

Abstracting the Real

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Elizabeth O'Reilly's Latest Lucid Display

By Maureen Mullarkey

Modesty is not a characteristic of contemporary culture. The prevailing emphasis on self-assertion and the pseudoprofundity that fuels it in the visual arts leaves little room for the quietude and lucidity that is the hallmark of Elizabeth O'Reilly's painting.

O'Reilly brings to her art an intuitive regard for man's sense of place. It is a sensibility that makes the locks on the Union Street Bridge, which spans Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal, a significant aspect of home. Under her eye, urban details can as easily approach the same wellsprings of serenity as a Douglas fir on Long Island's North Fork, where O'Reilly spends her weekends.

This eponymous solo exhibit—her eighth at George Billis Gallery—marks O'Reilly's return to pure painting after working in collage (painting's alter ego) for several years. Her willingness to move between means, to exchange an expected one for another, indicates a restless concern for getting it right. Mastery is rooted in self-possession no less than in technique. The trajectory of O'Reilly's successive exhibitions points to a painter striving to possess herself in her art in order to suit her means of expression to her own temperament.

It is her ability to work gracefully and persuasively within the sharp-edged constraints of cut-paper collage that best distinguishes her from her mentor, Lois Dodd. Both share the same beneficent light that is so generous with color, eliminating the harsh tones and discordancies that trap lesser representational painters. Both are adept at the free, fluid brushwork necessitated by working en plein air.

These similarities between them serve to emphasize an unfashionable truth: that tradition—fertile inheritance—is the bedrock on which individual achievement is built. O'Reilly has not followed Dodd into fey or whimsical motifs. The character of her creative endowment does not permit it. For the last few years, she has been altering her means rather than her subjects. Her adventures in collage have proven fruitful in the recent paintings.

"Green Triangle, Union Street" (2011) is a beguiling instance of the carry-over into oil of the tightening and clarifying of forms that knifed paper makes obligatory. The triangle of the title is simply a shaft of light falling across a faded green industrial building that fills the upper right quadrant of the canvas. The immediate foreground is empty of everything but light. The void recedes into the distance, broken dramatically by the verticals of a traffic light and the arms of a canal-crossing barrier. Bright candy-cane stripes on the moveable arms provide patterned, complementary relief to the subdued tones of the surrounding architecture and a loose tangle of street greenery. Low-slung, the building is a fitting slynotechoe of a neighborhood erected on marshy ground that cannot sustain the weight of tall construction. Coloration, graceful yet still convincing, raises what could have been a dingy scene to an homage to quotidian places.

O'Reilly's gift for rendering is everywhere apparent. In that regard, the exhibition offers substantial nourishment to other painters. My own preferences tilt in favor of the collages. Composed from cunningly shaped and toned segments of watercolor wash, they strike the eye as paintings first. "Sunset at Carroll Street" (2011) is a small glory of darkling washes punctuated by pale strips of dying natural light and dots of street lamps emerging from mottled gloom. "Red Truck, Reflected" (2011) is another lovely performance. Deft, limpid reflections of a parked truck in the moving water of the Gowanus are at once faithful to reality and wholly abstract.

Elizabeth O'Reilly

Through Nov. 12, George Billis Gallery, 521 W. 26th St., 212-645-2621, www.georgebillis.com.



Elizabeth O'Reilly, "Red Truck, Reflected," watercolor collage, 12x16", 2011.