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## Cornwall Artist's Works at Core of 9/11 Confluence

By: Julia E.M. Halewicz

**LITCHFIELD-**The view from the Manhattan "art studio" where Donald Bracken set up his easel for a year was world famous. Stretching from Jersey City, N.J., to the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, it allowed him to turn his canvas toward the twinkling Brooklyn Bridge or peer at the courtyard 91 stories below his vantage point in the World Trade Center to watch civil servants from nearby City Hall and financial executives from Wall Street crowd together eating shish kebobs from their favorite street cart.

On a summer afternoon, the sounds of The Dave Brubeck Quartet's "Time Out" would bounce off the sound-proof windows of the north tower. In the confines of his art studio, Mr. Bracken floated among the clouds and above the heart of the Western world. "I felt like I was in this ivory tower looking down, totally removed from everything," he recalled.

In that artistic vacuum, Mr. Bracken would produce works that stirred anxiety in observers living in a pre-9/11 world-after the terrorist attacks his images seemed prophetic, and even painful.

One painting, shaped like an elongated upside down 'T'-or like one of the towers with a base-shows a blue sky with cotton clouds and a long, thin gold string with a plumb bob hanging at the end, swinging over a miniature landscape of southern Manhattan. Time, the painting conveys, was ticking.

A more disturbing view from inside Mr. Bracken's studio shows windows engulfed in flames-a reflection of the morning sun gone mad.

Ten years have passed since Mr. Bracken, a Cornwall artist who shows at the New Arts Gallery in Litchfield, painted New York City's skyline during a year-long artist in residence program organized by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. During that period, the terrorist attacks on the United States and the subsequent wars in the Middle East transformed the meaning of the works Mr. Bracken had produced in his unfinished, 10,000-square-foot studio.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bracken moved on by reconsidering the World Trade Center. Not only did he go back and revise paintings from 1997, but the artist also created a new series of works that incorporate actual materials from Lower Manhattan.

The complete body of works has inspired a fusion of film and art at the Bantam Cinema's remembrance of 9/11. Mr. Bracken will present his paintings, some already hanging in the Bantam's gallery, Sept. 16 at 11:30 a.m. Following his lecture is a screening of HBO's 2002 documentary "In Memoriam: New York City, 9/11/01" and a discussion with producer John Hoffman and editor Paula Heredia. New Arts Gallery is also featuring a show of Mr. Bracken's work through mid-October.

"When you do these things, the experience becomes three-dimensional," said Tony Carretta, owner of New Arts Gallery, on the process of reflecting on the six-year anniversary of the attacks. "What role does art play in something like this? It's a historical event, it's political in nature. How meaningful can art be? Art itself in relation to humanity. That's what this [collaboration] does more perfectly than anything."

Seeing Mr. Bracken's paintings for the first time inspired Sheila Nevins, whose husband Sidney Koch and son David co-own the Bantam Cinema with Elizabeth Merz, to bring the film and paintings together. "There was something about looking at all three phases of his work. I can't explain the feeling. I felt so sad," said Ms. Nevins, speaking from HBO's midtown Manhattan office, where she is president of the documentary division.

"I don't think we would have shown the film if we didn't find such a talented artist," said the younger Mr. Koch.

What struck Ms. Nevins was Mr. Bracken's apparent omniscience about the tragedy. "I had a creepy feeling," the artist recalled. Like the other members of the artist-in-residence program, Mr. Bracken had a key to his studio and 24-hour-access to the building. He would, without questions asked, bring carloads of paint, wood and easels to the studio and take friends up to see the view. Security only stopped Mr. Bracken once, when he brought his then-girlfriend to the building who had olive-toned skin, dark hair and dark eyes, he said. "I knew they were looking for something."

Of the approximately 150 artists whose studios were at World Trade Center over the course of five years, Mr. Bracken is distinguished by his focus on the politics of the landscape. One of his greatest influences, the 19th-century British painter Joseph Mallord William Turner, viewed the industrial revolution with a certain amount of trepidation and Mr. Bracken translated that philosophy in his paintings, which he describes as revealing "the power of nature was first and man's role was secondary."

The theme predates the World Trade Center works, surfacing in a 1984 New York City show entitled, "Swimming at Ground Zero," in which the University of California Berkley graduate and San Francisco native depicted the lazy ease of swimmers going through life with a false sense of security against the backdrop of murky waters.

The Feb. 26, 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center masterminded by Sheikh Omar Abdel weighed on Mr. Bracken's mind as he

ascended the building's floors surrounding by employees of some of the most powerful financial institutions in the world. "Americans aren't that conscious of metaphors. They are going to go after the biggest icon in America," he recalled thinking. But it was the very nature of the World Trade Center representing that paradox of power and fragility that inspired Mr. Bracken.

Four years after he started the project, Mr. Bracken was in Upstate New York when a friend called to tell him that the World Trade Center had been attacked—again. "It felt like Armageddon," he said. He spent the rest of the day painting watercolors. On Sept. 12, 2001, Mr. Bracken returned to his Cornwall studio to meet an art dealer for an appointment. A day removed from the event, Mr. Bracken hung a series of acrylic on Mylar landscapes he had completed in 1997 but felt never achieved what he wanted. He had turned over the nearly 10-foot-long, clear narrow panels and covered the back with splashes of red paint, allowing the shadow of the former skyline to come through, but now drenched in blood-red. When the dealer arrived and saw the paintings, she cried.

If Mr. Bracken's 1997 paintings from his World Trade Center studio represent a bygone era and an eerie premonition of the events to come, and the Mylar works his reaction to those events, then the latest series of paintings grapple with the act of remembering what is now gone.

Working with dirt from the area around Trinity Church in downtown Manhattan, Mr. Bracken elicits strong reactions from those who view them and notice pieces of metal and porcelain memorialized in the works. The dirt, he said, brings him a feeling of connectedness to his work that he lost and is a technique he began while painting farm landscapes.

One painting tentatively titled, "Everything in its Right Place," shows a gold phantom Manhattan skyline from inside Mr. Bracken's former studio. Faint outlines of the buildings shimmer through the rectangular vertical windows, this time formed of dirt. The skyline reveals that, in fact, the entire view is now out of place and will never be restored. The materials force the viewer to reconcile the act of remembering 9/11 with the grim reality of the physical remnants of the attack and lends power to the images.

Not all artists have found the works that resulted from their stay at the World Trade Center to invoke such readiness by patrons to explore their meaning. Richard Haas, who is famous for his large-scale cityscape paintings on buildings and high-profile civic commissions, has been asked to remove the towers from old murals. "Someone bought a print in Chicago and returned it when he realized the towers were in it," he said. Mr. Haas calls the reaction "harmful" to his work and also philosophically opposed to his view of history and memorials.

The tension between remembering and honoring what was lost on 9/11 and dissociating the buildings from those memories began soon after the buildings collapsed. Scenes from "Spider-Man" were re-shot without the World Trade Center and the film industry postponed the production and release of films that were deemed too sensitive because of their reference to planes flying into buildings and terrorism attacks on the country.

Conversely, the summer blockbuster "Transformers" showed graphic images of a plane hitting a building and severed limbs, proving either that the collective memory of the 9/11 attacks has not outlasted its sixth anniversary, or that the images of planes flying into towers can be used as a political tool to garner support for war.

"Don had the privilege of painting these when there were no thoughts of politics," explained Mr. Carretta. "The images become iconic. Look at Warhol. His images became icons: a Brillo box, a soup can. Looking back at it now, those paintings are icons of American life."



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