



DEREK BUCKNER

Gowanus or Bust



Brooklyn-based painter Derek Buckner has learned how to shimmy into places other artists would balk at, how to explore long-forgotten industrial facilities and how to risk a trespassing ticket to find the perfect vantage point for a new painting. What he comes back to the studio with is the machinery of the past left to rust and rot in the New York sun. It's not quite post-apocalyptic, mostly because there is some method to the madness—tires are in loosely formed piles, property fences are still intact and hints of more ordered life peek through the cracks—but make no mistake, his subjects have seen better days.

"It's not really about whether these places are beautiful or ugly. They're just powerful images. There's something dramatic and odd, something I'm drawn to visually. The fact that there's a tension there, a tension based on whether they're ugly or not, beautiful or not, is why I paint these places," he says. "But just speaking to the light that hits these places, ultimately I do think it's beautiful. I paint the light, because I'm not interested in painting flat, gray days. I love the light and the drama it brings."

Buckner will be showing his most recent paintings at an exhibition, *New Cityscapes*, beginning April

- 1 *Scrap Metal Yard, Gowanus Canal*, oil, 60 x 72"
- 2 *Gowanus Canal Clearing Storm*, oil on canvas, 30 x 40"
- 3 *Gowanus Canal, Mid Day*, oil on linen, 24 x 32"
- 4 *Snow Cover Evening Light*, oil on linen, 30 x 40"



2



3

30 at George Billis Gallery in New York City. Many of the works will focus on the Gowanus Canal, a subject the artist has returned to numerous times. The Brooklyn waterway, once called the most polluted body of water in the country, is now a Superfund site and has largely been abandoned by the industrial facilities that still cling to its concrete shores. For Buckner, the Gowanus Canal is not the most sanitary of muses, but it provides endless opportunities to explore light in fascinating new ways. “One thing about the canal that intrigues me is the stillness of the water. It reflects everything so you get the industrial buildings and the smoke of the factories...it all lends itself to these amazing compositions,” he says. “They’re cleaning it up now, but much of it still feels like a no man’s land. It’s very exciting for me, visually speaking, to paint it.”

Works in the new show include *Gowanus Canal Clearing Storm*, which features junk piles adjacent to the canal’s reflective surface, and *Canal, Evening*, a delicate Gowanus scene done in watercolor, a medium that the artist has been exploring more over the last two years. In *Snow Cover Evening Light*, Buckner allows light and shadow to dance about on the surface of freshly fallen snow, which hides rusty piles of iron and debris in a factory yard. His handling of the paint—loose at places but with short, confident strokes that reveal an eagerness to explore light and color—seems to suggest Pennsylvania Impressionism, perhaps even the works of Fern Isabel Coppedge or Edward Willis Redfield. “Whether it’s the Ashcan School, George Bellows or Winslow Homer—Homer wasn’t

part of the Ashcan, but he was an important predecessor—I’m always brought to these great artists who came before me. When it comes to American impressionism, certainly William [Langson] Lathrop... These artists were masters,” he says. “The way they handled paint and their sensibilities. They were traditional painters, but they influenced my work and if I’m ever in a tough spot I can go back and get some wisdom just by looking at their work.”

And yet, even as notes of other artists can be seen in Buckner’s work, there is a contemporary presence here in his paintings, one untouched by anyone but him. By looking at the ugly, the forgotten and the

abandoned elements near his home, he is able to bring life to things that long ago were last used.

“It’s almost an otherworldly place. There’s a grit to it all, and also an abstraction to it. And within there are these strange things that have been left behind, so strange that only a construction worker really understands what they are for,” Buckner says. “I just paint what I see, whether it’s cement walls, leftover cinder blocks, pilons...New York has a funny way of getting messy.” ●

George Billis Gallery

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4