

"Artist, Resident"

Anthony Rudisill, whose work is on display at the Noyes Museum, is living evidence that traveling is not required to discover a wildlife artist

By Kimball Baker

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"Too often we talk of finding good artists of the scenery and wildlife in our areas as if that automatically means we have to go elsewhere – to Philly, or New York, or some other 'art capital'...; The truth is that many times, the artists we're looking for are already right here."

The speaker of these words is Anthony Rudisill, a resident of West Atlantic City and a nature artist who gets much of his inspiration from South Jersey landscapes and seascapes. He is thus a prime example of his own assertion, which he makes with the confidence born of half a century portraying our region and of the local, national and international recognition he has gained for these and other portrayals.

At "*Capturing the Jersey Shore: Works of Anthony J. Rudisill*", a show on exhibit until Sept. 10 at the Noyes Museum of Art, in Galloway Township, Rudisill, 66, recently stood in the midst of the sizable, multi-decade sampling of his paintings and bird sculptures and marveled at seeing so much of his life's work to date all in one place. What most amazes him, he says, is that all the work on display comes from the convergence of a few simple childhood activities – rambling through the woods with a fellow Boy Scout and best friend, avidly studying his dad's Audubon book of birds, and painting a vase of flowers with his first set of oils and giving the likeness to his mom for Christmas.

That all happened in Haverford, Pennsylvania, planting the seeds of Rudisill's artistic career. He is largely self-taught. He dropped out of junior high art class, finding it too confining. In his daydreams, he sometimes imagines how the teacher of that class would react if she saw him now!

Soon afterward, in 1949, his family relocated to this area, and a similar experience occurred. His dad arranged for him to take art lessons from Frederick Noyes (later the co-founder, as fate would have it, of the Noyes Museum), but after several lessons Anthony got restless, and being out in the marshes with his boat won out over lesson-taking.

Rudisill picked up much, however, from both the lessons he did take and from his exploration of South Jersey's plentiful natural wonders. At age 19, he set up shop as a commercial artist, and for the next decade paid the bills (he married at 23, and several kids soon came along) through illustrating billboards, model-airplane boxes, postcards of hotels and motels, and other practical masterworks. In the process, he developed a reputation for accuracy and perspective which he also displayed in the bird carvings and wildlife paintings he did on the side.

In the early 1960's – and here fate re-enters – he ran into Fred Noyes again, at a decoy carving show in Smithville Inn. Noyes introduced him to the head of Newman Galleries in Philadelphia, who liked and promoted Rudisill's work, enabling the artist to become commercially successful with his "non-commercial" work. Over the next several decades, his meticulously detailed bird prints and sculptures won him such clients as the Franklin Mint and the National Wildlife Federation, and such honors as the prestigious Ward Foundation's "Best in World" award and the showing of his work at the Smithsonian Institution.

Examples of this period of Rudisill's artistic development are well represented in the Noyes showing. At the sculpture "Green Herons", for example, you half-expect the birds depicted to fly off at any moment. Nearby, at the base of a rendering in wood of several smaller birds, a cactus-like bit of debris

(modeled after a real-life sample supplied by the artist's brother in California) looks as if it were on a desert floor.

Also well-represented are works from the artist's latest phase of development, one that started a couple of years ago and now has him reinvigorated and excited about finishing his work in-progress, a 30x40 seascape of the ocean from Longport as it looked during Hurricane Floyd's toying with us last year. Rudisill likes to have two or three projects waiting in the wings, and he turns them around in his mind as he does his current work.

The impetus for this new phase of development came about in an unusual way, resulting as it did from a disappointment. The Franklin Mint, for reasons not clear to Rudisill, ended their long partnership. Gradually, however, as the artist turned away from birds as his main topic (and from the eye-straining, expensive, time and space-consuming labor which painting and sculpting them often involved), he felt a sense of liberation and renewed creativity. Birds have not disappeared from his work, but now when they appear, they do so for a specific purpose and a broader context.

Not only that, but Rudisill started doing the bulk of his painting in a different medium and with different materials. Now, he uses primarily acrylic paints on boards rather than painting primarily in gouache, or opaque watercolors. He likes the durability of acrylics – for example, the fact that they do not have to be covered by glass as gouache works do.

Whatever the case, these changes have added a new vibrancy to Rudisill's art and his approach to it. When he stands in the middle of his works on display and you ask him to pick out his favorite one, he enthuses and struggles as if you had asked him to pick out his favorite child. He points to "Snow Goose" and "Blue Goose", two of his earliest bird studies, and says he likes them now more than ever because he sees the fresher-eyed consciousness they reflect. Of his later bird likenesses, he likes most those in action in a landscape, as in "Double Fury", a 1975 gouache in which two hawks tangle with a rattler. He notes that this painting, which makes its home in the Newman Galleries, has attracted more clients than any other single piece.

But he is most enthusiastic when talking about his works of last year and this, some of the subjects nearby – such as "Broad Thorofare", a view of the Ocean City skyline from the section of waterway with the painting's name – and other subjects farther from home base. There are paintings, for example, of places he has been with his daughter, such as the rich farmland of Berks County, Pennsylvania, or the rocky coastline of Mount Desert Island, Maine. And there are paintings of places which just caught Rudisill's attention as he happened by, such as the view from Route 40 of sunlight playing among a field's greenery. Chances are you'll be able to identify with that one.

One view portrayed can be seen right through the big glass window outside the exhibition gallery's entrance. "Sun and Ice" depicts Lily Lake in winter, and the snow on the painting's trees is so close to life that you want to shake it off. Indeed, a number of the scenes shown in the exhibition are from the Edwin B. Forsythe Wildlife Refuge, which Noyes Museum adjoins.

Anthony Rudisill painted these scenes before there was a museum, and at this point in our story we hear fate's footsteps again. Fred Noyes taught Rudisill and helped him in his career, as discussed above. In 1973, Noyes and his wife Ethel Marie announced their intention to fund an art museum, and it was to have been financed by their sale of the Historic Towne of Smithville the following year. In 1979, however, Ethel died, and the museum was not founded until 1983. Four years later, Fred died. The paths of the museum and of Anthony Rudisill, which would otherwise have crossed long since, did not cross until this exhibit, completing a circle for both the artist and the institution.