

Four Artists Exhibit Foresight at Red Hook's Kentler Gallery

"I pay a lot of attention to craft, to how things look and the quality of the work. If you don't charm people a little bit, if you don't bring them into whatever the work is doing, after you deliver a message, it's not going to get across." — David Konigsburg, Exhibit Artist, 4SIGHT/From Realism to Abstraction, Kentler Gallery, Red Hook



Welcome to artist Margaret Neill's Red Hook

Margaret Neill gets the same reaction from people who visit her Red Hook neighborhood as from those who visit her studio in Gowanus. They're the outsiders yet they think she's weird.

Said Neill, "I know that a lot of people when they first come to Red Hook ask, 'Why would you want to live here? It's the end of the world. It's a dump.'" But the first thing I thought when I came was, 'Oh it's beautiful, filled with so much sky and all this water.'"

Margaret Neill must be one of those weirdos who needs to fill her lungs with clean air before painting. Nature may inspire the biomorphic forms she creates but how many of us get turned on by the sight of something similar to red blood cells? She revealed, "Some people challenge me quite a bit: 'Why do you do what you do. What are you trying to do. We don't know what it is.'"

Neill's way of guiding the perplexed is to organize the exhibit "4SIGHT: From Realism to Abstraction," on display through March 17 at the Kentler International Drawing Space, 353 Van Brunt Street in Red Hook. She hasn't turned out portraits of Louis Pasteur for the show but she has given her abstract designs more life. In addition,



Four artists with foresight: (l-r) Elizabeth O'Reilly, Margaret Neill, David Konigsburg, and Hovey Brock.

tion, Neill has invited three artists to show their paintings, artists who are more or less realistic than she is, more or less abstract. You can see Elizabeth O'Reilly's oil paintings of Red Hook street scenes, David Konigsburg's pastels of men on the march, and Hovey Brock's watercolors of sacred shapes. All the works in the show are on paper, making a small show even more personal.

Meeting Elizabeth O'Reilly On the Streets of Red Hook

Said Neill, "I thought of Elizabeth immediately

because she's so accessible." After inviting O'Reilly to be in the show, Margaret Neill took her for a canoe ride on the Gowanus Canal. O'Reilly had been painting the canal for a few years, but had never canoed it. So, as a preview to the show, an abstract painter helped a realist get closer to her subject.

Elizabeth O'Reilly surprised me with the news that she is not drawn to the ocean vistas of Red Hook as she is to the narrow Gowanus Canal. It is not nature per se she is after so much as the effect of time on human projects, on the geometry of buildings, walls, fences, and streets with which we protect ourselves against inevitable decay. Added O'Reilly, "There is a certain quality to the light because there are so few buildings, so many vacant lots." She creates an intimacy with her subjects no matter what her distance.

Thus she provides enough detail so we can cling emotionally to these objects. At the same time, her thick, vertical and horizontal lines of paint begin to dissolve the



boundaries between objects into striking blocks of color, such as the black, tarpaper house on Reed Street ("Black House, Reed Street") and the gray Revere Sugar Refinery on Beard ("Sun on the Sugar Refinery") which looms over the neighborhood like a spent volcano. When she insisted, "My paintings are not scenic, but they have their own attraction," she sounded like a realist with a guilty conscience.

Waking to David Konigsburg's pastel tales

David Konigsburg's pastels on paper have the same relationship to reality as fairy tales do. He populates sky, clouds, mountains, and plains with black and white men on a mission. They walk ("The March Inland") and fly ("Airship Over Monadnocks") over mountains in what look like dugout canoes. In Konigsburg's kingdom, everyone and everything moves from right to left, against the grain. According to the artist, "they are on a journey, but the next point of their journey is open to interpretation. You don't know which way they will go."

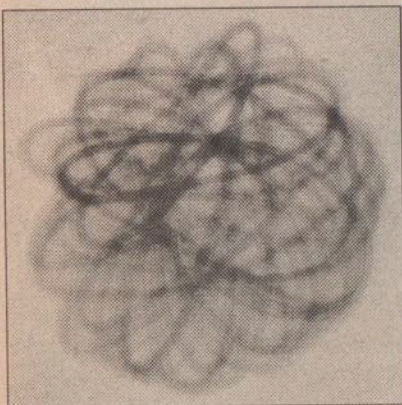
Although his drawings have the simplicity of a child's, their execution is complex. He builds up his images with layers of pastel, in blue, black, brown, and white, until they look like fossils in stone. Thus the contrast between sky and ground ("Hills Above New Lebanon") is softened by undertones, giving his stories mood and depth. Everything has a fuzzy kinship with everything else. Said Konigsburg, "Pastel is a difficult medium to master, but once you get the hang of it, it's easy."

Following the Timeless Lines of Hovey Brock

When I step back from Hovey Brock's two acrylic watercolors, "Derry" and "Isfahan," I see lungs and a brain. His convoluted line drawings could represent tiny air sacs and neurons. Then again they could be religious motifs, mandalas, or mazes for focusing meditation. Or perhaps he has created sophisticated versions of the scribbling we all did as kids. Clearly, he's

taking liberty with reality but in a very disciplined way.

Said Brock, "I like to think there is a universal



way of working with lines across cultures." The inspiration for the two works are respectively the curlicues found in the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages and the abstract designs on a mosque in Iran.

These paintings have a magical, peekaboo quality. The artist stated, "You can't tell where the brush strokes end and the paper begins. You can barely make out the image. Because it isn't centered, the image forces people to see paper and image as counterpoint."

He uses light, bright colors, red, pink, and yellow especially, to draw the viewer into his swirling designs but the brush strokes are meticulous. Said Brock, "I'm experimenting with layering. This technique requires more looking [by the viewer]. You get complexity out of simplicity."

Finding Balance With Margaret Neill's Tempera Paints

Margaret Neill has made some concessions to her critics with the tempera paintings on paper in this exhibit. Her oils from a few years ago were spare, with a few egg-like shapes and a narrow range of color. The sheen of oil paint gave them an archaic feel. The works in this show are more robust, crowded with her characteristic ovals in warm colors. They could be contemporary designs for fabric or microscope slides of amoebae in biological culture media.

Giving her paintings titles for the first time seems symbolic. She explained, "'Curb' is about the feeling of running the tires of your car against the curb. It is also about setting limits." Has she crossed the line from abstraction to realism with one word? Her "Orbs," (the title of another painting) can be mistaken for polished stones against a background of marble. I wonder if Neill uses Feng Shui to achieve the proper balance of objects

storefront for easy access. Renovat-

ed in 1987 by artists as part of New York City's Artist Housing Program, Kentler Gallery is run by artists, including the director Florence Neal.

For more information, try 875-2098, info @ kentlergallery.org, and www.kentlergallery.org. Take the B-61 bus to Red Hook, which stops in front of the gallery between Wolcott and Dikeman Street. By car, take the BQE south to the Atlantic Avenue exit, go left on Columbia Street, right on Degraw, left onto Van Brunt, then continue for 12 blocks. You will find the gallery on the left after the P.S. 15 schoolyard and across the street from the pharmacy sign.



Above: David Konigsburg goes back to the future with this pastel on paper entitled "Airship Over Monadnocks."

Left: This untitled watercolor by Hovey Brock resembles his other meditative paintings in the 4SIGHT show.