



# Staten Island Advance

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## 'Ballad of Staten Island' exhibit called on account of snow

by MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA

GRYMES HILL — A little snow last month was enough to squelch “The Ballad of Staten Island,” at the Wagner College Gallery. The show is a 42-year retrospective of drawings, prints and paintings by Island-based artist Bill Murphy.

Apparently, snow collected on the flat roof of the Student Union building, where the gallery occupies a small corner, melted and leaked down a wall, wetting two or three pieces. The artist, a member of the art faculty, then removed the show, which would have stayed up otherwise until Jan. 10.

Murphy, who was born in 1952 and grew up on the South Shore, is among the two or three best-known local artists of his generation. He is a draftsman, printmaker and painter (in that order) working in a representational style.

He and New Brighton-based marine lithographer John A. Noble (1913-1983), the best-known Island artist of his generation, are like-minded entities insofar as they are realists who find technical challenges stimulating.

When Murphy applies himself to the same material that engaged Noble, like wrecked boats and the waterfront, the two seem more similar than they actually are.

Unlike Noble, Murphy moves occasionally into portraiture, where he is incisive, emotionally complex and detailed. His “John A. Noble,” etching is an uncanny, careworn likeness of the older artist, weighed down by time and life. Done the year the artist died (after having buried his wife) the piece seems more powerful every time it is shown.

The other portrait in the show, “Jack Demyan (Grandpa Moses),” is just as accurate, but heads the other way entirely. Demyan (1928-99), a restaurateur, bon vivant and semi-naive painter, is looking his rapscallion best, a Falstaffian presence, in this rendering.

Much as the portraits bring personality to light, the landscapes, streetscapes and panoramas are well-determined reflections of themselves in sharper light or deeper shadow.

The earliest piece in the show, “Sandy’s Boatyard,” an ink/watercolor drawing made when the artist was barely out of high school, is a well-drawn and romantically ramshackle landmark on the South Shore. It’s almost prophetic.

Nostalgia reverence for age and history and considerable pervade much of this artist’s work over the next four decades.

Topically, he is drawn to the old places that have seen better times, like Kreischerville, Port Richmond, the New Brighton waterfront. Etchings — composed of many carefully excised lines — are the perfect medium for such views, since they embrace buildings, ruins and shadows.

Still, Murphy isn’t immune to news. But even his “Hurricane Sandy,” his take on the Caddell tanker storm-beached in Clifton, looks like it might have happened a hundred years ago.

“The Ballad of Staten Island,” which had several of the artist’s watercolors and a new version of his “Paramount” lithograph, should have had a longer showcase. Here’s hoping a new, dry venue surfaces.