

With bird's-eye view of rebirth of World Trade Center, Bucks artist captures 'Downtown Rising'



SHOW CAPTION ▼

1 / 18

By **Tim Higgins**,
Special to The Morning Call

SEPTEMBER 11, 2014, 11:01 PM

Todd Stone was in his Tribeca studio six blocks from the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, working literally in the shadow of the twin towers in downtown Manhattan.

Stone, a well-known abstract artist, ran to his rooftop when the first plane hit, photographing the tragic events unfolding right in front of him for as long as he could.

Like countless others, that day changed his life. For more than a decade, Stone's artistry has centered on ground zero. First he painted the tragedy, incorporating the dust that blew into his studio when the towers collapsed, driving him off the roof. The series is called "Witness."

"I started as what you might call a hippie artist," Stone says. "I was full of love and understanding. I woke up to a dark nightmare. This became the focus of my work. I believed things had changed at the millennium. I don't think that anymore."

Stone's latest works are more uplifting. Called "Downtown Rising — Studies in Resilience," they document the re-

construction of ground zero from the unusual vantage point on the 48th floor of the rebuilt 7 World Trade Center. Nine of the works are on view at the ArtsQuest Center at SteelStacks in Bethlehem.

A native New Yorker, Stone lives in Kintnersville, Bucks County. He once considered Kintnersville a retreat, but after Sept. 11 it became more of a home. Stone is the first guest artist of ArtsQuest's new "Artists Among Us" series highlighting local and regional artistic talent. He will talk about his work on Monday Sept. 15 and also screen "Witness Downtown Rising Renga," a short documentary film in which 11 noted New York poets respond to a decade of Stone's paintings of the destruction and rebuilding of the World Trade Center site.

"Downtown Rising — Studies in Resilience" may be a sequel of sorts to "Witness," but it has an equally fascinating story. Not only, says Stone, do they represent a story of rebirth but also a reminder of tragedy. Standing next to the paintings he says, "... for me, they are a physical reminder of what happened, all of the time. It's emotional still for me to show any kind of happiness when standing with these works."

Stone's paintings are large, realistic depictions of the construction surrounding ground zero. They are not dire or somber but brightly colored, detailed works. Several are on the first floor of the ArtsQuest Center and the rest are on the second floor Butz Gallery.

While the ArtsQuest Center, with its deconstructed industrial look, may not be the best venue in the world to display Stone's paintings, it is particularly appropriate. The steel used in the construction of the original World Trade Center come from Bethlehem Steel, and the paintings are a celebration of the same labor and resilience that went into the making of that steel.

Stone's renderings of steel girders in deep blue and images that look straight down at the towers' footprints, surrounded by construction equipment, have a precisionist feel. They are accurate, but not necessarily real.

"It never really looked like this," Stone says. "What I was painting was all the good effort that was going into this project." The works are, he says, more like composite paintings that capture moments in time. "Every window I was painting I was counting. I mean, there were thousands killed and each window became one of them. Each window represents a person."

The real story behind these works is how they came to be, and to understand that is to understand what happened to Stone on Sept. 11. "I realized there is a destructive nature to human existence," he says "What is the legacy of 9/11? For me, it deepened my work."

"I was an abstract painter for the first 20 years of my career," he says. "I had done a series of paintings about living on the perimeter of the World Trade Center." When the towers fell, everything changed.

Stone's New York changed too in the days just after the towers fell and Stone found himself living in what he calls a "frozen zone."

"The initial shock of living behind barricades," he says. "... no phone service, armed guards everywhere and having to show my ID just to get home. That's what I was starting to document." The result was hundreds of works connected to what happened to him and the city's landscape on 9/11. "I couldn't put my arms around the horror of that day. I saw people jumping from those windows."

After Silverstein Properties, the landlords of 7 World Trade Center, saw his work, they invited him to work from the 48th floor of the building. Seven World Trade Center was the last building in the World Trade Center complex to collapse and the first to be rebuilt. The property opened in 2006 and Stone has been there since 2009.

From that perspective, Stone has had a bird's-eye view of the rise of the new One World Trade Center, also known as the Freedom Tower, and the surrounding memorial.

Stone was particularly honored to take part in a 10th anniversary exhibition that took place on the 48th floor of 7 World Trade Center.

"I felt such a weight on my shoulders to bring forth this suffering. I was surrounded by memorial cards and members of the families that died. I could not have dreamed of a better audience," he says.

Stone continues to work on documenting the construction site. "We're fighting back against terrorism just by being there," he says. "I am amazed how everybody is now flowing into this zone, which used to be a frozen zone."

Tim Higgins is a freelance writer.

Jodi Duckett, editor

jodi.duckett@mcall.com

610-820-6704

TODD STONE EXHIBIT

•**What:** Paintings by the Bucks County resident of the aftermath of Sept. 11: "Downtown Rising — Studies in Resilience." First in ArtsQuest's new "Artists Among Us" series of residencies.

•**When:** Through Oct. 12

•**Where:** Alvin H. Butz Gallery, second floor of the ArtsQuest Center, 101 Founders Way, Bethlehem

•**Related events:** Screenings of "Witness Downtown Rising Renga," which highlights a collaboration between Stone and slam master poet and Bowery Poetry Club founder Bob Holman. The 7 p.m. Monday Sept. 15 screening is free and will include a talk by Stone. Advance reservations required at lmcaloon@artsquest.org. The 4 p.m. Sept. 28 screening is \$10 and features a poetry reading and talk by Bowery Poetry Club poets, including Holman, Nikhil Melnechuk, Quincy Troupe, Margret Porter Troupe and Tahani Salah.

•**Info:** 610-332-3378, <http://www.artsquest.org>.

Copyright © 2014, The Morning Call
