

## Duke Riley Article in Financial Times



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### High jinks on a forgotten isle

By Constance Wyndham

The 17 islands that surround Manhattan are a source of rumour and intrigue for New Yorkers. In 2003, Governors Island was sold by the federal government to the state and city of New York for the princely sum of one dollar. Rikers Island is host to high-security prisons; Roosevelt Island was once a smallpox colony and home to a mental hospital whose conditions famously appalled the visiting Charles Dickens.

Mill Rock Island is an eight-acre, key-shaped landmass in the middle of the East river, where Harlem river meets the Long Island sound, and it has not filled chapters in history books. Not yet, at least. This un-inhabited island, only a stone's throw from Manhattan's prime real estate, is the subject of Duke Riley's first New York solo show at Magnan Projects.

Riley is a tattoo artist and self-styled urban pirate based in Brooklyn. Originally from Boston, he graduated from RISD in 1995, taught at a Boston preparatory school and now owns and runs Cherry Bomb Tattoo in Greenpoint. Heclambered aboard Robert Smithson's floating barge on its 2005 trip around Manhattan and launched a home-made boat for his Circumnavigatea Project, in which he and his girlfriend sailed round the island with the help of a plastic sheet and a couple of poles.

Riley has created his own history book - a fictitious history and identity for Mill Rock Island and its inhabitants. The idea is in a similar vein to Allison Smith's recent civil war re-enactments on Governor's Island. He provides encased artifacts, a map, dusty military uniforms, mosaics and a huge, detailed ink-on-paper drawing as "evidence" to make his case. A nine-part video documentary is shown on monitors placed atop battered trunks. The video explores the boundary between fact and fiction by weaving together historical facts and hilarious testimonials made by an array of bogus characters, all set to the convincing, BBC-like patter of a narrator. It is an anthropologists' *This is Spinal Tap*. Among the items depicted are paintings of Henry Hudson sailing up the East river. This passage is followed by interviews with semi-incomprehensible "locals" telling tales of piracy and cannibalism. Dramatic chords of background music add to the intrigue while the contrast of Riley's humour with the darker, more tragic tales works well.

For example, the General Slocum was a pleasure boat that really did set sail up the river in June 1904, only to sink precipitously near Mill Rock Island in a catastrophe that drowned nearly all of its 1,500 German picnicking passengers. It was New York's biggest human tragedy before September 11 2001 - and floating sauerkraut could be seen for days.

Later, wild nights of hooch-fuelled debauchery took place on the island during Prohibition.

Finally, Riley describes his visit to the island for an arranged meeting with a "representative". A hermit emerges, stripped to the waist, and shows the camera his muddy cave dwelling, dwarfed by the skyscrapers across the river, which signifies impending doom for the fun-loving island folk. When asked whether he thinks Donald Trump will take advantage of the island he replies that he is ready to welcome Trump, the casino and the jobs they will bring.

Riley depicts the Mill Rock Islanders as a riotous lot in "The Bright Passage, 2005", his hugely impressive 6ft by 10ft ink drawing on scrunched architectural paper fashioned to look like scrimshaw, an engraving technique on ivory or bone used by sailors. Riley draws his dark fantasies in picture- book style, to emphasise his themes - of territory, community and the struggle for independent spaces.

The childlike images are at odds with the orgiastic scene. The inky, timeless sprawl is interrupted by incongruous objects that date the scene firmly in the present: Gracie Mansion (the mayor's residence), a floating Chinese takeaway box and towering apartment blocks. It is almost as if all this fun were going on right now under our noses, and we had not noticed.

\*\*\*\*Duke Riley's next exhibit is a solo show at the PULSE Contemporary Art Fair in New York City, March 10-13, 2006.