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Pre-Retroscope IV: Gowanus Journey

by [Shumi Bose](#)
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Wandering around the industrial landscape of Gowanus, with its odd mix of tire shops, taxi yards and enterprising [creative hives](#), often yields pleasant surprises ([Omnibus](#)-enabled [birdhouses](#), for example). At the moment, one such surprise is a poetic exposition of the neighborhood's eponymous canal: the show [Pre-Retroscope IV: Gowanus Journey](#). British artist Conrad Shawcross uses a fantastic rowboat contraption (more on that later) both to capture and to exhibit video imagery of the banks of this uncelebrated waterway.

The folks at [Cabinet](#), always with an eye for the beautiful and slightly bizarre, are exhibiting Shawcross' video, photographs and his specially pimped-out vessel which is both the method and means for showing his documentation, at their [HQ-gallery-reading room](#) tucked away on Nevins Street (a short, rainy walk from the Omnibus office.)

The centerpiece is Conrad's rowing boat, beautifully engineered and hand crafted back in Britain. The vessel – or 'Pre-Retroscope' – is supplanted with a giant wheel, with a seat for Conrad himself in the middle. A motorized deck carries a video-camera around the tracks of the wheel, recording a 360-degree panoramic view, circumambulating the artist as he propels the boat forward (*very* smooth rowing skills on this guy to avoid nauseating his audience). The care and craftsmanship put into the boat – complete with little lockable cabinets for ropes and camera equipment – as well as its singular function and design, recall

a laboratory apparatus, and Shawcross' recording of the Gowanus Canal is somehow more scientific than humanly possible, as it takes in more than the eye ever could.

For the exhibit, the armatures are rejigged to accommodate a projector in place of a camera, and a moving projection screen revolves around the outer periphery of the whole kit, so the captured scenery revolves around the boat, recasting the camera's roving eye. As a result, the effect is something like a merry-go-round or a lighthouse beacon; the spectator can follow the image up to a point, until the screen turns out of view, suggesting as the curators say, "the impossibility of a comprehensive understanding of our surroundings." The boat skims past gas cylinders, chimneys, raw industrial architecture, dilapidated remains of collapsed workshops, half submerged sheds... These are the kinds of images we have seen before, but looking a little more closely transforms the realities of neglect into something fragile and profound.

Shawcross began his unique process of waterborne exploration in London's East End, exploring the soon-to-be-transformed banks of the Lea River, due to be altered forever by the Olympic developments in that area. Likewise, potential [Superfund](#) designation and the ongoing (albeit delayed) gentrification of almost-post-industrial Gowanus means that these delicate images of decay and stillness will probably gain more poetry in posterity.

CONRAD SHAWCROSS: "PRE-RETROSCOPE IV-GOWANUS JOURNEY"

June 20 - July 10, 2009

300 Nevins Street, Brooklyn, NY

Open Tuesday to Saturday, 12-6 pm

Shumi Bose is an architectural writer and researcher. She is currently working between London and New York, and lives in Brooklyn.

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