

Bringing an Ancient Art Form to the Edge of Modern Manhattan

By COREY KILGANNON



Ángel Franco/The New York Times Kevin Sudeith near one of his carvings that he has etched in northern Manhattan.

Kevin Sudeith, 47, climbed up a wooded area in northern Manhattan recently and stood in front of a rock outcropping that looked as if it had been visited by a group of industrious cave men – albeit ones with art degrees and a working knowledge of modern aircraft.

The rock's vertical face was ornamented with some 20 carvings, each about the size of a dinner plate and up to an inch deep.

The sketches in stone looked like expert doodles of an array of flying objects that included hot-air balloons, police helicopters, space shuttles and satellites.

They were the handiwork of Mr. Sudeith, an artist with a master's degree in painting and a longtime fascination with ancient stone carvings, or petroglyphs.

Mr. Sudeith said he began making charcoal drawings on stone about 10 years ago, but then realized that "it will last longer if it's carved."

So in 2007 he began carving images into rock formations here in this wooded area. First he made a jumbo jet, then a man on a bicycle and then more aircraft, usually flying objects he had observed over New York City: the hot-air balloons he saw in an exhibition, the fighter jet he saw flying over the

city one Fourth of July, a seaplane that landed in the East River and a satellite designed by the father of a friend living in Queens.

“I see it as storytelling and documenting, in a special way, some of the cool stuff from our moment in time,” he said, adding that the first carvings were slow and laborious to execute.

“This is Manhattan schist – it’s up to 500 million years old, and very hard,” he said. “Midtown and Wall Street skyscrapers are bolted to this stuff.”

Mr. Sudeith used chisels and battery-powered tools to create bas-relief renderings that exhibited perspective, depth and detail. Even a small carving could take up to a week to finish. He worked even in cold weather, and at one point contracted a bad case of poison ivy, and he loved it all.

The area is city parkland and Mr. Sudeith executed the carvings without getting permission. But he said these unobtrusive carvings could hardly be considered vandalism. Unlike many graffiti painters, he went out of his way to make sure they would not be in a highly visible spot.

He said he looked at topographical maps of New York City to find “the most underutilized place I could find,” but one with rocky outcroppings. This spot in Upper Manhattan – he asked that the exact location not be disclosed — takes some pretty rugged hiking and climbing to access.

The only people who came upon him working were some teenagers cutting through the woods and walking two pit bulls. The dogs froze and stared down Mr. Sudeith.

“The kids came up and one of them said: ‘You’re the one doing these? These are mad cool,’ which I took great pride in,” Mr. Sudeith recalled, after climbing a bit farther up a slope last week to show a few more carvings to a reporter.

“There’s some poison ivy,” he said, pointing to a three-leafed plant, “and there’s a hypodermic needle wrapper.”

To share his work with more than the occasional hiker, Mr. Sudeith makes prints from his carvings — embossed impressions that he creates by applying ink or paint to the etchings and then rubbing wet paper on them.

“The prints are the emissaries of the carvings back to town, or society,” said Mr. Sudeith, who is currently showing his rubbings in a show called “Modern Petroglyphs” at [308 at 156 Project Art Space](#), at Fifth Avenue and 20th Street in Manhattan, through June 22.

Mr. Sudeith, who grew up in Minnesota, said he remembered being struck, even as a teenager, while seeing American Indian petroglyphs there while camping, and later at age 21, seeing images on stone in Australia.

He moved to New York City in 1993 to pursue a master’s degree at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, and he helped support himself by setting up at downtown Manhattan flea markets and selling woolen carpets woven in a traditional Afghan style that depict images of machine guns, tanks and warplanes.

The uptown petroglyphs served as a test case, after which he packed up his tools and camping gear, and began carving his way across the continent, from California to Nova Scotia.

Mostly he worked on private property with the permission of the owner, often carving images reflecting the local culture, like carvings of moose and fishing boats in Nova Scotia, farm equipment in North Dakota or a commuter train he carved on a natural stone wall inside a garage in Berkeley, Calif.

In the end, it is the permanence that is the rub, said Mr. Sudeith, looking over his Manhattan petroglyphs, a short hike from nearby bustling streets.

“These should last 10,000 years,” he said, “or at least until they build something here.”



Ángel Franco/The New York Times Many of Mr. Sudeith’s etchings are of items he has spotted flying over New York City.

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