



FROM THE NEW YORK CITY PARKS SERIES, REILLY FOUND THIS IMAGE ON A SNOWY DAY AT THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDENS, BRONX, NY. —GRAPHITE PENCIL ON PAPER



CHERRY BLOSSOMS, FOUND ON STOWE'S RECREATION PATH. —GRAPHITE PENCIL ON PAPER

SHADES OF GRAYS

Stowe artist explores nature with graphite

At first glance, it's hard to discern if Mary Reilly's drawings are black and white photographs. It's difficult to imagine she could create such exquisite detail with any medium other than a camera. But she can, using graphite pencils.

STORY: kate carter



KATE CARTER

She calls it “drawing with tone,” and her technique is both additive and reductive. She adds graphite for darkness and then removes it with soft, molded erasers and eraser stubs to attain lighter shades.

“It’s a hyper-realistic approach to drawing, where you can’t see the pencil strokes. It’s a mystery to anyone not familiar with the process,” Reilly said.

To achieve this hyper-realistic effect, she uses Toison d’Or pencils, which are professional-grade, high-quality graphite pencils, known for their smooth, consistent, and break-resistant lead. They are ideal for fine art, sketching, and technical drawing. Her toolbox also includes Tombow pencils, a favorite among artists for their extra-refined, high-density graphite that resists

breakage, a variety of erasers in different sizes and density, and a chamois cloth.

Reilly begins the process of “drawing with tone,” a moniker she conceived to describe her technique, on a durable sheet of white paper with a smooth finish, not at all toothy. The first step is to create a middle tonal value covering the entire sheet, smoothing it out with a chamois cloth to make it velvety and consistent.

“It could take a week to create the tonal layer,” Reilly said. “It’s labor intensive. I apply the graphite and rub it with the chamois until it’s a flawless halftone. The neater the toning process, the better it sets me up for the rest of the piece.”

Once she has achieved this base, Reilly uses photographs, usually landscapes or seascapes, never human action, to create her drawings. >>



REILLY WAS DRAWN TO THE WILD ROCKY EXPANSE FOUND ALONG STOWE'S RECREATION TRAIL. —GRAPHITE PENCIL ON PAPER



FROM REILLY'S NEW YORK CITY SERIES, WHICH ENCOMPASSED THE WOODED AREAS OF THE PARKS WITHIN ALL FIVE OF THE CITY'S BOROUGH. CLOVE LAKE IS ONE OF THE LAKES WITHIN CLOVE LAKES PARK IN STATEN ISLAND. —GRAPHITE PENCIL ON PAPER



BARE TREES AGAINST AN OMINOUS SKY HAS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF MANY OF REILLY'S DRAWINGS FOR THE SIMPLICITY IN COMPOSITION. SHE SAW THIS SCENE WHILE WALKING ON ROBINSON SPRINGS ROAD IN STOWE, LOOKING TOWARD WATERBURY. —GRAPHITE PENCIL ON PAPER

"I studied with Frederick Brosen, a watercolor artist whose work is shown at the Forum Gallery in New York City. He helped me to find the subject and hone in on what to draw and make it personal to me. I choose nature, not at a passing glance, but glorifying it."

Eventually Reilly puts the photograph away so she "doesn't become a slave to it" and begins the process of adding darker layers with the graphite pencils and then using eraser-blending stumps to remove graphite and achieve lighter layers. This process allows Reilly to

explore the full range achievable in a gray-scale palette.

Reilly grew up in Yorktown Heights, New York, and after high school moved to New York City, where she worked as a graphic artist for Speed Graphics, doing mock-ups for agencies on Madison Avenue. She eventually started to paint portraits of children. It wasn't until she took classes from Sharon Sprung at the National Academy of Design that she began to focus on drawing with graphite. (Sprung painted the White House portrait of Michelle Obama.) >>

I CHOOSE NATURE,
NOT AT A PASSING GLANCE,
BUT GLORIFYING IT.



CHERRY BLOSSOMS FOUND ALONG THE RECREATION PATH IN STOWE NEAR CHASE PARK. —GRAPHITE PENCIL ON PAPER

LABOR INTENSIVE Reilly works on a current piece that will take approximately three years to finish.

"Nobody else that I am aware of is using the same technique," Reilly said. "I've never heard of anyone who does it. I gave it the 'drawing with tone' name and Sprung approved."

While living in New York City, Reilly embarked on an all-consuming project of drawing the nature found in Manhattan's Central Park and New York City's four other boroughs. It's her way of paying tribute to the 30,000 acres of New York City's municipal parks and 14 miles of public beaches. She compiled a body of work that includes rivers, streams, creeks, marshes, lakes, ponds, and beaches.

In 2021, that work came together in a book, "Taller Than Trees," published by Studio 96

Publishing. The coffee-table book includes approximately 50 black-and-white drawings.

Along the way, she became enthralled by the graffiti etched into trees in Alley Pond Park in Queens,

which has one of the most ancient forests in New York City. Thus, began her "Graffiti Trees" series, included in the book.

"My mother was a painter. I might have gotten the painting gene from her, but really, it's innate. I used to draw trees when I was 7 or 8 and I'm still drawing them," said Reilly, who has been drawing for over 25 years.

In 2015 Reilly, her husband, and two daughters moved to Vermont. "We wanted a better lifestyle for the girls and they love to snowboard. We came to Stowe often for a more outdoorsy experience and decided to move here," she said. Now Reilly's subjects are found in Stowe's woodlands, streams, and wildlife. >>

I'VE BECOME A FOREST BATHER HERE IN VERMONT



KATE CARTER



IN THE WOODED AREA OF ALLEY POND PARK, QUEENS, THERE ARE ACRES OF MARKED BEECH TREES WITH MARKINGS THAT DATE BACK TO THE 1930S. THIS DRAWING IS PART OF REILLY'S "GRAFFITI TREE" SERIES FROM THE PARK. —GRAPHITE PENCIL ON PAPER

But she hasn't left New York City behind. She's currently working on a 24-inch by 24-inch drawing of a scene she photographed in Thain Family Forest, a 50-acre swath of old-growth forest along the Bronx River in the New York Botanical Garden, formerly known as the Native Forest. "I really miss the energy of the city, but I've become a forest bather here in Vermont," Reilly said.

Reilly is represented by Garvey|Simon, a New York City-based private dealer, where her work ranges from \$2,400 to \$14,000, depending on the size. "For most artists it usually takes two to three years to build a body of work, but I'm more like three years because of how long the process takes," Reilly said.

If you're interested in learning Reilly's "drawing with tone" method, you're in luck. She teaches a class at River Arts in Morrisville and at Burlington City Arts. ■

See her work at maryreillyart.com.