

Looking and Seeing

SAUGERTIES PHOTOGRAPHER, LEGALLY BLIND, EXHIBITS AT SMITHSONIAN



It's not something he imagined at this stage of life, but Saugerties resident Allen Bryan is considered an emerging artist. The photographer recently returned from Washington, D.C., where his work can be seen in one of the nation's most prestigious museums.

Revealing Culture opened at the Smithsonian Institution's International Gallery last week. The exhibition explores how culture positions people with disabilities, with the artists behind the more than 130 works along a vast array of medium are all disabled in some way.

Allen, a photographer since childhood, was chosen alongside around 50 other artists from roughly 400 submissions from around the world. In 1988, Allen was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative genetic eye disease which has progressively tunneled his vision to the point where he is now legally blind.

"If you see me on the street and I ignore you, I'm not ignoring you," he said. "I just haven't seen you."

Faced early on with the prospect of tunnel vision, as well as the distortion of color perception and night blindness, Bryan took a trip through the American Southwest to soak up for the last time the vast panoramic landscape before he was unable to appreciate it the same way again. The trip awakened in him a new appreciation for the search for the right light in the right place that is now such a vital part of his work, especially the series, *Comforts of Home*, from which the pieces were chosen for the Smithsonian exhibition.

"It's sort of sardonic," Allen said of the title of his series, which has been ongoing over the last four years. "They're not homes in the traditional sense, nor are they particularly comfortable places to be. They're very



Allen Bryan.

disquieting."

That disquiet comes in the form of color and light which might appear at first to be perfectly normal, but which reveals itself to be something far more complex. The same is true of some of the images in Bryan's pieces, which are often out of place with everything else that's happening.

"I build it up in layers," Bryan said. "Put a door where there isn't a door. It's like in a renaissance painting, and over the person's shoulder there's a window, and there's a peasant working in a field, and beyond that there's a ship. They seem normal, but if you look a little closer something doesn't seem quite right. They all create something that isn't as real as you first thought it was. They're very dreamlike sometimes. Space

is either very compressed or extended, and there are different light sources."

Though it took years to make it happen, the idea for his current artistic vision was borne more than eight years ago when he was still able to drive.

"I was coming down 9W to pass by Fiero's Garage," he said. "I avoided (photographing) that for years, because the world didn't need another picture of a grimy garage. But there was an incredible reflection in the window of a field. For years afterward I was hoping to stumble across another scene like that, but it never happened."

When it didn't happen again in nature, Bryan realized he could produce the desired effects using technology.

"I woke up one morning, and literally it was a revelation," he said. "I realized I really could do it. I realized I had the skills through Photoshop to make landscapes that don't exist. My work, it's all photo-based

digital constructions. I'm kind of re-organizing the last 30 years of my photographic life. There are all these slides are sitting in my cases waiting to be worked with."

Bryan's work had already gotten him attention before he learned he'd been accepted into the Smithsonian exhibit earlier this year. In April, he had a solo show at the Blue Sky Gallery in Portland, Oregon, and he's had pieces in exhibits from Boston to Charlotte and all points in between, including a booth at the Armory Art Show in New York City. It's all new, despite the fact that he's been a photographer since childhood when he frustrated his mother and brother by turning the bathroom into a darkroom.

"The funny thing is, I'm in a very peculiar stage of life," said Bryan. "I'm going to be 66 in a couple of weeks, and I'm classified as an emerging artist. Getting known and being shown in the big places is a goal of mine. And the more representation you have in museums, the more noteworthy galleries take notice. There's so many out there, so many good ones."

Bryan's profile isn't likely to fade anytime soon with the popularity of the *Revealing Culture* exhibition.

"I'm quite overwhelmed by it," Bryan said. "It's great on my resume, having the Smithsonian. It's gotten me into other shows."

Bryan is back in the area after spending much of last week in the nation's capital for the opening of the exhibition, which is curiously three levels below the ground, requiring some disabled artists and attendees to take an elevator and circumnavigate a series of entry points to see the show.

"It's an immense honor to be shown at the Smithsonian, even 3 levels down," said Bryan.

Revealing Culture, sponsored by VSA, runs at the Smithsonian's International Gallery in the S. Dillon Ripley Center on the National Mall through August 29.

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