

HYPERALLERGIC

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The Artist Documenting the Rise of New York's Giant Ferris Wheel

Bill Murphy has for decades been the unofficial recorder of Staten Island's changing landscape — a role for which his talents and vision are uniquely suited.

by PETER MALONE

Though immensely popular with tourists, the Staten Island Ferry has for decades been a tease for the many local cultural institutions at the far end of the voyage who have consistently failed — though not for lack of trying — to convince daily boatloads of sightseers to linger on the island long enough to partake of its unique museums, ballparks, historical sites, and nature preserves. To this day, a predictable rush of visitors can be seen disembarking at the St George ferry terminal every half-hour — and then immediately boarding the next boat back to Manhattan.

So local boosters are now investing in the New York Wheel, a giant observatory modeled after the London Eye, which is expected to keep tourists onto the island for at least a few hours: enough, they hope, to encourage engagement with other Staten Island attractions. And though to date only a foundation for the giant Ferris wheel has been completed, the project is already unlocking the island's visual culture: Plans have been made to bring recognition, via the venture's publicity campaign, to a local artist whose vision has been inextricably tied to Staten Island's unique character.

Bill Murphy has been commissioned by NY Wheel developer Richard Marin to produce drawings and etchings of the project's massive construction, which will be featured in a book designed to commemorate the effort. It is slated for publication once construction is completed, in 2018 or thereabouts. According to Kathryn Karse of the Staten Island Advance, the island's newspaper of record, the idea had to be sold to Marin, who, after the usual time-lapse camera installation, had also completed a deal with local filmmaker Dean Thompson to create a video documentary of the site's progress. Marin's initial response was that nothing else was needed. What won him over was not just the intensity of Murphy's work, but the fact that Murphy has for decades been the unofficial recorder of the island's changing landscape — a role for which his talents and vision are uniquely suited.

A native of the borough and a tenured member of the art faculty at nearby Wagner College, Murphy derives inspiration from Staten Island's bridges, lighthouses, and array of half-sunk vessels, piers, and bulkheads that were abandoned when the city's ship and rail systems gave way to air freight. Looming structures reflecting this history lie within the many inaccessible coves hidden along the city's shoreline, especially on Staten Island. One might characterize Murphy as the graphic witness to their ghostly presence.

I say "graphic" because Murphy prefers drawing, etching, and occasionally monotype to painting. Even his watercolors are girded by a field of lines, used both as edge and tonal

variation. His overall vision is built on density and contrast, an apt combination for the unique challenge of depicting large structures. His effective use of line and tone can be demonstrated in a small etching of the Manhattan Bridge, which was shown to Marin in consideration of the project. Capturing the steel tower's mass and even something of its fin de siècle ironwork, the piece includes a light sense of freeform drawing. Threads of ink meander from the top of the structure like splayed wires dangling from a cable.

This balance between the mimetic and the spontaneous is a key aspect of Murphy's approach, a balance he manages to fine-tune to the unique properties of each motif while avoiding formulaic repetition. A comparison of the Manhattan Bridge print with an etching of the Flatiron building on 23rd Street highlights a similar weave of dense black line, used this time to emphasize the building's reflection on rain-covered asphalt and giving it an entirely different feel than the image of the bridge. Sweeping curves are then overlaid to suggest the intersecting roadways in the foreground while providing a subtle counterpoint to the dominantly vertical pattern.

Both images vividly capture the scale of their subjects yet remain faithful to the appearance of their source. They are hybrids of personal expression and careful reporting, a combination once prevalent among a group we might call fine-art illustrators. Murphy's understanding of this tradition (he studied illustration at the School of Visual Arts in the 1970s) echoes the sort of picture-making that was prominent in the 19th century and continued somewhat into early 20th, notably in the work of Edward Hopper. Eventually sidelined during the modernist upheaval, the realist artists who thrived after 1950 tended to reflect changes in taste engendered by the dominance of abstract painting. Fairfield Porter, Lois Dodd, Neal Welliver, Alex Katz, and others took a flat and more painterly approach to their subjects, while a decade later a wave of photorealists pushed the tradition of realism to an opposite extreme. Murphy is part of a cohort of artists who remain somewhere in the middle, committed to the poetry of reportage yet comfortable with personal expression.

This past summer, Murphy joined fellow representational painters Jerome Witkin, Robert Birmelin, Tim Lowly, Gillian Pederson-Krag, and Joel Sheesley in an exhibition aptly called "Poetry of Content: Five Contemporary Representational Artists," curated by Witkin at the Syracuse University Art Gallery. Each participant's abilities as both recorder and interpreter of nature supported the exhibition's theme of an unbroken link between readable content and personal poetics.

As the popularity of narrative painting grows, evidenced by recent and hopefully influential exhibitions of work by Kerry James Marshall and Nicole Eisenman, overdue attention may finally come to artists whose proficiency and skill add a welcome dimension to what has thus far been a rather loosely defined return to representational art. And if it continues, a wider discussion of skilled, unskilled, and deskilled studio practice is inevitable. Visual narrative, especially narrative dedicated to a specific event or location, requires an artist who is comfortable with journalistic description, yet flexible enough to enhance their work with the subtle properties associated with a unique visual sensibility. Considering that so few artists with these characteristics have yet appeared in mainstream contemporary art, the people responsible for the New York Wheel book project were fortunate to have found Bill Murphy not two miles away from where ground was broken last year.