

West Brighton artist Andrea Phillips earns her first one-woman show

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By Michael J. Fressola



Staten Island Advance/Jan Somma-Hammel. Collage artist Andrea Phillips at work in her West Brighton home.

STATEN ISLAND, NY — Andrea Phillips has no idea what she’s doing and she plans to keep it that way.

Ms. Phillips, a well-known but low-key figure on the local arts scene, makes collages that are narrative and figurative. They are complex without being sophisticated, folksy but hardly primitive. It’s a delicate, deliberate balance.

Many years ago, when she was first drawn towards art, her husband, Maurice Phillips (1938-1972) advised her to forget the usual prerequisites — instruction in drawing, color theory, perspective. He had formal training and knew what he was talking about. As she recalls it: “Maurice said, ‘You shouldn’t take classes. They might ruin things.’”

So she largely avoided conventional preparation, steering clear of “classes where they try to tell you what to do.”

Forty-five years later her naiveté is intact. Her first one-person museum show, “Pieces of Spirit” will open next month in the Staten Island Museum, with about 40 pieces, many made in the past 10 years.

The title recalls another bit of advice from Maurice Phillips, an artist himself. She mentioned that she needed some new clothes, but was short of cash. “Maurice just said: ‘Piece it together. You have fabric. Just sew the sections together’.”

She took that advice too. She made clothing, pillow-covers and hangings from pieced together fabric. She’s done complex decoupage on items of furniture. Some of these

works have made their way out of her house, into the hands of friends and collectors, where they are often treasured. Making collages as a fine-art venture was the next logical step. She uses paper and fabric, cut out and pieced together and combined with painted elements.

Her practice has changed over the years. She used to harvest paper for collages from books and magazines, selecting for color and texture as she went along. She's far more likely today to paint paper the exact color she has in mind, and cut it out.

You can see the advantages in "Jazz," the signature image of the exhibit. It depicts a colorfully dressed sextet (five instrumentalists, one vocalist) on an outdoor stage. Customizing the colors makes it easier to achieve balance. These days, she likes looking at Persian miniatures, and envies the intensity of their colors. Ms. Phillips's house, a wood-frame, 100-year-old two-family in West Brighton, is full of things she's made over the years.

She often works in the living room. That's where the museum shot the video that will be part of "Pieces of Spirit." It's an important part of the picture, according to Diane Matyas, who is curating: "Look the color, the form, the narrative of her work. Look at the house. This is what it means to make art."

ARTISTIC MOTIVATION

The collages have different agendas. Some treat societal problems — violence, poverty, drugs — or domestic scenes that she lifts right out of her neighborhood and the news. Or they may relate vignettes of personal history.

One new piece has a central figure dressed in a light blue suit, It's Maurice Phillips, surrounded by significant elements: A churchyard he played in as a boy, sculptures he carved, his Volkswagen, the section of Richmond Terrace he was in when he was killed in a two-car collision in 1972.

Another piece has a meditating figure in the lotus position on a green lawn. It is actually about 9/11, according to the artist. "I could not process Sept. 11 for several years," she said, "and when I could, I made this."

Ms. Phillips, who has worked for many years as a substitute teacher, was meditating on Sept. 11 when the attack occurred.

She has been practicing yoga for nearly 25 years. She wasn't seeking spiritual dividends when she started. "I was in my late 40s and I has a lot of aches and pains, probably from jogging," she said. "Someone suggested that I try yoga."

She enrolled at Integral Yoga in Manhattan, which proved to be a good fit. "I didn't miss a session in 13 years," she said. The aches and pains evaporated.

Eventually she taught yoga in a continuing education program at Susan Wagner High School. Budget cuts dismantled the program some time ago; she hasn't returned to teaching and doesn't think she will.

“I think I just don't like the sound of my own voice telling people what to do any more,” she said.

She lives without some of the devices most people take for granted. She drives but has no computer or television set. She meditates outdoors — she has secret spots at Snug Harbor, Silver Lake and the Greenbelt she frequents from spring to fall. Her goal is to treat meditation and art-making like work, as scheduled, daily regimens.

Recently she decided to begin absorbing the Bhagavad Gita, the 600-verse, Sanskrit wisdom text that adherents think of as a “manual for mankind.”

She and her son, who lives upstairs with his wife and daughters, have started to read sections together every morning.

‘Andrea Phillips: Pieces of Spirit’

A 40-piece collage collection opening with an reception from 3-7 p.m. Feb. 3

When

Sunday-Friday, noon-5 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; through June 5.

Where

Staten Island Museum, 75 Stuyvesant Pl., St. George; 718-727-1135

More information

Visit StatenIslandMuseum.org