



LATE AFTERNOON, AN ISLAND VIEW BY STEVE MILLS.

Vineyard Painter Steve Mills Debuts at the Granary Gallery

By DANIEL WATERS

Sunday's cold, gray drizzle may have dampened a few barbecues, but there was nothing dismal about that afternoon's opening of the latest show at the Granary Gallery in West Tisbury. Word had evidently gotten out that a new and important young Vineyard talent was making his first one-man debut that evening for, drizzle or no drizzle, the parking lot was filled with cars minutes after the show opened.

Twenty-four-year-old Steve Mills paints with stunning power and verve. His portraits of the Vineyard sing with authenticity. His is not the work of just another weekend painter, but a stirring statement by a young man with Vineyard in his veins. As one woman put it, "You could live here 20 summers and still not be able to paint a picture like that. This fellow's lived through a few Island winters."

Chalk it up to his Vineyard upbringing, but Mr. Mills knows the drama of the Vineyard sky. In an oil called *Sunset Over Chilmark*, he has captured the way wild, jetstream-whipped cirrus clouds dominate the winter landscape at sunset. Here the earth and its trees and houses are seen in black silhouette against a blur of gray cloud and canteloupe-tinged sky. Fantastic feathery arms shoot into the darkening blue, recalling the vertigo you feel when you try to take in something as enormous as the winter heavens.

In *Racing the Storm*, the drama again is in the sky. A furious thunderstorm overcomes West Chop, where rain already is falling, as a sailboat races desperately for the shelter of the harbor. Terrible black-bellied ice-cream-scoop thunderheads dwarf the valiant but puny man-made vessel, to awe-inspiring effect.

But there is also subtlety and peace in Mr. Mills's work. In *Late Afternoon*, at low tide, a handful of boats languish in a marshy flat of Chilmark Pond, near the artist's house. The water is placid, mirroring grasses and masts. In the foreground, the muddy shore breaks the sky's reflection into a mosaic of puddle-shaped fragments. Beyond the boats, a field of marsh grass stretches for miles toward a soft, gray, misty sky. From mere description, this may sound

like a scene thousands of artists have painted, but Mr. Mills has the rare gift of being able to bring freshness and originality to whatever he paints. He employs his eyes. He thinks about what he sees. He banishes banality through sheer intensity and steadfast integrity.

Integrity seems an odd word to apply to an artist, yet it is a moving quality in Steve Mills's work. An oil called *Warm Summer's Eye* portrays a startling sunset over Chilmark Pond. The sky is cloudless this time, so the horizon's yellow deepens smoothly to a starry nighttime blue overhead. Within the dark profile of a gentle hill, houses are clearly visible — modern houses with plate-glass picture windows and electric lights turned on for the evening. Mr. Mills could have ignored these, but he chose to include them.

"This is Chilmark Pond at sunset, after a cold front's gone through and the air is crystal-clear, and there's just enough light to see where you're going," Mr. Mills said. "The houses are there because they're part of the whole scene. There are some parts of this Island, especially down-Island, that are just house upon house upon house. They're part of the Vineyard too, for me."

Steve Mills's unflinching honesty carries through to a few human vignettes of Martha's Vineyard. *Summer's End* is a small canvas of three Steamship Authority crewmen rolling back the iron doors to the ferry's automobile deck. It is late afternoon, and the sun casts a long shaft of light through the open crack between doors. The poignancy lies in the implicit exhaustion and relief: here is a facet of Vineyard life which finds little voice in our art. The age-old Island story of autumn's welcome release is widely known but rarely told.

Similarly, there is an acrylic called *After Hours*, showing a young jogger in mid-summer scrutinizing the poster-littered bulletin board at a deserted Alley's General Store. Perhaps he is looking for a summer rental, a roommate, or a job. Mr. Mills painted in loving detail the lettering of the familiar store sign (it is perfectly reproduced) and the sandy tracks left by hundreds of summer feet across the porch floorboards. This is

a slice of Vineyard quotidian which almost never finds expression.

Sunday's gallery-goers were quick to react to Steve Mills's work, and comments were overwhelmingly favorable. "I probably got enough commissions tonight to keep me busy for the rest of the year," he said happily. It seemed a propitious beginning to a promising career.

Paintings by Mr. Mills will be on display at the Granary Gallery through July 30.