

# Brooklyn Photographer Captures the Gowanus Canal in All Its Toxic Glory

By [Brianna McGurran](#) • 11/13/14 1:18pm



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surface of the water,” said Hirsch.

Since the 1.8-mile-long canal opened in 1869, it’s been a dumping ground for runoff from nearby gas and chemical plants, oil refineries, coal yards and factories. Now it’s polluted with a heady mixture of “PCBs, coal tar wastes, heavy metals and volatile organics,” some of which are known carcinogens, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In 2010 the EPA labeled the canal a [Superfund site](#), and last year the agency proposed a [cleanup plan](#) set to cost more than \$500 million.

“I found these photographs particularly beautiful mainly because of their wonderful composition, contrasts, colors, and variety,” curator Cindy Iltzky of Lilac Gallery told the *Observer*. “But most of all because the actual subject was untouched.”

Who says a Superfund site can’t be beautiful?

In a new solo exhibition, Brooklyn-born photographer Steven Hirsch captures the unlikely Impressionistic swirls and ripples of toxic sludge on top of the Gowanus Canal.

“I would sit there on the side of the canal, and what looked like a giant painting by Monet would be there in front of me hovering on the

Hirsch has previously photographed homeless youth in Tompkins Square Park for his series “Crustypunks” and alien abductees in “Little Sticky Legs.” “Gowanus: Off the Water’s Surface” is on view at Lilac Gallery in the Flatiron District through December 1.

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