

Art Review: Trestle Time Machine

By Annette Monnier
Published: November 14, 2013



Legends across cultures speak of works of art that become real. A Chinese folk tale tells of Ma Liang, a boy with a magic ink brush whose drawings come off the page to help the poor; in Japan, a young seminary student's obsessive doodles of cats come to life to defend him. Greek mythology has Pygmalion, a sculptor who falls in love with his masterwork, Galatea, and with divine help turns the marble figure into a real woman. Today, self-help books like *The Secret*, which stress "visualization" of goals, draw on the same deep-rooted idea: That imagination can affect reality.

Sarah McEneaney's current exhibition at Locks Gallery, "Trestletown," could be seen as an exercise in trying to think an idea into existence. Of her 14 paintings, the six or so that deal with the abandoned Reading Viaduct — both as it is now and how it could look if the much-discussed plans to turn it into a public green space a la New York's High Line come to fruition — are the most memorable.



McEneaney has been working with neighborhood groups for a decade to turn these legs of elevated train tracks, stretching from Vine and 12th, to Eighth and Fairmount, to Broad and Noble, into the Reading Viaduct Rail Park. She's lived and worked in the neighborhood (alternately known as Trestletown, Callowhill, North Chinatown, Spring Garden and the Eraserhood) for 34 years — taking the train that ran on the viaduct until it closed in 1984, walking along the rails afterward, watching as nature slowly reclaimed the elevated strip. Now with the nonprofit group Friends of the Rail Park, McEneaney's vision is slowly converging with real life, with the group declaring a tentative groundbreaking for the project sometime next year.

If realized, the Rail Park will be open to all, but McEneaney's artistic visions are mostly solitary. She is often the lone human in her work, though usually accompanied by her dog, Trixie, if outdoors and her cats, Angel and Cole, if indoors. As the neighborhood she paints is largely post-industrial, McEneaney's solitary wanderings can seem a little post-apocalyptic. There is even some temporal displacement: In Carlton and Wood, McEneaney and Trixie are depicted twice in the same landscape, just at different places on the timeline.

The paintings in "Trestletown" are evenly divided between representations of the artist in her studio and depictions of walking the neighborhood with past, present and future trestles, with a baseball game thrown in for good measure. The overall feeling is of a sort of happy loneliness, a person in her own head space who lives a structured working life — painting, walks and community engagement.

By all rights, none of this should be very interesting. It is therefore surprising that paintings like Animal Thirst, in which McEneaney is shown drinking a glass of water as her two cats look on, are quietly enthralling. Equally arresting is the glimpse into her work space in Studio 2013, where the artist is shown standing with Angel and Trixie, surrounded by many of the paintings on view in "Trestletown." This *mise en abyme* effect causes an almost dreamlike displacement in the viewer. McEneaney's work is narrative, but the story is definitely nonlinear: Standing in a gallery, looking at a painting of a painting in that gallery as it is being painted, creates a mental time machine of sorts.

In the stories, Ma Liang utilizes his magic brush to do good deeds and outwit the evil rich man who imprisons him, the young man is rescued from a rat demon by his cat doodles, and Pygmalion marries Galatea. In real-life Philadelphia, though, McEneaney's vision of Trestletown looks like it will cross the line into reality sooner rather than later.

Through Nov. 23, Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South, 215-629-1000, locksgallery.com.