

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

Pam Rosenblatt

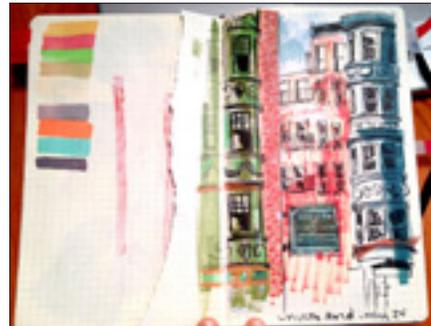
Sarah Gay-O'Neill's artwork: reflecting the fragility of the human experience



On Friday, January 9, 2014, *Wilderness House Literary Review's* arts editor Pam Rosenblatt entered the Nave Gallery Annex, Somerville, Massachusetts, to interview artist Sarah Gay-O'Neill. The walls of the Annex were covered with sketchbook paper filled with designs created by about 20 artists – Sarah Gay-O'Neill's artwork was included. The atmosphere was a creative, energetic one. The opening reception for *The Sketchbook Show* was that day's evening. Soon these drawings would be seen by many people. But right then, at a few minutes after 1 p.m., Gay-O'Neill and Rosenblatt, along with one fellow male artist and one of the two curators, were the only persons in the still quiet gallery.

ARTIST SARAH GAY-O'NEILL lived on the Boston side of the Charles River for about 12 years. Last spring, she moved with her husband to Somerville, which is near Cambridge and on the other side of the Charles River. And she is glad that she relocated.

"I had been living on the Boston side of the river for 11-12 years," Gay-O'Neill said. "Just these last few months, living in Somerville, I've found there's such a nurturing environment for creating [in Somerville] and I am so glad to be on this side of the river!"



Gay-O'Neill enjoys doing a little bit of everything in art. She is a drawer, an illustrator, a painter, and does freelance animation and video work. In November 2014, she won an award for a short film titled "In the Crowd" from the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanic and Boston Art Commission. She was one of 12 winners of "Fenway's 30 Second Cinema" which is one of a number of initiatives by the City of Boston to interest and focus upon the artistic populations of Boston. Her film will be shown starting in late November 2014 on Lansdowne and Ipswich Streets, outside of Fenway Park, where a 14' high x 48' wide digital sign is located.¹ The other 11 winners' films will also be viewed alternately.

She also is a design artist for Jo Malone London and for Chantecaille where she draws and paints artistic patterns on their perfume products. "I've been working with them for a little over a year. It's been a really fun

1 HeySgay.com, p. 1-4, January 14, 2015.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1



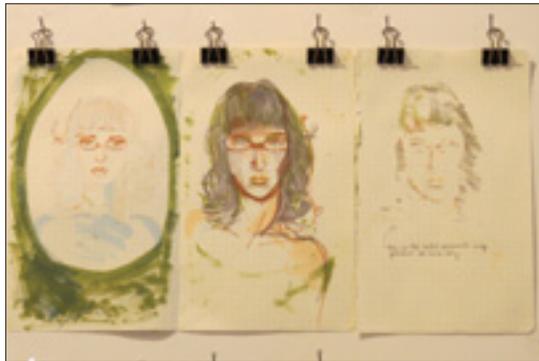
time. I'll sit in a boutique, like Saks Fifth Avenue or Nordstrom, and draw on their products," Gay-O'Neill said.

This experience is "cool" as she gets to see the structured corporate world becoming more sensitized to the non-conformist creative world.

But Gay-O'Neill's real joy is creating her own art, especially her sketchbook art which she has made since childhood. She said, "A lot of my work trend reflects the Now. The present moment."

While she does understand and appreciate mainstream commercialism, she doesn't want her personal art to be commercialized. "I'm not that materialistic a person. Most of my clothes come from thrift stores. Not like that really matters."

To Gay-O'Neill, "My sketchbook is this external part of my inner mind. So I bring it with me most everywhere I go. Most of the time, if I have down time, if I'm on train or at a café, I like to use my sketchbook as a home base to work out something I'm thinking about. If I see something particularly interesting to me, I try to record it and try to figure why it's interesting."



Some sketches she has created were displayed in *The Sketchbook Show* that took place from January 9 -30, 2015. On show were a self-portrait that was in her sketchbook before she removed it and submitted it for *The Sketchbook Show*; a cityscape of some colorful buildings in Boston's North End; two young women sitting at a table in a café; and a man seated in a chair with his back to the viewer.

In each of these sketches, Gay-O'Neill's ability to sketch detailed images within 20 minutes to 45 minutes is apparent. Her use of design markers is finely tuned and effective. The viewer understands that these situations are probably real and accurately depicted by Gay-O'Neill

Gay-O'Neill compares sketchbook drawing to yoga. "Sometimes it's just literally about how people like yoga because they want to be centered and be kind of 'present'. I find when I draw sometimes literally – I just enjoy using the medium (scraping a pencil across the paper or painting) –

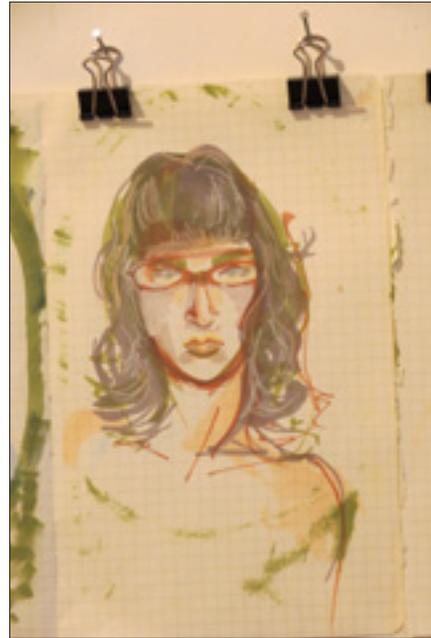
Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

the act of mark making can center me. So it's not always about what I'm recording as much as the physical dragging the material across the page," she said.

She finds her work to be "fairly feminine in that I like to draw women, probably because I am a woman. I like drawing them. It helps me understand who I am more.

But I draw a lot. I've always been attracted to relics. What I mean by that is that there are these things that can outline a person – like their clothes or furniture, buildings. Human life is only so long but these things that we have in our lives don't really have an expiration on them," Gay-O'Neill explained.

She often draws buildings that may last for centuries and outlive us or empty chairs that represent sitting down, taking a minute to figure something out, or holding a conversation with another



person. "I feel like these relics that we interact with on a daily basis absorb some of those moments and interactions. The mere fact that they linger on and we don't, I record them.

I think a lot of my drawings [reflect] the fragility of the human experience."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1



Painting is another passion of Gay-O'Neill. "In the last year, I have been doing these paintings that I call 'Anti-quit-ies' that are mostly these hollow forms of dresses and clothes that are floating in a static space. This is what I was just talking about. The articles are outliving us but they're so important to our daily lives, so I've been doing a lot of paintings about that."

Gay-O'Neill tends to work in a series. The titles of her recent painted artworks are "Anti-quit-ies I," "Anti-quit-ies II," and "Anti-quit-ies III." Their dimensions are approximately 18" x 24" or a little smaller. She usually uses the mediums of oil and mixed media.

Over the past 12 years, Gay-O'Neill has seen changes in her artwork. "When I was in school [at MassArt], I was really interested in making art that would sell. But I have found that making art just to sell is not satisfying. Instead, now, I make what I want to see and if there happens to be a call for art for a show, and if it fits, I'll submit it [to that show]. Most of the time, my art is for me and I try not to make it with the goal of pleasing others, ie: to sell.

With that said, I am also a freelance designer and I certainly do work for other people with the aim to please. However

most of the time, the artwork that

I am exhibiting in galleries is made mostly because I want to see it, and if someone else sees it and can relate...that's awesome."



Sarah Gay-O'Neill graduated from MassArt and teaches animation and digital arts at MassArt and Harvard University.