

The Venice Series Drawings of Mary Gillis

A brief history

This work is about line and movement. It is about Venice. It is about this artist. And, it is about the physicality and lyricism of each. Venice, in her enduring state of static balance, of equilibrium, weathers and survives amidst the constant erosive movement of her canals. That movement, surrounding, on top of and through stasis, that lure, is evoked in the drawings. Though other aspects of the works are highly regarded and appreciated, observed and felt, one thing is clear: this work had to originate in Venice.

It all started with one small abstract drawing by a graduate student in the overseas studio art program of New York University in Venice, Italy. Mary Gillis was a resident of Venice in 1977. This graduate study was essentially an independent painting, drawing and sculpture program allowing students to experience the artistic wealth associated with Venice, while offering time and space to work on individual artistic pursuits. At that time, NYU had secured the top floor of the Palazzo Grassi for studio space; providing an incredible atelier for their students. In those days the Palazzo Grassi also housed Il Centro Internazionale delle Arte e del Costume.

The graduate students were a mix of artists and art instructors. Mary Gillis was both - a teacher at the Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, NY, and an aspiring 25-year old artist. A graduate of Pratt Institute, Mary had committed herself to art since childhood. In June of 1977 she was still searching for her own artistic personality. Venice and the Palazzo Grassi, remote from any other place she had experienced, provided the perfect environment for creating it.

Though students shared the expansive studio space in the Palazzo Grassi during those summers, each made their own experience of it. Not one to socialize during the creative process, Mary adopted an alternate schedule; arriving at the Palazzo Grassi just about the time of day when everyone else was leaving for lunch. She then had it all to herself, for a couple of hours, sometimes longer. Breaking for a late lunch, she returned when everyone else was leaving for the day. It worked perfectly.

When others discovered Mary's creation in their absence: these huge, gestural drawings, they were surprised, and impressed. Some never knew the artist of these drawings.



Mary Gillis, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, Italy 1978

A small abstract drawing, charcoal on paper, approximately 12 x 18" was the beginning. Once completing that, Mary dashed out to the local art supply store and purchased a huge roll of Fabriano paper and boxes of soft pastels. From that point on the drawings just had to be big - huge in fact. To accommodate this need, Mary appropriated a larger studio space in the Palazzo Grassi that the program director, Dr. Angiola Churchill, had set aside for herself. No words were ever spoken about it.

Size was not an intellectually analyzed decision. It was all gut and feeling. Venice had had an effect on this artist that she did not need to dissect or explain. The drawings spoke for themselves.

The Fabriano paper was perfect. It was rolled out onto a very large, smooth wall and was secured with pushpins. Many sticks of soft pastel were worked into the surface by hand. In most drawings, borders were taped off defining an interior perimeter and allowing what was to become an essential white border. Then the drawing was mentally choreographed. The

choreography was subject to change with one line affecting the next. Lines were envisioned and then made with an eraser – quickly and decisively bearing down through the pastel to create a modeled line. The velocity of the line was crucial, and once it was down, it was down. Each line clearly recorded a specific physical movement traversing a vast expanse of ground. Most eventually broke through carefully delineated borders, leaving trails of their flight in the surrounding white of the paper.

Mary returned to New York and continued to develop this series of drawings. Horizontal drawings became vertical. Given the scale and fragility of the paper, she started to experiment on canvas. The canvas surface was painstakingly prepared to a paper-smooth ground. Pastel was applied in layers. Simple geometric shapes hovered in the background and lines were erased away. The canvas was then stretched, and the surface sealed with an acrylic matte varnish.

Returning for her second summer in Venice in 1978, Mary expanded her vision taking with her several large prepared canvases. These canvases along with the beautiful and stimulating environs of the Palazzo Grassi would provide the opportunity for Mary to further develop this series.

Some of the paintings were exhibited in 1979 at the O.K. Harris Gallery in New York. All of the works on canvas from the Venice Series have been sold; three of them destroyed in the devastating September 11th World Trade Center attack. The artist, however, retained the best works on paper from the collection. These original drawings have not been exhibited since Mary's time at the Palazzo Grassi.

In 1979, Mr. William Rubin, then Chief Curator, Painting and Sculpture Collection, The Museum of Modern Art; and Adjunct Professor, Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, happened to view slides of the drawings. Subsequently visiting Mary Gillis's studio, he recommended her to Leo Castelli. Both wrote recommendations for a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, which Mary received in 1987.



In 2008, the Venice Series drawings by Mary Gillis will return to Venice in an exhibition at the Foundation Querini Stampalia.

*Mary Gillis, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, Italy
1978*