

The RIVERDALE PRESS

July 24, 2014

Artist takes on storied castle, minus Dracula

by Shant Shahrigian

Legend has it that Slains Castle near Aberdeen, Scotland provided the real-life basis for Dracula's home in Bram Stoker's famous novel. But for Riverdale artist Agnes Murray, the huge, ruined building has lent itself to more serene works of art.

A series of monotypes depicting different views of the castle won her a Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO) award for artistic excellence from the Bronx Council on the Arts earlier this year.

During a recent visit to her West 259th Street home studio, Ms. Murray explained that the series is both a personal expression and a meditation on space.

The artist's husband comes from the same region as the castle. After a first visit to the site in 1984, she found the building in largely the same condition on a trip in 2010.

"Over time, layers of meaning and interest start to become [apparent] to you," said Ms. Murray, 63. "Many things had changed, but the castle itself was very much the same way."

None of her black-and-white monotypes of Slains Castle show the structure in its entirety. Instead, the images focus on various angles that a person might see while walking in and around the building.

Three of the monotypes take the viewer further and further down a shadowy corridor. The effect is similar to zooming in on a camera. But while in the first image, a hallway and pools of light are recognizable, by the third one, details have faded away and the work has a highly abstract quality reminiscent of a minimalist mural.

"As the visual cues sort of fall away, you can't read what it is in terms of subject matter and you're left more with shapes, colors, values — the more abstract elements," the artist said.

Ms. Murray, who teaches design and other art classes at Bronx Community College, said photo realists in vogue during her undergraduate days remain a strong influence on her own work. She based the monotypes in her series, called *Approaching Slains Castle*, on photos she took of the site.

"Some of my professors were photo realists and my bent was realism," she said. "It was a way to sort of theoretically be allowed to work in realism at that point."



Agnes Murray looks at one of her award-winning monotypes depicting a famous Scottish castle inside her West 259th Street home studio.

Photo: Marisol Diaz/Riverdale Press

Making prints from scratch enabled Ms. Murray to play with shapes and light in a different way than her camera allowed.

“There’s an interest in this kind of play back and forth between this illusion of space and the surface that you’re working on and an awareness of the materials you’re working on and in some ways letting that process of work show in the work,” she said.

While her pieces have a cool, intellectual feel, she said some of them are designed to evoke warm thoughts of home. Several of the images focus on an empty stone window frame, cropped so it looks like a miniature house.

“Another kind of compelling image I think can be called the house-shaped house,” Ms. Murray said. “[There’s] this sort of comfort. Even though there’s this grand manor, there’s a number of structures that evoke a series of little house-shaped spaces that somehow are very appealing.”

Ms. Murray has not finished working on Slains Castle yet. She is currently making a monotype triptych of the ruins. Bright greens and blues in that work in progress make for a stark contrast with *Approaching Slains Castle*.

Ms. Murray has also depicted a number of famous sites in the Bronx. Her watercolor paintings of the Henry Hudson Bridge, Wave Hill and other locations incorporate the same kind of unusual angles she uses in *Approaching Slains Castle*.

The artist said her encounters with the castle inspired her to read *Dracula*. While she said she could not see the ruins as the setting of a gothic tale, it is easy to imagine a vampire lurking somewhere inside her “house-shaped house.”