

Haunted by hope

By Chris Bergeron/DAILY NEWS STAFF
GHS
Sun Feb 17, 2008, 12:33 AM EST



WINCHESTER -

In the morgue, measles ward and vacant rooms, Stephen Wilkes photographs the ghosts who haunt Ellis Island in spectral images of great poignancy and power.

Starting in 1998, he spent five years exploring and photographing the ruined hospital complex on Ellis Island in New York Harbor where 1.2 million immigrants were treated for medical problems between 1892 and 1954.

While there are no people in these striking photos, Wilkes evokes immigrants' bleak ordeals by documenting the now-dilapidated rooms, hospital and grounds where they waited for clearance to enter the United States.

In lingering shadows and sunbeams streaking down an empty corridor, the forgotten lives of Angelina Palmiero, Pietro Pizzo and Nachbur Urs come alive once more on the lonely island where immigrant dreams languished in view of the Statue of Liberty.

Now, 29 of Wilkes' large-format color photos are on display at the Griffin Museum of Photography in a gorgeous exhibit that evokes the suffering newcomers faced seeking freedom and better lives. The show, "Stephen Wilkes, Ellis Island: Ghosts of Freedom," runs through March 30 at the museum on Lake Shore Drive, Winchester.

Museum Executive Director Paula Tognarelli described Wilkes' photos as "technically beautiful...(and) almost spiritual."

"Wilkes gives visitors a view of Ellis Island as if they were the ones entering these rooms and seeing them for the first time," she said. "The first time I saw these photos the hair of my arms stood up."

Tognarelli said Wilkes achieved his brilliant colors by using light-sensitive film with long exposures that recorded his images on 4-by-5-inch negatives that preserve exact details and nuanced degrees of light and shadow.

The colors of Wilkes photos seem to burn from within like an iron rod heated by an acetylene torch.



His minimalist burnt orange photo of the linen room door smolders like lava rushing down a volcano's slopes.

Yet in a deceptively simple photo of the hospital morgue, a bleached white porcelain sink and rusted plumbing fixtures convey a sense of depleted energies and dreams that can never be restored.

From his Connecticut studio, Wilkes said for this series he used an ARCA-SWISS camera known for high-quality images. Also used by photographer Ansel Adams toward the end of his legendary career, the ARCA, which is usually mounted on a tripod, shoots a single high-definition negative.

In wall text accompanying the show, Wilkes said he never digitally enhanced his photos' colors.

Working with the New York Landmarks Conservancy, Wilkes made a video of the hospital complex on Ellis Island that was presented to the U.S. Congress. Two years later, Congress allocated \$6 million to preserve the island's south side as a historic living ruin.

Tognarelli predicted the exhibit will have broad appeal since virtually all Americans' family roots stretch back to other lands. After visiting Ellis Island to research her own family history, she was struck by Wilkes' success creating images from a ruined hospital that captured the plight of immigrants waiting for their fate to be decided.

In his lovely but haunting "Isolation Ward," Wilkes photographed a worn steamer trunk, still locked, laying on the dirty wooden floor of an empty room with peeling wallpaper.

Suggesting the volume and anonymity of immigrants who passed through the hospital complex, the photo "Measles Ward, oak file cabinets" simply shows rows of cabinets with drawers flung open, lining the walls of a silent empty room.

"We all crossed the border," said Tognarelli. "Many people never got off the island."

After learning of Wilkes photos, she visited Ellis Island to research the history of family members who had left their native Italy for the United States. Tognarelli was surprised to discover her grandfather, from the village of Lucca in Tuscany, initially traveled to Cuba where he spent many years teaching sculpture before arriving in the United States around 1930.

"Everyone has a story of how they came," she said.

Through informative introductory panels and eloquent wall text accompanying each picture, Wilkes wrote he was overwhelmed by the site, fascinated by "the palpable presence of humanity" in the ruined and empty structures.

We can't see the former patients, but in "Main Hospital, blue room," we can imagine them on the single iron-framed bed where someone slept in the cramped room with paint-flaked walls and a single overhead light.

At the core of Wilkes' power is his ability to nudge viewers into creating private narratives that infuse these dreary rooms with a human presence.

He confounds our expectations by recording seemingly insignificant details like a dirty sink or a chair facing a window that remind us of countless newcomers who passed through there. Avoiding visual dramatics, he infuses recognizable yearnings into a desolate interior landscape of locked rooms, dirty sinks and cheap furniture with such immediacy we can visualize "the huddled masses" waiting for their future to arrive.

Like echoes of long-silent voices, the actual words of immigrants who passed through the hospital still speak to visitors from mounted wall text.

"This was not the America I was led to believe it was going to be," said Scottish immigrant Thomas Allen, who was confined to the hospital in 1927 at the age of 9 with a case of chicken pox. "And here I was, literally a prisoner."

On a nearby wall, one of Wilkes' most striking images, "Tuberculosis ward, Statue of Liberty," brings painfully alive the plight of newcomers, stranded within view of their dreams. Just above two dust-covered sinks fixed to a dirty yellow wall, a small mirror catches the reflection, through an unseen window, of the Statue of Liberty just hundreds of yards away, raising her torch like a "lamp beside a golden door."

Without judging, Wilkes' photos capture the harsh juxtaposition of hope and hopelessness immigrants must have felt after leaving their native lands behind, yet unable to enter a new home.

The words of a young Russian girl, Karen Hesse, hospitalized with typhus and ringworm, speak for thousands of other immigrants who once lived in the now-deserted rooms, looking through iron-barred windows to the shores of freedom not far away.

"Ellis Island is a line separating my future from my past," she wrote in a later memoir, "Letters to Rifka." "Until I cross that line, I am still homeless, still an immigrant."

Wilkes' photographs document that line and all the despair and dreams of those who crossed it and those who could not. They convey a painful beauty that deserves to be seen and pondered.