

These Beautiful Images Are of...Canal Sludge in Brooklyn

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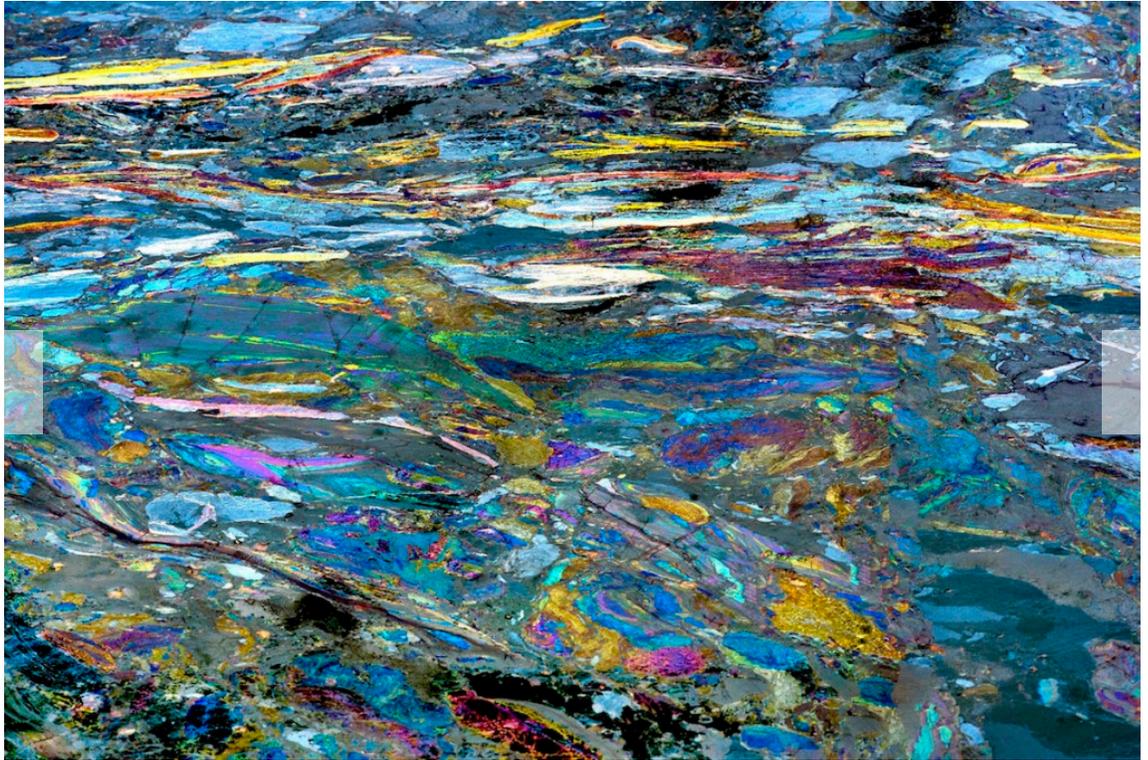
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1 / 13 Rhode, 2014. STEVEN HIRSCH

LIKE MANY KIDS growing up in Brooklyn, [Steven Hirsch](#) rarely ventured

beyond his neighborhood. His entire world was limited to a few blocks of East Flatbush, and he never saw the Gowanus Canal that meanders through the borough before his family moved away when he was 13.

He finally saw the notorious waterway in 2010 during a homecoming visit. The Gowanus Canal, once a vital shipping lane through Brooklyn, is among the nation's most polluted waterways, contaminated by sewer runoff and waste from the industrial sites that once lined its banks. As he stood gazing at the water, rising gas bubbles created ripples in the oily sludge floating on the surface. It produced a brilliant display of color, which Hirsch photographed.

Hirsch forgot about the photos until earlier this year, when he showed them to Niko Koppel, a *New York Times* photo editor. Their [publication](#) online inspired him to make more images. When he returned last spring, he didn't see the same amazing abstractions he'd captured earlier. He was "determined to find something else" and drove alongside the canal until he came across a huge swath of water covered in a "massive amount of slime" that produced a "psychedelic" mix of hues and patterns.

"If you were to look at what I looked at, you might not think it's beautiful. You might cringe," he said. "But I think I saw something that other people might not see there. People might have seen it as just a layer of slime and sludge. I saw it as a palette."

Hirsch returned to the spot, which is behind a movie studio, several times during the next few months, usually early in the morning before studio employees arrived at work. After taking the photos, he made the colors pop by boosting the contrast and saturation. Images from this period will be shown at [Gowanus: Off The Water's Surface](#) at the Lilac Gallery beginning November 12.

Hirsch shot down directly at the water's surface, sometimes lying on his stomach for a better angle. He wore a mask to protect himself from the noxious fumes, but he still found himself with headaches, nausea and itchy arms at the end of each day.

While Hirsch acknowledges the canal is in bad shape, he doesn't want his images to be seen as a polemic against pollution. Instead, he wants people to appreciate them for their aesthetic value. "I don't want to be a spokesman

making a statement about cleaning up the Gowanus,” he said. “There are plenty of people who can do that better than I can. I want people to see this for what it is—interesting images that have a lot of depth.”

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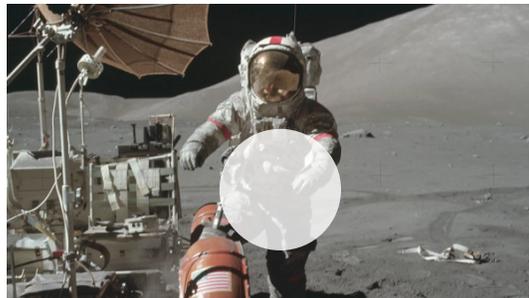
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