

Gowanus Artist Elizabeth O'Reilly Puts Canal on the Map — Artistically

Show in Manhattan Through Nov. 12

By Carl Blumenthal
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GOWANUS — It's hard to measure progress. Ten years ago I wrote a series of articles for this newspaper about conditions on and around the Gowanus Canal. At the time, six months before 9/11, prominent residents and merchants, environmentalists and artists, agreed that things were looking up for the area. (The canal was still called "Lavender Lake" but at least it didn't stink anymore, thanks to the reactivation of the flushing tunnel.)

Since then the canal has been studied quite a bit, and with the Superfund designation there will be a lot more study. But even with continuing problems, the blocks surrounded by Smith Street and Fourth Avenue, the Gowanus Expressway and Baltic Street, seem livelier than ever with new galleries, clubs and restaurants open on weekends and evenings and plenty of commercial traffic during the day.

Artist Elizabeth O'Reilly was one of the people I interviewed in 2001. She had been in her studio on the top floor of 543 Union St., next to the canal, since 1992. She's still there, one of the stalwarts of the "Gowanus school" of painting, which also includes John Ross Michaels, Nicholas Evans-Cato, Joseph and Linda Mariano, Regina Perlin, Diana Horowitz and Andrew Landigan, among others.

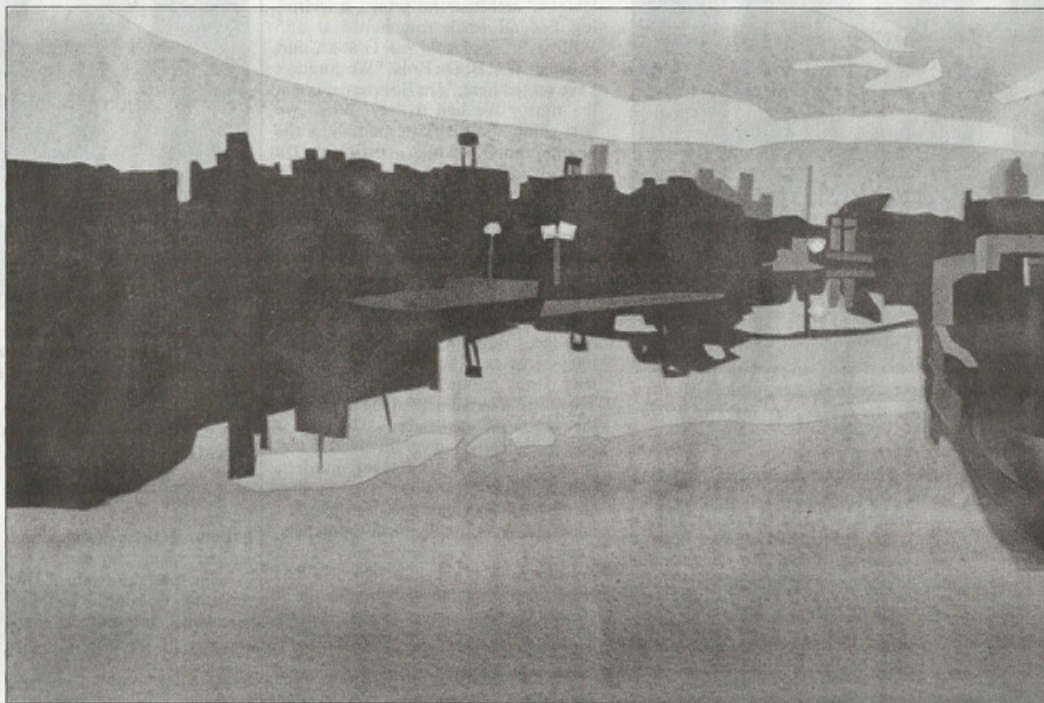
Some 150 painters, sculptors, photographers and multimedia artists participated in the 15th Annual Gowanus Artists Studio Tour on Oct. 15 and 16-24 artists did in 1999 when I first covered the event — but, in spite of the vitality they contribute to the artistic scene, the Gowanus Canal is rarely a subject for them.

Elizabeth O'Reilly is one of the exceptions to this rule. Not only was her studio open to the public during the tour, but she also has a solo exhibit of her oils and watercolor collages featuring the Gowanus area at the George Billis Gallery, 521 West 26th St. (Basement 1) in Manhattan, through Nov. 12. This is her eighth solo show at the Billis, which has represented her since 2000.

So if you missed her work or want to see more, hop on the A/C train and get off at 23rd Street, a half dozen blocks from the gallery. (Also go to www.georgebillis.com or elizabethoreilly.com for a preview.)

Why is Elizabeth O'Reilly so prolific, or, in other words, why is there such a demand for her work, which has yielded countless exhibitions, sales to prominent collectors, awards, and teaching positions? For an expatriate from County Cork, Ireland, land of literary giants, it is partly her dogged efforts to find her artistic legs on the streets of Gowanus, as she recounted to me during my visit to her studio on Oct. 4.

Her humility matches her 5'2" size, and her wavy brown hair frames a face with sparkling eyes and a ready smile. Her small canvasses, no more than a foot or two on each side, also seem to fit her modest ambitions. As she said in 2001, "It is the freshness of the paint

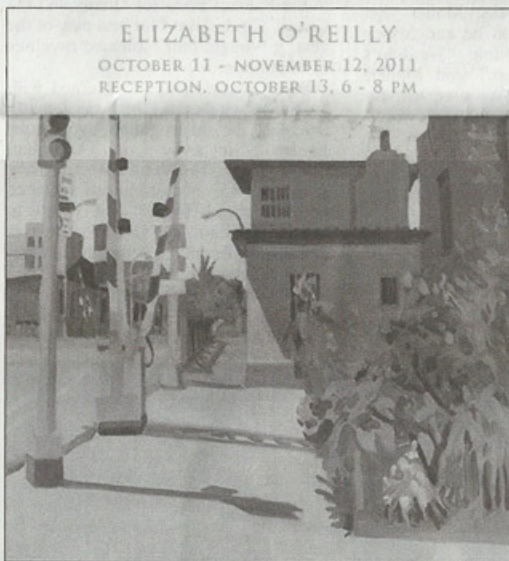


that captures my feelings. If I don't do [the painting] in one day, I lose the energy, the intensity."

Although she earned her master's of fine arts from Brooklyn College in 1992, it wasn't until one day in 1997 when she realized the alleyway behind her studio building was an equally valid subject as the trees and flowers she had been painting since she was a little girl.

Whether close-ups or panoramas of the Gowanus area — sometimes seen from such exotic locations as the F train platform at Smith and Ninth streets, the roof of the Home Depot garage, and her car (for nighttime painting, a friend rigged an easel which fits over her steering wheel) — her pieces are intimate, warm, even buoyant.

They are not "photo realist," but they are realistic enough for the viewer to easily identify with the painter's point of view. On the other hand, the absence of people in the frame allows your eyes to wander, to imagine ... life in the past ... or in the fu-



These paintings show the many sides of Gowanus artist Elizabeth O'Reilly's art. One of them clearly shows the Gowanus Canal.
Courtesy of George Billis Gallery



ing outdoors, the change in technique has also advanced her aesthetic. She told me, "I've always been interested in shape and color. More so now. I'm not a tonal painter. It's the flattened shapes I'm after. That's the abstraction of it." And she added, "Collage enables me to retain the best qualities of watercolor, its transparency and light, because I can cut the paper at the edge where I want. Otherwise the color bleeds."

The collages also brighten those colors. Check out her nighttime images of the Gowanus Expressway and Bay to see what you're missing by whizzing by in your car. A moonlight swim, anyone?!

The industrial landscape Elizabeth once only depicted with oil paint on board (or more rarely watercolor on paper) she now also "builds up" with pieces of colored paper. This is a form of construction in miniature. Perhaps it mirrors a canal whose future is under construction.

A critic might say Elizabeth O'Reilly romanticizes or ignores the gritty history of the Gowanus. For example, Thomas Wolfe, in *You Can't Go Home Again*, wrote about the "symphonic stink," like "deceased, decaying cats" and "prehistoric eggs" of the canal in the 1930s.

I would say she idealizes rather than idolizes the Gowanus area. While heavy and light industry continue along the canal even in a stagnant economy, Elizabeth's work probably gives comfort to those who would like to see the Gowanus declared a National Historic Site (in the Urban Industrial category).

Ten years ago I wrote, "Elizabeth is a connoisseur of the old and decayed, the natural and manmade. She especially likes the color of the Gowanus bridges, the bright greens and blues that used to be mirrored in the color of the canal."

Prefers Manmade Environment
Even though there are natural landscapes in the Billis show, Elizabeth admitted to me, "I find it harder to paint in the countryside because it lacks the color and structure of the man-made world. I'm not as attracted to traditional landscape. There's not so much sky in my paintings. Even if it's blue, I won't make it so."

In the past few years, she's turned to making water-colored paper collages of these scenes. This has not only enabled her to come in from the cold of paint-

ture?

'Nature Is Reclaiming Its Own'
"She commented, 'You look in the water and see all these elements. And the industrial world has its own beauty. When something is past its prime, the colors are more subtle, weeds creep in, nature is reclaiming its own. Decay means you have to give the object a second or third look. There is poignancy and poetry that you don't find in the fresh and new. That's the feeling I try to portray.'"

She still agrees with this statement and adds, when you "feel like you're painting history, you see changes other people don't notice as much. I've lived on the slope for 23 years. Familiarity is helpful for inspiration. It's kind of a contradiction. You look at [the Gowanus] long enough, you see new things."

As for the politics of development along the canal, Elizabeth is cautious. Several times she emphasized how the issues are complicated. She explained, "Maybe it's better [with the Superfund designation] that development slows down. I worry about bringing in people to live in big buildings [a la the Toll Brothers] before the canal is cleaned up. But maybe you have to bring in people first [to pressure for a cleanup]. For a painter, slow is more organic."