

## Searing Memories, Etched in Art; The Imprint of Sept. 11 Emerges, Sometimes Subtly

By RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD  
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He is hunched over the canvas on the floor, dabbing at it with a long brush, looking as if he were fishing something out of a pond with a stick.

First come dark swirls of black, and then washes of aluminum gray. The gray billows like clouds masking a jagged nest of black marks. Michael Mulhern, an Abstract Expressionist painter, moves around his work, drawing inspiration from somewhere within, fighting the urge to throw away this piece as imperfections taunt his eye.

He steps back. Like so many others he has painted since Sept. 11, this piece is "busy with information," a departure from the softer curtains of pale gray that dominated his work in progress -- the "Ash" series. That is, the work that was in progress when he watched two jetliners demolish the World Trade Center just outside the windows of his loft at 125 Cedar Street.

"The previous work was very quiet," Mr. Mulhern said during a break at his temporary studio in Long Island City, Queens. "This is almost severe. I can't believe it is not a response."

Mr. Mulhern leans in closer, pointing to small oval marks made using the base of a foam cup. He recalls the goggles he wore as he escaped from his apartment after the buildings came down, the blizzard of debris that blew out his windows and nearly suffocated him.

"On the goggles, as I was looking out, there were specks of dust not unlike these up here," he said.

All around him are the large canvases of his art, filled with the seemingly haphazard but intricate black, gray, silver and sepia strokes and blotches that define his work. Abstract Expressionism seems a fitting style to translate the chaos of the event, of crawling through the soot and muck to find his way out of his apartment and staggering through the moonscape that his neighborhood had become.

"It's kind of like that day when I was wondering, was it really a car under all that or not? Is this the street or part of a building?" Mr. Mulhern said.

Cedar Street, with its spacious lofts, large windows and low rents, attracted several artists, who drew varying degrees of inspiration from living next door to the city's tallest buildings. In the more than six months since the attacks, they have begun to discover the disaster's imprint on their work.

Dianne Blell, a photographer, has taken sudden interest in sketching serene images of quiet lakes. Michael Cook, a painter, has found surreal, spiraling shapes in his recent work, an abstract shift from his idyllic landscapes. Elena del Rivero, an artist who uses craft-based materials, is working on a project that incorporates the dust, debris and paper from the towers that she and her husband, Kyle Brooks, retrieved from their loft.

The painter Andy Jurinko, who had been searching for a new direction in his art even before Sept. 11, found it afterward with a radical departure from the sports images that have dominated his work: he is painting nudes.

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"I wanted to deal with images that were pleasant," Mr. Jurinko said.

And there is Mr. Mulhern, 61, who made no such dramatic turn but finds 9/11 and the turmoil of dislocation infiltrating his work just the same.

He is living temporarily with his ex-wife; he and the other residents may not be allowed to move back for at least another couple of months, while the building is cleaned of contaminated dust and debris inside and out. He spends hours on end in his temporary studio, with its drab gray floor, paint-dabbled stool and ladder and air reeking of linseed oil and turpentine.

He has always cobbled together a living. He sells maybe one or two pieces a year, earning a meager living as a freelance graphic artist. To pay the bills from thumb surgery a year ago, he arranged incremental payments to the physicians and may give a surgeon one of his paintings in exchange for his services.

He has lived at 125 Cedar for 23 years, in part because of its relative isolation in the financial district, and in part because, like many of the other residents, he could ill afford the same space in other Manhattan neighborhoods. He was paying less than \$1,000 in rent for a 2,000-square-foot spread, which includes a studio large enough to accommodate his 9-foot-by-9-foot canvases.

Mr. Mulhern is represented by a gallery, Salander-O'Reilly, on the Upper East Side, but with such large works that he concedes are "difficult to get into," he hardly expects to strike it rich.

Still, he paints.

"A lot of it is about failing, loss, disappointment and regret," Mr. Mulhern said in a quiet but intense voice. "Being rebuffed. The work is not accepted. A lot of artists feed on being neglected, not being desired or wanted."

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Mulhern slipped into a white smock and, fueled by gallons of coffee, he stirred his aluminum-based oil paint, preparing for another go at success.

He tunes out his predicament, for the most part, while he works, but it has a way of intruding. He recently took a call from a deliveryman to arrange for the tubes he needs to wrap up his scores of paintings at Cedar Street. They must be packed up and removed in preparation for the cleaning of his loft.

He has sought to make the adjustment to this studio, significantly smaller than his Cedar Street space. The view here looks out on a large blue warehouse, with the tips of distant Midtown Manhattan skyscrapers peeking over rooftops.

At Cedar Street, in his ninth-floor studio, Mr. Mulhern felt he could reach out and touch the south tower, and had come to know the office workers across the way in 4 World Trade Center, who would watch him work from their own windows.

"At first it was like having an audience," Mr. Mulhern recalled, "but we got used to each other."

The buildings, he believes, clearly influenced his work. In the 1980's, in fact, he turned out a series of works with images of blocks that he is certain must have come from peering out the window at the boxy behemoths of the trade center.

"I live amongst these structures," Mr. Mulhern said. "How could I not be influenced?"

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Consider that day. He was looking out his window, photographing the tornado of black smoke from the north tower, in time to see the top of the south tower explode. When it came crashing down, the storm of ash, soot and debris buried him -- "like having comforters and blankets over you." His throat parched and seared and his apartment still black with the haze of smoke, he drank the only available water in reach, from the toilet bowl.

Frozen by fear, he did not leave his building until a few hours after the second tower, the north tower, fell. He made his way to his ex-wife's home, and a little over a month later, friends helped him secure this studio space.

He took solace in painting, large works and small, though he was uncertain as usual where it was leading him.

"I start with charcoal marks, hit it with a brush, with black acrylic," Mr. Mulhern explained, marking a sheet of white paper on the floor. "I go back to dealing with the marks. It seems slipshod, so I go over it again, erasing and making darker, lighter, covering it up."

He has done this over and over again, so far making eight large paintings and, mainly for practice, dozens more a little smaller than a sheet of loose-leaf paper.

Soon he took notice of changes, more helter-skelter patterns submerged under gray hues.

He took a stab at interpretation for the benefit of a visitor. "It reminds me of being at the trade center," he said. "That fear, you can't return. You're putting yourself on the line. Why not make a run for it? It's a mystery."

He is erasing marks. He is adding new ones. He is dabbing again, poking, fishing. He cannot stop. Especially not now.

"It's got mojo," he said. "It's about the human spirit. The real great stuff has it -- music, literature. It tells us about us. It reveals myself to myself."

125 Cedar Street

This is the fifth article in an occasional series on the residents of 125 Cedar Street in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack. Other articles in the series are available at [nytimes.com/nyregion](http://nytimes.com/nyregion).

Photos: At Cedar Street, Michael Mulhern once felt as if he could touch 2 World Trade Center from his window. On Sept. 11, he took this photo as a plane hit the tower.; Michael Mulhern, who lived at 125 Cedar Street, now has a temporary studio in Queens, where Sept. 11 still influences his art. (Photographs by Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times)