

## **WAR STORY**

### **Artist Ralph Sirianni finds peaceful world in work with veterans**

*By JANA EISENBERG, Special to The News, 11/11/2005*

"Peaceful World," the current show at the Virginia Weiss Gallery at Empire State College, offers only one aspect of artist Ralph Sirianni's universe. A series of still-lives and landscapes in a style that blends abstract and impressionist techniques, it is supported by photographs of the locations depicted in the paintings.

Sirianni, 56, is a Vietnam War veteran - he served for a year with the Marines. On today, Veterans Day, it's interesting to note that Sirianni says his military experience is a major factor in his work. He dates his entire life either pre- or post-Vietnam, and he continues to work with veterans today as a creative arts therapist.

The artist grew up on Buffalo's West Side, and he can't remember not drawing or doing some sort of artistic expression.

"If I didn't have money to buy supplies, I would go by the print shop, and they would give me scraps of paper to draw on," he said.

True to his lifelong dream, Sirianni now lives and breathes art. If he's not at his job with Veterans Affairs, he's making art in his studio, or teaching portrait and caricature drawing at Ken-Ton Continuing Education. He also spends time volunteering as a police sketch artist and working as a courtroom artist.

"When I came back from Vietnam, I went to University at Buffalo to complete my art degree, and I was lucky enough to meet Walter Prochownik," Sirianni said. "He became my mentor."

Well-known artist Prochownik was a veteran of World War II, and the two bonded.

"Walter understood my pain and anger, and helped me channel it through art. He said "You are not a camera. You need to release your feelings and paint what you feel.' "

Sirianni continues to contribute to society in ways that strongly rely on his talent, chosen path and war experience.

"As an art therapist for the Veterans Administration, I share a lot with my clients. Many of them have post-traumatic stress symptoms," he said. "They can be nonverbal and heavily medicated. They might not have a lot to say, but they start putting paint down and they start to open up."

Volunteering for the police provides him another outlet to be of assistance.

"I had to interview a young rape victim," Sirianni said. "I got her description of the person that did it and was able to do a sketch. They arrested the guy and credited me. The mother wrote and thanked me.

"It's very rewarding to take my lifelong experience with art and share it with students," he said. "But when I can do something to help a person who's been the victim of abuse, I truly feel blessed."

"Peaceful World" explores Sirianni's desire to create his own refuge and offers to share it with the public. The show is on display through Nov. 23.