



NEIGHBORHOODS

Life of Riley

by SILKE TUDOR

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**Duke Riley in Greenpoint**

PHOTO: TOD SEELIE

According to **Duke Riley**, “Crappy weather just makes things interesting.” An intense, brusque 33-year-old with a rough-hewn Boston accent and workingman’s gait, Riley has

a fierce proclivity for margins, whether that means marginal characters, landscapes, societies, vocations, or weather, and he is considered something of a madman.

In the summer of 2004, during the heightened security of the Republican National Convention, Riley drank a gut-full of rum and rowed out to Belmont Island, a pile of scrub situated across from the United Nations, where he climbed Tower 17 and unfurled a 21-foot-long red flag depicting two electric eels. As daybreak approached, he proclaimed Belmont Island a sovereign nation and began a laborious retreat back to the Long Island City ferry terminal. Just after dawn, a Coast Guard boat equipped with machine guns apprehended Riley's craft. The entire operation was caught on video and scored with Wagner, for a piece Riley calls *Belmont Island (SMEACC)*.

"I was pretty trashed," admits Riley with a smile. "SMEACC is military debriefing acronym for Situation, Mission, Execution, Administration, and Command Control. Amazingly enough, they didn't arrest me."

The life of Riley is awash in such good luck. During his frequent explorations of the forgotten islands of New York, he has been detained and questioned by the Coast Guard and harbor patrol dozens of times but arrested only once, he says. And his recreational swims in the East River have yet to produce any lasting side effects.

"You know [the East River] is not even a river," says Riley with a dismissive shrug. "It's a tidal strait. There's fresh water moving in and out of there all the time."

Duke Riley became fascinated by the culture and topography of waterfronts while he was still a child, following his uncle to the docks where they bought wholesale fish. That early urban-aquatic absorption has informed Riley's life and work ever since, from his vocation as the owner and operator of Cherry Bomb, soon to be known as Mossbunker Tattoo, in Greenpoint; to his creation of a tremendous body of artwork that incorporates nautical history and seafarer's handicraft; to his hosting of legendary parties that involve

fresh-dug clams and fragrant maritime waste, which provides an authentic “low-tide” ambience at secret locations along the Brooklyn shoreline.

In January, Magnan Projects presented a one-man show centered on Riley’s documentary exhibit about Mill Rock Island, which sits in the East River off 96th Street. Through video and artifacts such as bottles, munitions, maps, and authentic military uniforms interspersed with Riley’s own wonderfully harrowing nautical-inspired work—drawings, scrimshaw, mosaics, wood cuts, and a colossal tongue-and-groove waterway map—the show created its own myth about an autonomous community residing on Mill Rock Island. When the exhibition was moved to the Pulse Armory in March nearly everything sold, including a colossal 6-by-12-foot tattoo-style illustration of life on Mill Rock Island, which was purchased by a major New York museum. Soon after, Magnan Projects founder **Alberto Magnan** took Riley to Cuba on a humanitarian mission, during which Riley explored the Almendares River near Havana.

“I’ve always been interested in the space where water meets land in the urban landscape,” explains Riley. “Traditionally, those places have been associated with crime, disease, and sin. It was where the [housing] projects were built; where the sailors drank, fought, and gambled; where the cheapest whores plied their trade. Tattoos wouldn’t exist in the U.S. if it weren’t for the waterfronts; they were born on the waterfront, in the periphery of society. But the peripheries are changing quickly.”

Sandwiched between LaGuardia Airport and College Point in Queens, Flushing Bay is just a skipping stone from a U.S. Postal Service processing center, several bottling plants, and the *New York Times* printing plant. It’s perfect. Riley slows his truck to a crawl as he searches the waterfront for access. Finally, he pulls over and we unload his handmade plywood canoe. After a couple aborted attempts—one because of a fence, the other because we get caught—we put in at a sleeping yacht club just as the sun begins to break through the clouds.

“It only leaks a little,” says Riley with a grin as water sloshes around our knees. We dip our paddles into the cold gray water and set out.

Riley began making his own boats after visiting the island of Bequia (just south of St. Vincent, in the Grenadines), which he says is one of the only places in the world where indigenous people still hunt whales with hand-thrown harpoons, from handmade sailboats. After being invited to participate in Bequia’s annual regatta, he began making boats at home, a venture which led him to fellow boat builder, frequent partner in crime, full-time girlfriend, and fellow Rhode Island School of Design alum **Marie Lorenz**.

“We have a lot of common interests,” says Riley. “We hold the Nautical Waste parties at her place every year, and during my Clam Bake [held at the now burned- out abandoned twine factory in Greenpoint] she helped row over nearly 100 guests. We had to leave early because she cracked her face open, but it was a good night.”

We paddle toward a watery graveyard of half-submerged boats on Flushing Bay: old yachts such as the *Oceanic* and the *Bandersnatch*, with their flooded cabins peering out of the steely water like frog eyes; workboats with rusted winches and tools left forgotten on their corroded decks; a palatial houseboat with moldering turrets, walkways, and a monumental spiral staircase but no pier to connect it to land; and a sunken barge with a tremendous rusted crane on which a sign reads, “For Sale Call Dick.”

We beach the canoe on the mostly sunken deck of the barge and scavenge rope to tie it off. We pry open doors, try out the crane seat, and praise our luck, then paddle out to the boathouse, where we find a pile of bad cassette tapes from Windham Hill, a half-dozen huge piles of feces, and a ghostly softball among the rubble. Watching a fish swim through an old-fashioned ship’s wheel appeals to Riley’s piratical sense of humor. He begins to spin tales of New York’s waterways, which, like his art, are a mingling of adventure (like the time he was caught by special ops scoping out the site of the *General Slocum* wreck on North Brother Island), maritime history (a now buried island that became a den of debauchery when the residents realized they could offer tax-free booze

and cigarettes outside New York City limits), trivia (the much derided pigeon once dwelled in sea cliffs; pigeons have inspired much art in the course of Riley's life as well as three tattoos on his body), reminiscence (his onetime business partner **T-Bone** jumped into shark-infested waters while wearing a pork chop girdle to challenge his fear of the beasts), and imaginative hypotheses (the possibility of mermaids).

By the time we emerge from the water in the backyard of a bottling plant, sodden, covered in silt and rust, and vaguely reeking, I am quite sure our exploration has become a small part of a nautical *gesamtkunstwerk*. It's little surprise to me when we return to Riley's art studio cum laboratory cum junkyard at Pratt to find a recent museum acquisition crumpled in a heap on the floor—"You know," says Riley, "the older it looks, the better it is"—alongside the remains of a dolphin and a dog (found on Lawrence's Island and Brother Island, respectively).

"It's the beginning of an East River mermaid," explains Riley, dragging a dirty hand across his forehead.

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