

The Beauty of New York City in Black and White

by Naomi Ekperigin

Mary Reilly: Capturing the Transience of Nature

New York-based artist Mary Reilly also combines a love of the city with her commitment to a realistic style. Like Mitri, her emotions guide her toward her subject matter, and she seeks to share this with the viewer in her graphite drawings. However, unlike Mitri, Reilly focuses on the areas of New York City that are often forgotten or ignored by visitors and natives alike: the serene parks and gardens outside of the city center, where one can enjoy solitude, quiet walks, and uninterrupted observation.

Reilly was raised in Westchester County, adjacent to the Bronx, and has lived in New York City since graduating from high school. She worked as a graphic designer for many years before making the decision to focus on her career as a fine artist. She's studied at many of the city's best art schools, but it was not until she began her work at the National Academy that she found her current preferred technique and subject matter. "Three years after having my first child, I began taking classes at the National Academy," Reilly recalls. "Sharon Sprung's life-drawing class was a turning point for me. We worked in charcoal, but I quickly

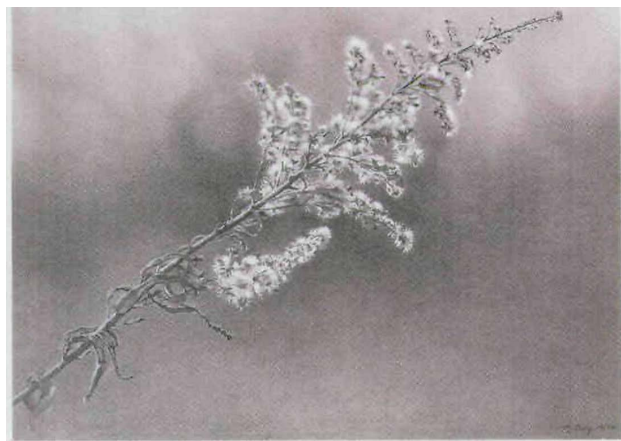
abandoned it for my favorite medium: graphite." Reilly adopted her instructor's technique of toning her paper with layers of graphite before starting her drawing, taking the surface to a middle tone that she can then subtly manipulate with pencils, erasers, and other drawing tools.

As she honed this technique, Reilly experimented with various subject matter. "In the beginning I drew architectural spaces, using my own photographs as a guide," she remembers. "I was thrilled with the process and the results of this technique, but I knew that I needed to find a subject matter that was personal for me, so I used my love of nature as inspiration." During this process of discovery, Reilly began taking a watercolor class taught by Rick Brosen. Ironically, it was in studying another medium that she found a welcoming environment in which to explore her vision and take greater risks. "For several years I worked independently in the classroom, using graphite," the artist says. "It was a supportive environment where I could really focus on developing my personal style."

Her first forays into drawing nature scenes began about seven years ago and were based on areas of Prince Edward Island, located off the eastern coast of Canada. In these instances, she was moved by photographs of the area and felt compelled to draw from them. Reilly had found exactly what she had been seeking—a truly clear vision—and she was thrilled. "Carving out the gentle details of nature with the quiet, silvery patina and sensual feel of graphite became the perfect outlet for me," the artist says contentedly. After this experience, she purposely set out to develop a new body of work that explored this vision.

Like Mitri, Reilly was moved by an emotional response to her subject and began furthering her interest by seeking areas that could provide the same excitement and beauty of the island photographs. She found it while walking around the north woods of Central Park, in Manhattan. "You forget you're in the city when you're in those woods," the artist says. "I was completely transported to the place I saw on Prince Edward Island, and I found myself totally immersed in the serenity of the natural side of New York City." The development of this style and clear vision can be seen in the drawings *North Woods I* and *North Woods II*.

The positive experience in Central Park prompted Reilly to research parks and wooded areas in the other four boroughs,



ABOVE

North Woods II

by Mary Reilly, 2006, graphite, 18 x 23½.
Collection the artist.

"I'm less interested in areas of the parks where you find a lot of people and baseball fields and playgrounds," says Reilly. "You don't see buildings in the north woods—it's like you're transported to the Adirondacks."

OPPOSITE PAGE

North Woods I

by Mary Reilly, 2006, graphite, 50 x 33½.
Collection the artist.



BELOW LEFT

Bronx River

by Mary Reilly, 2006,
graphite, 38 x 50
Collection the artist.

BELOW RIGHT

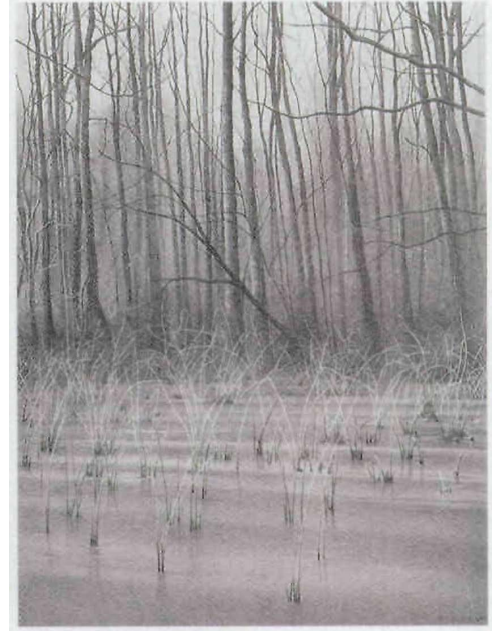
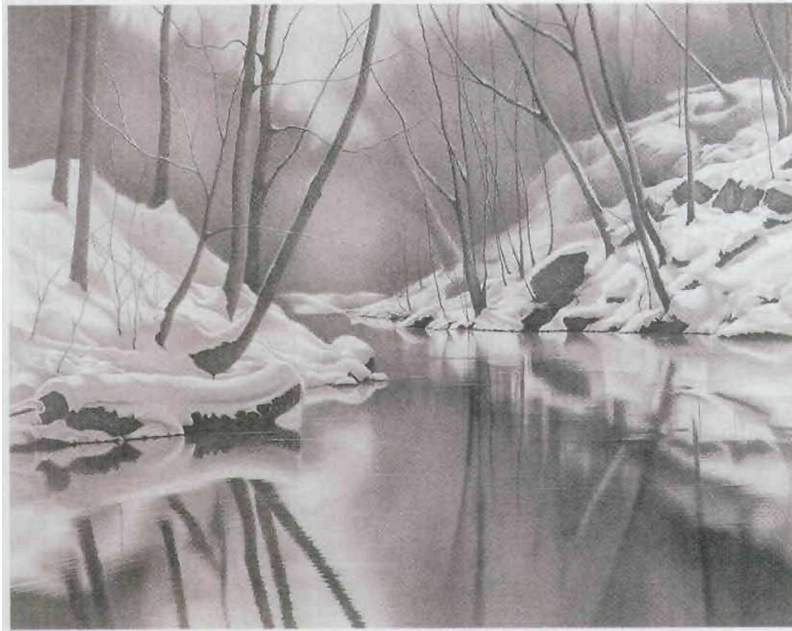
**Spring Pond,
Staten Island**

by Mary Reilly, 2007,
graphite, 23½ x 18.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Clove Lake,
Staten Island**

by Mary Reilly, 2007,
graphite, 23½ x 18.
Collection the artist.

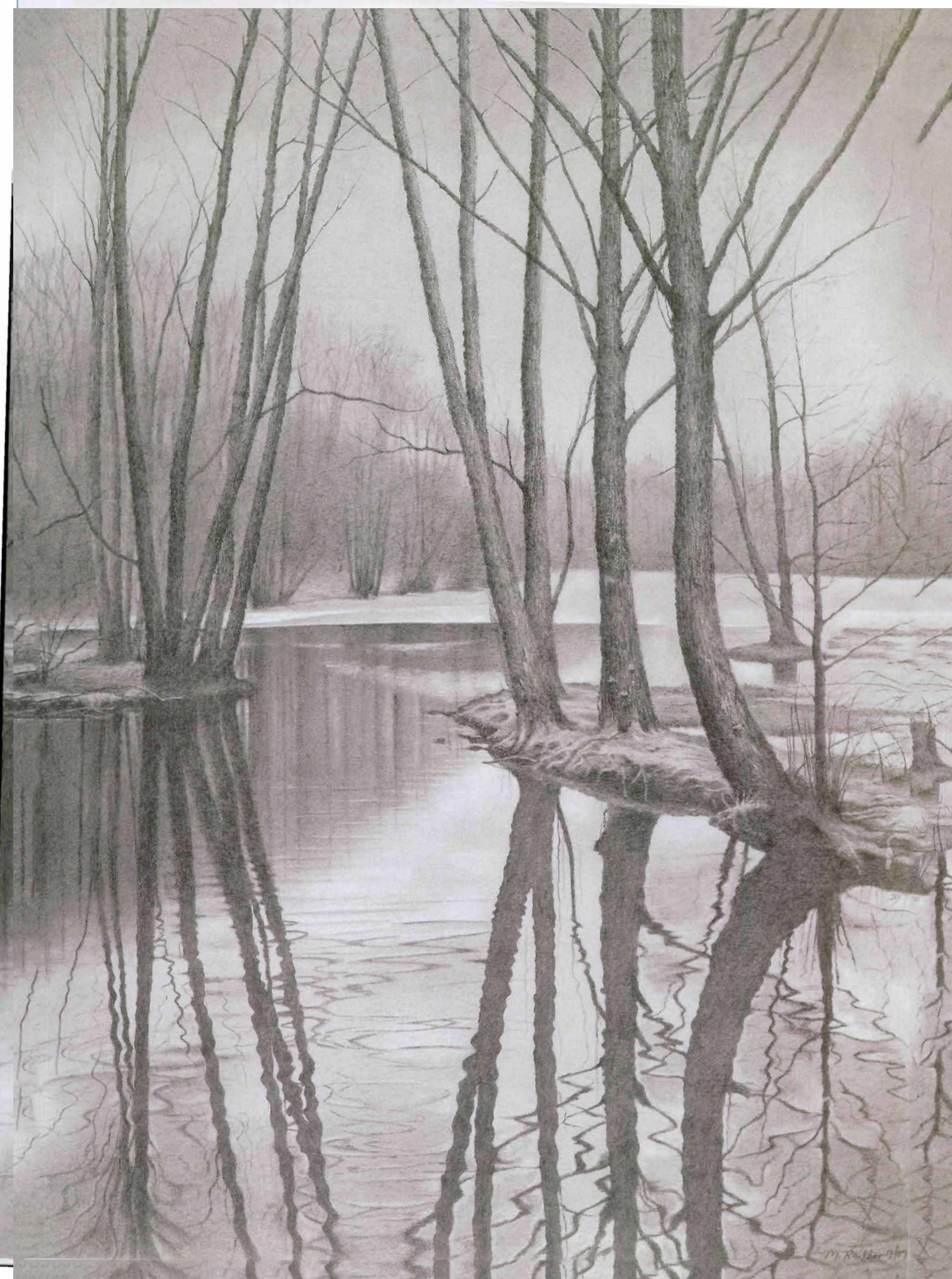


and she began taking long trips to the areas of New York that tourists rarely see, and natives often forget. “I went to eight ancient forests and took walks along the Staten Island shore, and I was blown away by the beauty. There were so many densely wooded areas—huge, natural, unpopulated.” For Reilly, there is no need to block out the passersby and bustle of the New York City that Mitri edits out of his *Central Park at Fifth Avenue, New York, NY*, and *West 54th Street From the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY*. Mitri works in busy locals and creates an intimate environment, engaging in a dialogue with his subject, but for Reilly this is effortless, as her chosen areas of New York City are often as quiet as any countryside—and this is exactly what the artist seeks to communicate. “I’m trying to find these isolated spots and make the viewer feel as though they, too, are alone and isolated,” she explains. “I want to show people the peace and solitude here that you would normally find outside of New York City and convey that emotion.” This task seems well suited to a New York City transplant who spent her childhood a stone’s throw away from the five boroughs, developing a love and respect for nature.

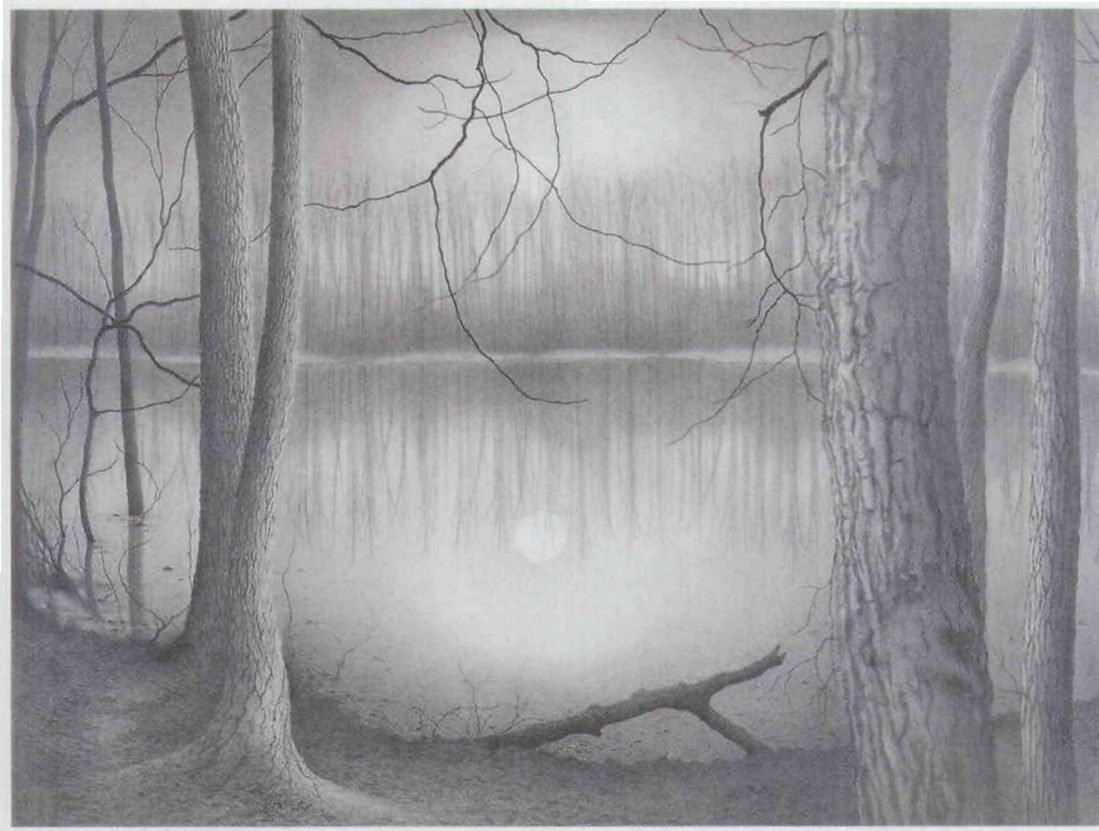
While creating these drawings and choosing her subject matter, Reilly found her own view of New York City changed. “I had only been to Staten Island once before,” she sheepishly admits. “Since visiting all its parks, taking photographs of the shoreline and the wooded areas, I’m in awe of the magnitude of its beauty.” She takes great care in capturing this beauty, taking up to 10 rolls of film on location, then reviewing them in her studio before settling on the few that will

serve as the basis for a drawing. When she has decided on a composition, she begins the layering technique taught to her by Sprung to create a sense of depth and a rich tone that instantly strikes the viewer. “I tone the paper with six to eight layers of graphite, depending on the subject,” Reilly explains. “With a lighter subject, like the snow-covered rocks in *Bronx River*, I use fewer layers. For intensely focused floral scenes, such as *North Woods II*, I make the background dark and blurred, and use several layers to create this photographlike effect. After applying each layer I rub it in with a chamois cloth. Generally, it takes up to five days to prepare the drawing surface, depending on the size of the piece.” After reaching a middle tone that she’s satisfied with, the artist spends one week laying in the initial drawing, and an additional four to five weeks working in the details. Reilly has an intense work ethic, devoting seven hours a day, five days a week to a given piece. Surprisingly, she finds that she utilizes her time better now than she did before her children were born. “I get totally engrossed in my work while they’re at school. I know the time I have available, and I use it.”

Like any draftsman, Reilly’s biggest technical challenge is avoiding smudging, and she makes sure to touch her surface as little as possible while she works. “When I do use my hand for stability—most often when working on details—I use my pinky finger, which I wrap with acetate. The acetate is smooth and will glide over the graphite instead of smudging or lifting it.” To create the reflective surfaces on the water in such drawings as *Spring Pond* and *Clove Lake*, Reilly uses erasers to lift the reflection of the sky as seen in the water,



“The shift to drawing nature in graphite was really just my going back to the core of who I am, the marriage of my love of nature and my love of drawing. Carving out the gentle details of nature with the quiet silvery patina and sensual feel of graphite became the perfect outlet for me.” —Mary Reilly



LEFT
Moonrise, Staten Island

by Mary Reilly, 2007, graphite, 28 x 38%. Collection the artist.

“I took this photograph in the early evening, in the winter,” the artist says. “I pretty much know at the end of the day, when I have several rolls of film, which ones will work. Something about the composition, subject, lighting, and general mood—if it’s all there when I take the photo, I know it’s going to be a winner.”

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT
The Pool

by Mary Reilly, 2006, graphite, 18 x 23%. Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT
Nature Study, Harlem Meer

by Mary Reilly, 2007, graphite, 18 x 13%. Collection the artist.

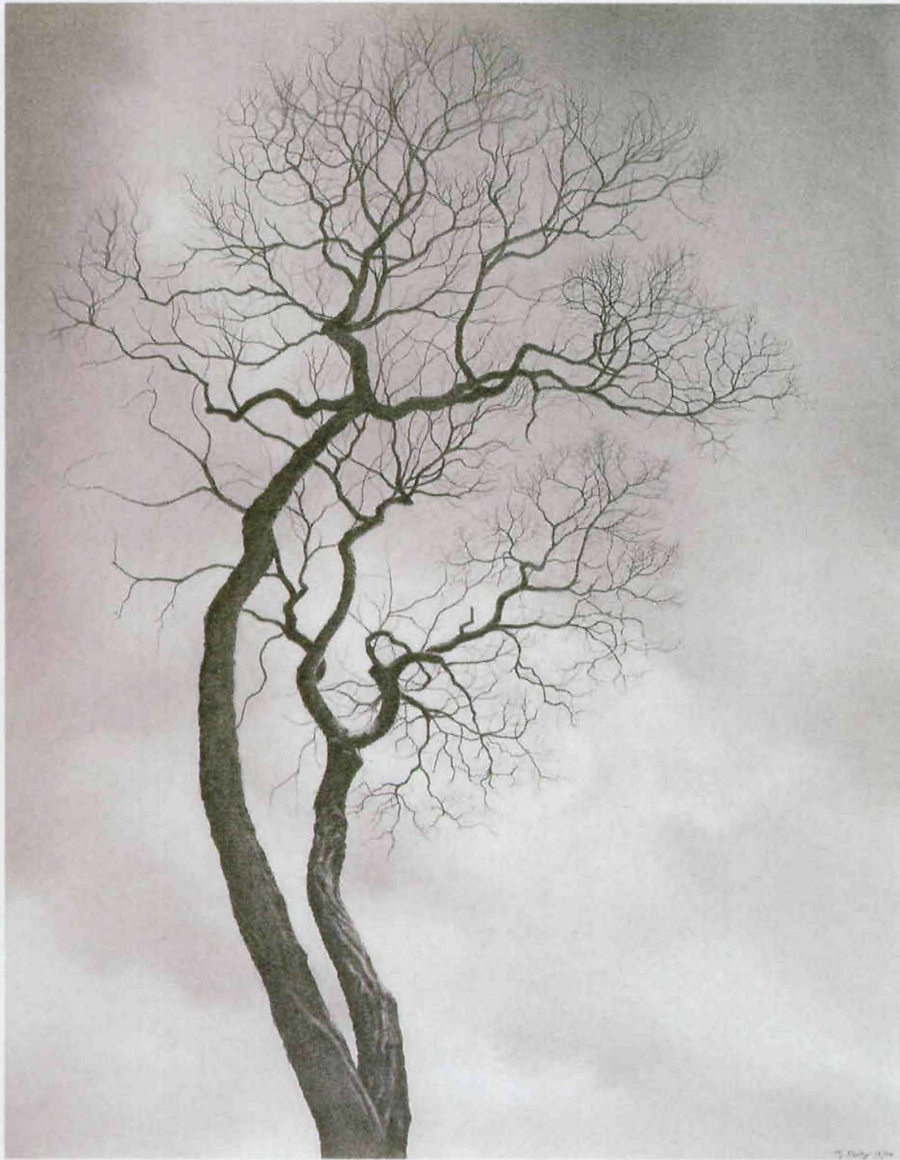
and then lays in the dark reflection of the trees or grass. Looking at these drawings, one can sense a feeling of serenity that belies the locations on which they are based; the intimate views of the hidden nooks of New York City are just as moving as Mitri’s precise renderings of the city’s landmarks.

Reilly began working in oil, but found the shift to graphite drawings to be rather easy—for her it was less of an experiment and more like returning to a first love. “I don’t place much importance on the switch in medium because I started out drawing in black and white. I just went back to what I do best and to what I have a passion for,” she explains. “The difference is that I went back with a technique that I enjoy and with a clear vision. Not only did that enrich my work personally and technically but I now feel that it is complete in itself, and I don’t miss working in color.”

Although she finds herself truly fulfilled with her new subject matter and technique, Reilly understands the difficulties that come with switching media and taking risks. She advises other artists interested in making the transition

to have patience. “The change may bring on some failure at first,” she admits, referencing her initial drawings that, although well executed, were not to her liking. “The transition is an investment, particularly once you realize what subject matter you respond to personally and what awakens you as an artist.”

Indeed, both Mitri and Reilly seek to awaken not only themselves but also viewers of their work, as they place New York City in a context as exciting and fresh as the metropolis itself. Both artists are moved by the emotion provoked by their locations and provide an intimate view of their subject—no matter how simple or unimportant it may seem. The details of Mitri’s ornate windows and building facades are rendered as sensitively as Reilly’s snow-covered tree branches and flowers. In both the natural and manmade, there is a beauty and grace that is highlighted through not only the artists’ choices of subject but also through the skill and care with which they bring that subject to life and expose its emotional power.



About the Artists

New York native **Mary Reilly** studied art at SUNY Purchase, in upstate New York, and at the School of Visual Arts, the Art Students League of New York, and the National Academy School of Fine Arts, all in Manhattan. After a career as a graphic designer, she began pursuing her art career full time and has studied with such instructors as Rick Brosen and Sharon Sprung. She currently lives in Manhattan, where she is represented by DFN Gallery. For more information on Reilly, visit her gallery's website at www.dfngallery.com.