

Mie Olise Is ON OUR RADAR: The Painter Speaks

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Danish artist Mie Olise has a slight obsession with the beauty of abandoned spaces. So when Brooklyn's Gowanus neighborhood transformed from an up-and-coming art hub to a site of toxic devastation following Hurricane Sandy, Olise saw an opportunity.

The artist honored the area's longstanding balance between beauty and decay with a series of paintings made of sludge she dredges up from the Gowanus canal. While most denizens have been working to rid the area of this mystery muck, made of petroleum, century-old sewage, and a slew of unknown contaminants, Olise finds value in the toxic material. We were intrigued by this unusual -- and poisonous -- art endeavor, and wanted to learn more.

The Huffington Post: What are you trying to say with this project? Why does it matter?

Mie Olise: The project relates to my long-term involvement with abandoned constructions and places. For the past many years, I have studied and visited man-made constructions in different states of disrepair. For example, a forsaken Russian mining town by the Arctic Circle and a deserted amusement park in Berlin; I'm interested in the narratives relating to these constructions. With this specific project, I'm exploring the area around the Gowanus Canal as an architectural landscape of man-made constructions.



Working as a visual artist, my practice is driven by my strong interest in texture and material. The fact that the pigments in paint continue to have names like "raw sienna" and "burnt umbra," even though they today are all chemically produced, tells us about a time before the Industrial Revolution (and the Gowanus Canal) when we were dependent on natural resources in a way we often seem to have forgotten about today.

So, when I use the pigment from the bottom of the canal, I follow an aesthetic tradition dating back to prehistoric times -- a time when all man-made colors came from the soil and the rocks. Color never used to exist on its own; it was always the color of a specific place. In this way, the sludge, for me, is much more than toxic waste. It is both the color of Gowanus and the actual, physical remnants of its history, of everything that was built, fell apart and still lives here. I feel that the bottom of the canal is a good place to start looking if you want to try and understand what really happened here.



HP: Who has influenced your work?

MO: I am influenced by a lot of people: Janet Cardiff, Tacita Dean, Sophie Calle, Robert Smithson, Bernd and Hilla Becher, many of the German painters old and young, I have to mention Kiefer and Baslitz. Also David Byrne, Gordon Matta Clark, Joachim Koester, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Tracey Emin, Peter Doig, Tal R... the list is long!

HP: What are the lowest and highest points in your career so far?

MO: There have been some really low moments, several of them including freezing my tail off. One time on a stranded ship in an Icelandic snowstorm trying to make a video by myself. Another at the Arctic Circle where I had forgotten the shotgun you were not allowed to leave the house without! At the same time, working on

these projects have also created the most amazing moments. The rush of it all came together in the final exhibition last year at my big solo show at Nikolaj Kunsthal in Copenhagen. I guess the high and the low happens in each project simultaneously.

HP: What are you obsessed with right now, or what's inspiring you?

MO: White house paint and working with huge brushes. The blackness from the bottom of the Gowanus Canal. So very, very black. I am always obsessed with new materials, with uncovering constructions every place I go. I love searching for images in historical archives, trying to understand what has happened before I arrived — and making new narratives up!

HP: What movie/book/artist are you embarrassed about not knowing?

MO: I am bad with names, so it happens to me constantly. I grew up on a small island in Denmark with no art around at all. So I have walked a long and probably very embarrassing path. I was never good at the “new thing.” Actually, I am still not quite sure what Gangnam Style really is...?

HP: How would your childhood art/music teacher describe you?

MO: Kid with a bad memory and a selective intelligence.

