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Along the Gowanus, a Cultural Workshop Thrives

By ANDY NEWMAN

The former headquarters of the National Packing Box Factory on the banks of the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn have not pumped out a packing box in decades.

But since 2005, the sturdy brick building has housed a workshop of a different sort: Proteus Gowanus, an ever-changing cultural organism that describes itself, inadequately, as an “interdisciplinary gallery and reading room.”

Proteus Gowanus contains many worlds, including a gallery currently displaying a semifantastical, semifactual show about insects; an appliance-repair collective; a writing-under-constraints club called the Writhing Society; and the Reanimation Library, bulging with out-of-print and mysteriously illustrated technical manuals (more about that momentarily).

Since January, the building has also been home to a museum devoted to the canal itself: the Hall of the Gowanus, a small but lovingly curated homage to the despoiled mile-long body of water that exerts a strange pull on all who come within its orbit.

The museum contains an exhaustive timeline of the canal’s history, artifacts dug from the area, canvases soaked and tinted in the canal’s muck, and all manner of photographic and graphical representations of the canal and its environs.

The star object, arguably, is a large glass jar containing about half a gallon of actual Gowanus water and, settled at the bottom, several inches of the canal’s black muck. The jar is sealed, allowing visitors to get as close as they want without fear of olfactory offense.

“We wanted to have a specimen for the hall,” Tammy Pittman, the museum’s co-director, said one recent Sunday. “So we duct-taped a garden trowel to a broomstick and went down to the dock at low tide.” Frozen in the muck are several small shrimplike creatures. They died soon after the jar was capped, Ms. Pittman said. “It was either that or stink up the place.”

With interest in the state of the canal at a high-water mark after its designation this month as a Superfund site, the museum is presenting an event called Sewarama on Sunday afternoon. It will feature a reading by Elizabeth Gaffney from her public-works-obsessed historical novel, “Metropolis,” and a guest appearance by the Center for Urban Pedagogy’s

“Sewer in a Suitcase,” which will explain the ancient design of the city’s combined sewer system and how it channels street runoff and untreated sewage into the canal after heavy rains. “We always have a huge historical component to what we do,” Ms. Pittman said.

In the room adjoining the Gowanus hall that contains the Reanimation Library, meanwhile, history is paramount and perhaps best summed up by the photographer Garry Winogrand’s credo, “There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described.”

On shelves covered with plain-looking, monochrome-spined books, titles like “TV Sweep Alignment Techniques,” “Dental Radiology” and “A Fruit Is Born” vie for space with more speculative but still ostensibly nonfiction works like “The Shocking Truth About Water: The Universal Fluid of Death.”

The point of the books, however, is not the titles or the subject matter but the images contained within.

“Mind in the Waters,” a study of whale and dolphin consciousness, is illustrated by drawings, one depicting a man sitting on a whale’s back watching three younger naked men stand up and dive off the whale’s head.

The library, which has about 800 volumes and is equipped with scanners and a copying machine, bills itself as a resource for “artists, writers and other cultural archaeologists.” Its curator, Andrew Beccone, a librarian and visual artist, dreamed it up one day while working at the Minnesota State Legislature’s reference library.

“I thought I’d build a collection more geared toward my aesthetic interests,” he said.

Mr. Beccone showed off a 1977 report prepared for a Congressional committee on the possibility of life on other planets. It contained, after a hundred tiny-type pages of charts and formulas, a profusely illustrated appendix titled, “Exotic Bestiary for Vicarious Space Voyages,” including the hexalope, a six-legged herbivore that “evolved on a planet with a very dry climate and gravity similar to Earth’s.”

“This is being delivered to the United States Congress,” Mr. Beccone marveled. “This is someone’s ‘Dungeons & Dragons’ bong-hit afternoon.”

Sometimes, the interests of Proteus Gowanus’s various inhabitants converge, as in an 1851 clipping from The Brooklyn Daily Eagle in a binder in the Gowanus Hall.

“The Merman who was captured in Gowanus Bay last summer and found to be a man who lived on the beach and had become a fish by being continually in and about the water,” it announces, “has now nearly returned to his pristine form.”

It continues:

He made an attempt to escape back to his adopted element one day last week, and would have been successful, but, meeting with some isolated floating timber, his avarice got the better of his aquatic propensities, and he returned with it to shore. His head still bears a strong resemblance to that of a cod fish, and when he smokes a segar, (which he was seen to do not long since,) the smoke, instead of issuing from his mouth, oozes out behind his gills.

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