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Staten Island artist to document the New York Wheel's rise in drawings

by KATHRYN CARSE

The New York Wheel is the focus of attention from so many different angles — an engineering feat, a tourist attraction, a business engine, a real estate boon, a traffic challenge.

For landscape artist Bill Murphy, it was an instant source of fascination.

“When it started, I thought, ‘This could be interesting,’ ” said Murphy. “I always think about how the landscape will be changed.”

The 63-year-old Great Kills native, who teaches at Wagner College and directs the Wagner College Gallery, has been watching the North Shore waterfront pretty much his whole life — whether it be from the shore or from the ferry.

A draftsman, printer and painter, Murphy's first etching was from the stairs at Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden off Richmond Terrace with a view of the Statue of Liberty in 1975. The decades that followed have been filled with landscapes, streetscapes and panoramas in which he uses every line and the play of darkness and light to capture the atmosphere of a place.

The waterfront has been a favorite subject. He was energized by the idea of recording the rise of a 630-foot observation wheel in St. George overlooking New York Harbor.

When Murphy bumped into Richard Marin, CEO and president of the New York Wheel, at an event in Tappan Park, he pitched the idea of documenting the construction of the Wheel with drawings.

Marin wasn't sold immediately.

“To be honest, you meet a lot of people and hear a lot of ideas,” said Marin in a phone interview. “I try to keep a very open mind for what might be possible.”

Documenting the progress of the Wheel was something Marin was already committed to doing. Two Earthcams are creating an archive of photographic material, time lapse and stills. The live view can be watched any time on The New York Wheel's website.

St. George resident and filmmaker Dean Thompson is producing documentary videos. His work to date can be seen on the website and includes community and cultural leaders explaining what they think the importance and impact of the Wheel will be.

A photographer is contributing to a coffee table book that Marin has commissioned.

“Recording the construction of the Wheel, of something this significant, from the earliest point ... one almost has an obligation to do it,” Marin said. “We want to document the whole process in every way possible,” he said of the multimedia approach.

But, Marin admitted, he did not wake up one morning and say, “Hey, we need an illustrator.”

Attending events in the community, talking to people and taking them seriously is part of his approach, he said, and what led him to consider having a fine artist involved.

“I guess that's a function of keeping one's mind open to the possibilities,” he said.

It also led him to become more familiar with Murphy's work.

“I go to the Staten Island Museum and see this wonderful piece that he’s done,” Marin said. The piece, “Along the Arthur Kill,” provides a panoramic view from the Bayonne Bridge.

Murphy’s work, whether painting or print, always starts with on-location drawings, although that is rarely what people want, he said. So he is thrilled with the opportunity to contribute drawings.

“It’s fantastic to have something that unusual to draw,” said Murphy. “An artist can respond to it in a way that makes interesting images, what comes out in the end is the artist’s hand.”

For Marin, it also brings more of Staten Island into the web of the Wheel.

“If I had a strict dogmatic view of what this would be, I wouldn’t be keeping my mind open to all these ideas. This is what allows this project to be all that it can be,” he said. “Bill had the idea and he has the capabilities and passion to make it happen.