



brooklyn

Your Key to the Borough
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Pamela Talese Captures
Industrial Relics
From Another Era

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Before They're Gone

Pamela Talese Captures Industrial Relics From Another Era

For Pamela Talese, painting the corroding landscapes of Brooklyn's industrial waterfront is a race to capture what's left before it's gone. As the daughter of author and journalist Gay Talese and editor Nan Talese, she was always drawn to arts, but came late to painting, 'avoiding' it for years before committing herself full-time.

As her show *Rust Never Sleeps: Corrosion and Renewal in Maritime/Industrial New York* runs this month in Chelsea, Talese shares with the *Eagle* how being considered a 'terrorist' drove her to take up a Navy Yard studio, and how we should consider what is at risk as the wrecking ball continues to swing.

When did you start painting?

Late, when I was 22. In college I took a double major in literature and studio art, but did printmaking, and my plan was to become a graphic designer — or something with a salary.

I worked during college summers in the design departments of various magazines, then moved to Paris where I worked freelance for *American Vogue*, the *Herald Tribune* and other publications.

After two years I returned to New York and went to The Art Student's League, when I realized that I had been avoiding painting all of my life. But New York is expensive, so I'd paint for a while, then get a job.

What media do you work in?

Oil on linen or oil on panel. I sometimes grind my own pigments. I'm 'old school.'

How have your parents influenced your art?

My parents are literary, not visual, so they didn't influence my interest in paintings, as we had none. My parents worked very, very hard which was important to see. They also valued things well-made and well-written, so I've never been swept away by trends. I thank them for their standards in this regard.

Did they encourage you in a particular direction?

They encouraged me to work hard at whatever I did and to not be concerned with prizes. Regarding my interest in art, which was always there, my mother was always encouraging, but my father wanted me to become a journalist more than anything.

Looking back, I realize that I do paint 'non-fiction' and that my process of immersion into the subject matter is very much like what my father does when he writes, so that's a big influence.

Like all parents, they both worried about how I would support myself. I ultimately became an interior designer in high-end New York firms for about eight years.

I drew and did what I could on weekends and had a small landscape/still life show in 1997 by which time — living in Queens and socializing in Brooklyn — I was bitten by the industrial-landscape bug and the idea for *718: Changing Neighborhoods in Brooklyn & Queens* (2003) began to



Photo by John Bartelstone

fester.

Living on the east side of the East River, I began to see things change with increasing speed. Interesting old buildings came down, new boring ones went up. This made leaving my job to paint even more urgent. I'd been squirreling away money for a few years, so could make the leap in 2000.

For how long have you kept a studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and why did you choose the location?

When I began painting on site in New York City in 2000, I worked throughout Brooklyn and Queens, traveling by bicycle, and could set up anywhere I pleased. But after 9/11 I suddenly became 'a terrorist.'

I understood that my predilection for gas tanks and bridges made me the object of suspicion, but I paint so slowly that there was really no stealth involved.

Nevertheless, one policeman suggested that I might be sending my sketches to Al Qaeda. I told him that I wasn't really "that good" and that photographs would be more helpful, but he still told me to "leave the premises." This became annoying but I was able to do enough work for *718*.

After that show, my next big idea was to do paintings about the changing waterfront. I set out to document structures from Astoria Park to Red Hook. I rode by bike up and down the waterfront, with my painting equipment bungeed together, drawing and sketching as I was able. But in 2003 New York seemed to still be on "orange alert" and I became discouraged at being asked to move on so often.

During this period I passed the Brooklyn Navy Yard often. It's a fascinating place, and my logic was that if I were a 'known quantity' within, chances of my being seen as a terrorist (I'm not kidding about this) would decrease. The Yard is rich in motifs and in history, which made it even more compelling to an urban history geek like myself. My last three exhibitions, *A Short Season in the Navy Yard* (2005), *Working Waterfront* (2007) and the current show *Rust Never Sleeps: Corrosion and Renewal in Maritime/Industrial New York*, focus on the Yard.

When were you first drawn to "rust"? What is the "renewal" part of your current show?

When painting industrial sites, rust is part of the pallet, and there's no avoiding it. But it doesn't have to mean the end of whatever object it is consuming, and my point in this show was to document those structures that were in disrepair, but to also celebrate those people who work toward maintaining what is left of New York City's industries.

We've let a lot go. This is a national trend, but from a cargo perspective the Harbor of New York is still the third largest port in the U.S. We do still have a maritime trade that links us back to the very beginning of this country's economic success.

Also, [in 2003] development was beginning at such a pace that I realized that this project was going to be a total heartbreak, even more than *718*, because the wrecking ball was moving faster than I was.

Now, with our nation's waning economy, I would like people to consider what is at risk when communities prefer luxury housing over industry. We used to make and export things. We don't now. This has been my rant since *718*. Ever on the soapbox, I always include text next to my paintings to give the history of the site I've painted, or to gripe a little.

How does Brooklyn influence your work?

I see new sites every day in Brooklyn. Brooklyn was a separate city, so the buildings, both public and private, are amazing. There are exceptions, of course... like the Metrotech area, which reminds me of Atlanta, GA.

Which neighborhood is home for you?

I was an [Upper] East Side child when New York was bankrupt so my street looked rougher and more beat up than it does today. But if someone followed you home from school (this was common) you'd just dart into a candy store, a head-shop, whatever. Every kid knew what to do in the 70s.

I lived in Hunter's Point LIC, Queens for 14 years. I now live in lower Manhattan but work in Brooklyn, which is a magic borough.

I'm at home in any neighborhood where you can walk down the street and relate to the people and see some of our

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history in old buildings. Curiously, I feel awkward on the UES, the place of my birth. It's just too shiny.

What are your plans post *Rust Never Sleeps*?

I have about three new ideas but I am rather tightlipped about any new project until I have a substantial amount of work done. What I can say [is that] I will continue working in the Navy Yard because I've fallen in love with it.

People often ask me, somewhat hesitantly 'So, are you going to keep painting boats?' but how can I not?

I feel like Robert Caro (author of the extraordinary Robert Moses biography *The Power Broker*) who keeps adding new volumes to his Lyndon Johnson biography. When you are enthralled with your subject matter you find so much to say about it. Whether others will be interested in my vision is an open question.

Rust Never Sleeps: Corrosion and Renewal in Maritime/Industrial New York runs through October 30 at Atlantic Gallery, 135 West 29th St. Suite 601. www.atlanticgallery.org

— By Caitlin McNamara



Details from Talese's *The Valcogen Bow*, left, and *The Heron Tug*.

Cover: Pamela Talese paints *Orton Blue Crane*, 1935
Photo by John Bartelstone

"The other night I felt a burning, squeezing feeling in my chest. I thought it was heartburn. But it got worse. I started sweating and my chest felt heavy. My husband convinced me to go to LICH's Emergency Room. Thank goodness. Turned out I had a blocked artery. **I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW I HAD A HEART PROBLEM!** But thanks to LICH'S excellent "DOOR TO DOCTOR" time in the ER, I saw a physician really quickly. And when it turned out I needed an emergency angioplasty, I learned another great phrase: "DOOR TO BALLOON" time. The LICH cardiologist used a "balloon" to open my blocked artery in record time — *much faster* than the state average.

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