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SEPTEMBER 2013

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NEWS OF EVENTS & AWARDS

TIPS ON WATERCOLOR,  
PASTELS & OILS



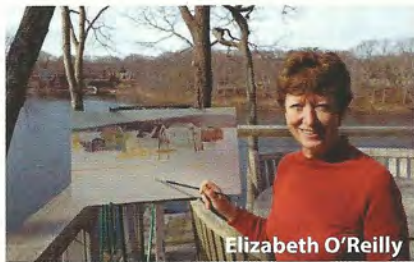
ELIZABETH O'REILLY

# Urban Landscapes in Watercolor, Oil & Collage

This Irish-American artist and teacher is attracted to urban landscapes that inspire her to paint in watercolor or oil, and to later use those images for creating collages. Each piece is composed of simplified, abstract shapes that take full advantage of the materials.

“I paint the scenes that speak to me, and those are not likely to be charming, pretty landscapes,” says Elizabeth O’Reilly, a New York-based artist who paints outdoors in her native Ireland, around her Brooklyn studio, in Maine, and when traveling to other parts of the United States. “Bucolic subjects that might interest other artists just don’t happen to capture my attention. We all have to be true to our own vision, especially if we hope to convey our enthusiasm about the landscape to others.” Among the subjects that speak to O’Reilly are industrial canals, warehouses, smokestacks, grain elevators, apartment buildings, barns, abandoned places, bridges, and other scenes punctuated by structures that help her organize the pattern of spaces.

“One can identify the subjects I have painted, but that shouldn’t indicate that I formulate a list of things I go looking for when I take my supplies outdoors,” O’Reilly explains. “The only time I consciously seek out places is when I head back to locations where I have painted before. For the most part, I respond to places and structures in the way the light reveals them to me. That might be the configuration of shapes, the pattern of dark and light values, or elements that come together in an abstract way. Even when I paint something that might be considered beautiful or lovely, I see the relationship between colors, shapes, and values and not the identities of the objects. For example, I did a workshop at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens and painted a forsythia as a mass of yellow with warm and cool variations, adding raw sienna to the mixtures of the three yellows I



**Union St Bridge & Yellow Van**

2011, oil on panel, 15 x 16 in.

Private collection

Plein air

Unless otherwise indicated, all artwork this article  
courtesy George Billis Gallery, New York, NY.



**Lilies at Green House**  
2012, oil on panel, 15 x 15 in.  
*Plein air*

normally have on my palette. I didn't paint details of the blossoms or leaves, because I was concerned with the abstract relationship of color shapes.

"I don't dwell on details or on the identifying markings of an object beyond the simple shapes that let the viewer know I am painting a building, tree, stream, or field. Moreover, I don't really consider the viewer's expectations or reaction to my paintings. I work from the assumption that if the location interests me, I have a better chance of interesting the viewer

by showing them something I found appealing. Similarly, I don't design the composition to direct the viewer's attention to one area of a painting or another. If a painting is well composed, then it gives viewers all the clues they need to understand why I painted it."

#### In The Zone

O'Reilly goes on, "When I am outdoors painting, I really do get into a zone or a meditative state, and there is nothing else on my mind except my observations and feelings

#### ARTIST DATA

**NAME:** Elizabeth O'Reilly  
**BIRTHDATE:** 1957  
**LOCATION:** Brooklyn, NY  
**INFLUENCES:** "Lois Dodd, Alex Katz's collages, Matisse, Morandi."  
**WEBSITE:** [www.elizabethoreilly.com](http://www.elizabethoreilly.com)

**Dusk**  
2012, collage, 5 x 9 in.  
Collection the artist  
Studio



**Gowanus Bay**  
2012, watercolor, 7 x 10 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air

**Smith & 9th St, Gowanus**  
2008, collage, 9 x 8 in.  
Private collection  
Studio





**Union Street Bridge**  
2009, oil, 16 x 6 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air

**Queens Borough Bridge**  
2008, oil on panel, 15 x 17 in.  
Plein air



**Pink Path & House**  
2012, oil on panel, 15 x 15 in.  
Plein air

about a scene. I used to do preliminary compositional studies to help me simplify and organize the shapes, but now that happens so automatically that I just draw the outlines of the forms on the painting panel with a thin mixture of raw sienna. Because that is a transparent hue, it disappears as I overlay the other strokes of oil color.

“My process is different in the studio because I have the luxury of time to step back and consider how a painting is taking shape even when I have been totally engrossed in the process. I use the same palette of warm and cool primaries and several earth colors in the studio and outdoors, and those include three yellows, three blues, titanium white, burnt sienna, and raw sienna.

“I am just as comfortable working in watercolor on location as I am with oils, and sometimes it is actually easier to use watercolors when the weather is rainy or overcast, as it often is in Ireland. I have an easel that fits over the steering wheel of my car and holds the watercolor paper, so I sit in the driver’s seat and spread my supplies out on the passenger seat. I have the same colors as in oil, except that I added aureolin yellow and rose madder genuine, which are transparent, non-staining colors that are particularly well suited to plein air watercolor painting.

“Before I head out to paint, I decide on the medium I will use, then I find a location that has potential and just start painting. What I put down is what I put down, and I try not to be critical of the piece until I am finished. I don’t do any preliminary drawing on the watercolor paper, and I encourage my students not to do that either because I find they will wind up filling in the drawing shapes rather than developing the overall painting. I can do watercolors almost anywhere in any weather, whereas the oils require being outdoors, where the solvents won’t bother me.”

### Creating Collages

“I taught in Maine last fall,” says O’Reilly, “and at other times of the year I offer workshops for seven or eight students in the urban environs of my Brooklyn studio and on the North Fork of Long Island. I keep those workshops small so we can all relax and paint. I offer a demonstration and then have the students paint along with me on location, and towards the end of each day we meet to discuss the work.

“I often paint with artists who are interested in the same kinds of location and spend about the same amount of time working on each



**Alley at Nevins**  
2011, oil on panel, 22 x 11 3/4 in.  
*Plein air*

picture. Lois Dodd has been a good friend and painting companion for more than 20 years, and I wrote a short essay for the catalogue for her retrospective exhibition recently presented in Kansas and Maine [see the May 2013 issue of *PleinAir*].”

O’Reilly became interested in collages after seeing two of them hanging in Dodd’s house in Maine. She says, “I gazed at them every summer for years, and then a friend sent me a catalogue for an exhibition of collages that was presented at Colby College. The works in this exhibition were totally exquisite. I made some on my own, based on my plein air paintings, using pieces of hand-painted watercolor paper. I became totally absorbed by the process of painting and cutting the small pieces of paper colored with transparent watercolors, especially during the winter months when it is challenging to paint outdoors.

“Later I decided to develop a course for the National Academy in creating collages as a way of helping students isolate shapes, something that is very important to the painting process. It proved to be helpful to students who wanted to simplify their pictures by focusing on the abstract relationships of forms. One person signed up for my workshop thinking it was a traditional watercolor class and in the end she really got a lot out of the process of breaking an image into simple, isolated color shapes. I’ve subsequently recommended to others that they try making collages as a way of improving their compositions.”

**ELIZABETH O’REILLY received her M.F.A. from Brooklyn College, New York, and her B.Ed from the National University of Ireland. She has participated in residencies at the Ballinglen Foundation, Ireland, the Ucross Foundation, Wyoming, and the Ragdale Foundation, Illinois, and has received numerous awards, including a Pollock Krasner Foundation grant. A documentary on her work, *Ealaíontóir Thar Sáile (An Artist Abroad)* was shown on network TV in Ireland.**

M. Stephen Doherty is editor of *PleinAir* magazine.



See more of Elizabeth O’Reilly’s work in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.