

## Watercolors With a Dose of Whimsy

By [MAUREEN MULLARKEY](#) | November 15, 2007

<http://www.nysun.com/arts/watercolors-with-a-dose-of-whimsy/66523/>

"Thank heaven for art that has nothing to prove!" the poetry editor of the New Yorker for many years and a poet herself, Louise Bogan, once said. I cannot look at Elizabeth O'Reilly's lyrical celebrations of unexceptional sites without thinking of Ms. Bogan, who understood that art can fulfill its purposes on the aesthetic plane alone.

Ms. O'Reilly's current exhibition at George Billis Gallery displays a generous selection of those freely brushed plein air landscapes for which she is known. But there is a delicious surprise in this show. Her paintings — scenes of Vermont, Maine, and Long Island's North Fork — are accompanied for the first time by watercolor collages of Brooklyn that lend a distinctive modernity and sophisticated whimsy to her motifs.

Among the paintings, "Cushing Bridge" is particularly deft and lovely. The rigid structures of a rural trestle bridge cut into view on a diagonal. Shimmering reflections of the green-painted steel beams flow rhythmically downward across the surface of a narrow river. Descending movement links the bridge to the foreground of the picture plane while, at the same time, it conveys the reality of a moving current. That sense of fluid motion acts dynamically on both the abstract and representational levels.

"Double Road, North Carolina" makes similar pictorial use of shadows across a road. The shadows quaver out of fidelity to the irregularities of the trees that cast them, and in response to dips in the road. The effect, again, is of movement. That and lively, exaggerated color lend savor to an ordinary country road. Ms. O'Reilly's bravura is evident in the point from which she chose to view it — just where a turnoff from the main road heads off to the right. Separation of the diverging planes is handled so simply and convincingly that you do not notice the difficulty of it.

Unafraid to experiment, Ms. O'Reilly has taken up watercolor again after having abandoned it some years ago. The results are captivating. Despite its popularity as a plein air medium, watercolor is obstreperous. Fluidity impedes efforts to control color, degree of saturation, and placement on the page all at once. Ms. O'Reilly shortcircuited these obstacles by taking a technical hint from the small collages of Alex Katz.

She separates color and shape into two distinct processes. Once her wash achieves the desired tone, she cuts into it, drawing with an X-ACTO knife. This substitutes crisp, decisive edges for the painterly gradations of a brushstroke. Subtle angularities displace curves, carving unexpected character into loose forms accustomed to the wandering caress of a brush.

"From 3rd Street, Night," "Carroll Street Bridge," and "Dusk" are magical images. Shaped by a knife, clouds and points of light — often indefinite — take on irrevocable contours. And all have that sense of play inherent in cutouts.

\* \* \*

Alexandra Athanassiades was born in Athens, Greece, where she still lives, works, and exhibits. "Horses & Armour," her second solo appearance at Kouros Gallery, is the follow-up to an exhibition earlier this year that was sponsored by the European Cultural Centre of Delphi.

Two very distinct bodies of work are included here. One is derived from the ancient Greek lorica musculata or muscle cuirass, one of the earliest forms of body armor. Dating back even to the Etruscans, it was typically worn by Greek infantry in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. E.

The other is a series of horse forms made from the twisted forms of tree limbs. Both series are characterized by Ms. Athanassiades's Greek roots; both are open to interpretations that transcend their Greek character.

Her bronze and iron cuirasses are particularly powerful. All repeat the finely articulated musculature of their ancient models. Greek cuirasses — like the later, more embellished Roman ones — provided a sensitive rendering of the male physique. Made to fit the human torso, the cuirass reproduced the anatomy of the male chest and upper abdomen, often in meticulous detail.

Ms. Athanassiades seizes the essential lineaments, omits minutiae, and distresses the surfaces. Her adaptations draw strength from exquisite manipulation of the texture and torn edges of the given form. Cuirasses split at the sides, as if from age or violence. In one, thin layers of steel peel back in delicate evocations of skin, torn flesh, or simply the natural history of decay. In another, the form seems to burst open from within, heightening intimations of violence. Each breastplate bears wounds, either of time or of the cruelties of history. However you understand them, the elegiac and funerary implications are unmistakable.

The horses are different in tone and handling. Ms. Athanassiades constructs them of random materials, combining found pieces of natural wood with delicate ribbons of steel to emphasize equine anatomy. These are not so much sculptures as assemblages enhanced by surface manipulation. Her individual horse's heads are wonderfully convincing, all mass and charged movement. "Horse LXXII" (2007) twists upward from a charred neck with persuasive animal vitality.

Less successful are the three-dimensional contour sketches, so to speak, of horses whose hollow outlines are strung together from found pieces of tree limbs. Only "Horse LX" (2005), affixed to metal fittings and with wheels like a carriage frame, has life to it. A witty arrangement, it suggests a four-wheeled cockhorse or a nursery variant of the mother of all hobbyhorses, the Trojan one.

Others are formless and piecemeal, lacking the aesthetic justification of the energetic and richly expressive heads. Taken together with the drawings on view — two surprisingly vague studies of the Parthenon frieze — they suggest that Ms. Athanassiades's gift for exploiting already existing forms is greater than her capacity to shape new ones. But that is nothing against the beauty she wrings from her materials.

*"Elizabeth O'Reilly: Painting & Collages" at George Billis Gallery until December 8 (511 W. 25th St., 212-645-2621); "Alexandra Athanassiades: Horses & Armour" at Kouros Gallery until November 24 (23 E. 73rd St., 212-288-5888).*