

***Presence, Absence, and Light in the Paintings of Elizabeth O'Reilly***

by Peter Malone

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George Billis Gallery  
521 West 26th Street  
New York City, 212-645-2621



Elizabeth O'Reilly, *Black House and Shadow*, 11" x 19", oil on panel, 2012. Courtesy of George Billis Gallery

Anyone who has encountered Elizabeth O'Reilly's work, even if only through a handful of her eight solo exhibitions at the George Billis Gallery, will find in this latest collection both an intensification of the artist's passion for abandoned places and a prodigious expansion of her ability to interpret the ephemeral effects of light with a minimum of fuss. After experimenting for a time with a hybrid of collage and watercolor, O'Reilly is once again applying unbound oil color to ground, guiding her brush with just the right viscosity to imply in a single stroke the effects of texture, shadow and form on surfaces as simple as distant tree tops and as complex as the rude and weathered clapboarding of a seventeenth century farm house.

This latest exhibition consists of several groups of paintings, including a series of pictures completed on the grounds of St. Mary's City, a restored colonial settlement forty miles south of Annapolis, Maryland. O'Reilly concentrates here on the dark, somber silhouettes of relic farmhouses that seem to trap the brilliant Chesapeake sunlight in triangular black holes. So effective is the contrast between their mysterious gloom and the brilliant hues of the surrounding environment that one is tempted to make more of the gothic context than the paintings actually address. Designed centuries ago to shelter the inhabitants from what was then the mortal hazards of weather and landscape—precisely the elements that frame those same buildings today in bucolic stillness—O'Reilly bends her focus away from a conceptual presentation of the site's historical circumstance and trains it on the stillness that remains.



Elizabeth O'Reilly, *Grey House, Night*, 12" x 7.5", oil on panel, 2012. Courtesy of George Billis Gallery

A consistent theme in O'Reilly's work is the study of derelict locations, but her focus as a painter is always on presence, on what is actually there more than the haunted absence of what was. In *Black House and Shadow* (2012), it is apparent that the artist faced into the sun to create her image, confronting the façade of a gabled structure similar in form to one of Monet's haystacks. However, unlike the impressionist's exploitation of shadow in the service of color's intensity, O'Reilly limits the higher keys of color to her rendering of grass and trees, while the house sits in its own windowless murk. The structures and their environment may remain at odds with each other, but her dovetailing compositions resolve themselves in spite of their incongruent sources. O'Reilly draws this tension to its limit in *Red Chimney*, in which an intrusion of dense, sooty umber almost dominates the composition, leaving hints of trees, grass and a footpath clinging to the frame.

*White House, White Boat* (2012), part of a series painted on the Maine coast plays to a higher color pitch. For instance, a tenacious stroke of yellow below the soffit of a small cabin follows along the top of a pale blue wall, recalling Fairfield Porter's paintings of the same coastal region, as does the subtle pink, violet and greenish whites that enliven these distinctly sunnier shadows. Though the look of each series is radically different, what the Maine paintings share with the Maryland panels is a resolute encounter with what is actually there.

Filling out the exhibition of almost twenty paintings are several landscape views of the water's edge that were painted on a trip to the south of Ireland. Here O'Reilly takes a cue from nature's own articulation of presence and absence in the form of rising and ebbing tides. The perennially overcast Irish sky illuminating indescribable reconstructions of sand, water and stone have inspired the artist to produce horizontal canvases that approach pure abstraction. The range that O'Reilly can find within the parameters of plein-air painting is expanded even further with *Gray House, Night* (2012), a painting that offers the viewer a sense of what can be achieved with the barest means. As minimal as a Whistler nocturne, its muted and iconic understatement fixes itself in the memory as deliberately and as efficiently as it was executed.



Elizabeth O'Reilly, *White Boat, White House*, 11" x 19", oil on panel, 2012. Courtesy of George Billis Gallery