestly sized, realistic masterpiece illuminates the contradictions and tensions that suffuse the city. Howard Norton Cook's etching *Times Square Sector*, 1930, illustrates the differences between the smaller buildings of Lower Manhattan and the grandiose skyscrapers that rise above it. And in Cook's haunting *Canyons, New York*, 1928—the only woodcut in the show—the gorges referred to in the title (a queue of starkly rendered, sentry-like high-rises) are abysmal; the tiny cars on the streets below them recall helpless victims. If I was reading the work correctly, the classical facade in this picture is that of the New York Stock Exchange, suggesting that the print is a prescient reading of the Great Depression that began with the stock market crash of 1929.

Apart from the few isolated, shadowy figures in Louis Lozowick's lithograph *Traffic*, 1930, the only other human forms in this presentation are a pair of surreally distorted mannequins that crop up in Stuart Davis's *Two Figures and El (Sixth Avenue El No. 2)*, 1931. It is amusing to compare Davis's lithograph, with its chic aesthetics, cleverly overlapping planes, and streamlined forms, to Cook's more conservative and emotionally realistic, even shocking, *Canyons*. Davis's blithe abstraction is utterly indifferent to the darker facts of life below the elevated train—very much unlike the rest of the works here.

New York, of course, would be nothing without the giant mountains of money that went into creating it. The skyscrapers—erected by all manner of corporations, industrialists, and unscrupulous robber barons—epitomize that wealth and ruthless determination are needed to establish dominance. This show focused on the metropolis between World Wars I and II (during that glittering period known as the Jazz Age), just before the Great Depression brought the city to its knees. The skyscrapers are, as historian and critic Louis Mumford once wrote, an "homage to gigantism" and "the agents of the pecuniary-power complex," designed "to erase every vestige of a more humane past." But, as this brilliant exhibition

makes clear, New York's cold, imperial landscape represents a brave new world of aesthetics and, now more than ever, an ongoing theater of the absurd.

— *Donald Kuspit*