

A painter keeps pace with the reconstruction of ground zero

By GWEN SHRIFT Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, September 11, 2014 12:15 am

Painter Todd Stone was on the flight path of the first jetliner to hit the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

In many ways essential to his art, and the recovery of the nation, he has stayed there ever since.

At 8:45 a.m. 13 years ago today, Stone and his wife, Lori, were in his studio in the artsy Tribeca neighborhood of Lower Manhattan.

Through the skylight, they heard and saw a wide-bodied jetliner thundering low over their building, headed south.

Seconds later, American Airlines Flight 11 sliced into the north tower of the World Trade Center, six blocks from the Stones' building, and exploded.

The artist snapped a photo so quickly, the camera caught pigeons startled by the impact in mid-flight.

Stone painted his heart out all day, and for years thereafter. And over time, his work began to reflect a certain process of healing.

His first series, "Witness," recorded the impact, the fireball, the dust, the ravaged skyline of New York City.

When the towers fell, "my studio was filled with light. The light was all about absence, it was all about what wasn't there. It was the same thing when I was looking at the skyline," he said. "Trying to get my arms around the numbers of deaths, I would count the windows in Lower Manhattan."

Stone returned to his easel and documented the clearing and rebuilding of ground zero. In his work, the rising skyline came to stand for the people who were lost. Glittering new buildings replaced the ones that had vanished, flooding the neighborhood with reflections.

Paintings from the latter period, "Downtown Rising — Studies in Resilience," are on view at the ArtsQuest Center at SteelStacks in Bethlehem through Oct. 12. The exhibit launches Artists Among Us, a series focusing on the work of creative spirits in the region.



Todd Stone

"Downtown Rising" documents the return of city life from almost unimaginable desolation.

"I've had a front-row seat at this," said Stone, who said he felt "spiritually reamed" by the attacks. "I have a god's-eye view of all this building, and I can connect with all this energy that has gone into the planning.

"My whole body of work has connected to this, coming out of a place of grief and sorrow, a total darkening of the soul. I connect with the fact that the people who were murdered downtown that day were at their workplace. I embrace that in my work ethic."

The destroyed section has been repopulated with new buildings, but the site of the old towers remains unbuilt, their footprints turned into memorial pools.

When Stone is at his home in New York (his country home is in Kintnersville), he walks through the site four times a day, brushed by air that wells upward where the towers once stood.

"You can't see them, but you can feel them," he said.

Years elapsed before the skyline was restored.

"Once the site was empty, it was a big scar on the city, but it's not like nothing was happening," said Stone. "It's such a complex community that comes out of 9/11. There was a complex planning process that went through for years that was invisible."

The results have been restorative and literally uplifting.

"Now, everybody who comes downtown is looking up, looking at the towers. It's hard to feel down when you're looking up," said Stone.

The artist is scheduled to speak at 7 p.m. Monday at a screening of "Witness Downtown Rising Renga," a documentary film about Stone's collaboration with poet Bob Holman.

The event is free but reservations are required by emailing lmcaloon@artsquest.org.