



Tammy Pittman, director of Proteus Gowanus, inside gallery/museum. Photos by Nicholas Fevelo

A 'disgusting and beautiful' exhibit

BY ERIN DURKIN

BROOKLYN'S grimeiest waterway may not be everyone's idea of beautiful, but some creative Brooklynites are turning it into a work of art.

A Union St. gallery has opened an exhibition hall dedicated to art and artifacts from the polluted Gowanus Canal.

"For artists, it's a place that is mysterious, neglected [and] semi-empty, and so [there's] the kind of fascination of a place that has been for a long time in decline," said Tamara Pittman, director of Proteus Gowanus, which opened its Hall of the Gowanus — a combination gallery and museum dedicated to the funky waterway — last Sunday.

There are drawings, photographs, maps — even a large jar of canal water and muck Pittman collected from the canal herself.

"Oh my God — it's growing things," she said as she showed it off.

Kevin Allen, 37, of Fort Greene, spent more than a year making sound recordings with an underwater microphone. Visitors listen to the sounds of water splashing, motor boats passing and a distant saxophone player while viewing Allen's 3-D photos of the canal.

"It's really kind of disgusting and beautiful at the same time," Allen said. "One of the benefits of the nastiness of the canal is a lot of the 19th century character has been left."

His work incorporates several of the five senses, but he knows something is missing to capture the full experience. "The one thing I couldn't include . . . was smell," he said. "It's pretty wretched."

There are canvases painted with astronomical symbols in metal dust — then

hung beneath the Union Street Bridge to weather with the canal's rising and falling tides.

"It's disgusting. I wear a Tyvek suit when I do this," said artist David Eustace, 39, of Gowanus, who added he's sure to scrub his canvases clean of gunk before they're displayed.

Gowanus artist Karla Roberts, 47, has a set of black-and-white photographs pairing shots of the Gowanus with the famous canals of Venice, where she lived for seven months.

"It's very tongue in cheek," she said — but then again, they might have more in common than you think. "The Venetian canals aren't really clean, either," Roberts said. "I wouldn't swim in those."

Architectural designer Michael Koehler, 53, sketched fanciful designs for the land around the waterway, with greenways and a baseball diamond.

"This is an area that's definitely going to be evolving and changing into something more," he said. "The idea is for it not to be a wasteland."

There are pressed flowers plucked from the banks of the canal, colorful maps and aerial photos with the gallery's location marked with a bright green pin, a scrolling time line of the canal's history since the 17th century, and a small collection of articles and books about the canal that Proteus hopes to expand with donations from community members.

Pittman said that with the current battle over whether to make the Gowanus a Superfund site, interest in the waterway is surging.

"There's no space dedicated to the Gowanus anywhere," she said. "The neighborhood needed it."



Water — and plenty else — from Gowanus Canal.

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