

Artist's views from his window capture – and help – a neighborhood

by Andrew Keshner

In halting brush strokes children play in a park shaded by trees, and there, in the background is the unmistakable image of the George Washington Bridge.

The piece, created by artist Tony Serio, is just one image in the new calendar being sold as a fundraiser for the Riverside Oval Association, a lower Washington Heights neighborhood group. Serio's work offers a colorful artistic interpretation for a cityscape filled with asphalt, concrete and brick.

Month by month, Serio's strong blues, greens and browns to depict landscapes between W. 158th and W. 179th Streets. Images of the brownstones along Riverside Drive, the Audubon Ballroom, Fort Washington Park and the George Washington Bridge are all part of the calendar.

Serio said the images in the calendar all show off the local interplay between nature and architecture. "The design of the streets and buildings; how the design is unlike the rest of Manhattan; the streets and buildings curve, twist and follow the natural geography: That's what I love about this area," he said, sitting in his studio with the smell of oil paints in the air.

Proceeds from the \$14 calendar go to the Riverside Oval Association, a community organization made up of residents between roughly W. 155th and W. 160th Streets, west of Broadway. Sales will help fund the organization's activities, which include beautification for the oval park, lectures, oral history projects and concerts.

Vivian Ducat, co-chair of the Riverside Oval Association, first saw Serio's work at an apartment being staged by real estate broker Sandy Edry of Citi Habitats. "I liked the color, the sense of light, the subject matter, the accuracy. . . . You can see there's seriousness in what he does and his technique," Ducat said.

She and Serio began work on the calendar in this past summer. Looking back, Ducat said she first learned how compelling it could be to find art composed in specific places when her mother, Ellen, created



Images painted by Tony Serio from the Riverside Oval Association's 2009 calendar.

pictures of a Central Park playground near Tavern on the Green for a neighborhood organization in the late 1960s.

"I had seen the value in linking artwork to a specific area that people care about," she said. Last year's calendar had roughly the same theme, but instead of paintings, the calendar was a compilation of historical photos of buildings in the neighborhood.

Serio and Ducat made the calendar using pictures that had already been painted and that show off Serio's visions of the neighborhood. So far the venture has been a success, 75 of the 250 calendars have already been sold.

For Serio, the pictures making up the calendar require time and observation. "I've always worked with areas I'm most familiar with. It's hard to go away to a new place and start painting. I have to be there a few days just to get acclimated." Even during a recent trip to scenic upstate New York, Serio couldn't just begin painting. "It's something that builds up. It's not a quick take," Serio said of his

artistic approach. "For me, it has to be absorbed and assimilated." Serio tries to paint on weekends and whenever else he can, bringing his portable easel with him. Serio is a member of the Bowery Gallery and has an upcoming one-man show at Boricua College, running from December 5 to January 8.

Looking through the calendar, Serio counts the November and June paintings as among his favorites. For him, the November painting with its deep blues, oranges and purples manages to catch twilight as the sun sets by the George Washington Bridge. "It's a very elusive effect," he said. On the other hand, the cover painting, another favorite, shows the neighborhood in early summer bloom, with the bridge again standing tall in the background.

Serio, a 52-year-old full-time graphic designer, first became interested in painting in high school. All it took was one year with a particularly effective art teacher to spark a lifelong passion. He first studied at the Maryland Institute College of Art, earning his bachelors degree. Seven years later, in 1985, Serio graduated from the Yale University School of Art with a Masters degree.

Serio lived in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn for 18 years, prior to moving to Washington Heights three years ago.

Thinking back on that move, Serio said he had to give up certain amenities of living in Brooklyn when he moved to the neighborhood – things like the restaurants along Smith Street, for example. With the Hudson River and the George Washington Bridge appearing through his studio window, it seems worth it to him now.

"I was all too willing to sacrifice it for the location and the apartment and the view," he said.

Application for NOMAA Grants deadline November 21st

Applications for grant money available through the Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance are still available.

The funding is available for artists or artist groups. Assistance filling out the application is only available until Fri., Nov. 14. For more information call NOMAA at 212.568.4396. To download an application visit <http://www.nomaanyc.org/en/node/25>.

ManhattanTimes