



BUILDING STORMS, OIL BY STEVE MILLS.

Painter Steve Mills Continues Growth with Second Exhibition

By DANIEL WATERS

It had not been a comfortable day. Sunday was, in fact, exactly the sort of gray, sticky, graceless day air conditioning was invented for. There seemed only two options: to empty six trays of ice cubes into a hot tub and plunge in, clothes and all, or to head straight for the Granary Gallery in West Tisbury, which was opening with fresh new works by Steve Mills.

No one should have been surprised to find a traffic jam in the parking lot of Brandy Wight and Bruce Blackwell's secluded up-Island gallery. When Steve Mills had his debut show there last summer, word quickly spread that an important new Vineyard artist had arrived, and within a week he had made the pages of the Boston Globe. Commission orders poured in, guaranteeing the young Mr. Mills a busy winter.

Aside from his obvious technical skill, there is one basic reason for Steve Mills's rapidly growing popularity: He was raised here and knows the Island intimately, and this shows in his work. He knows, for instance, that to paint Martha's Vineyard is to paint this Island's weather, for the land gains its character from the moods of the sea and the sky.

Building Storms, a large oil painting, distills the perennial Vineyard tension between humanity and the enormity of the world. Here a tiny fishing trawler makes for safety in a vast and open sea, under the onslaught of a great, plough-shaped blade of impending rain. The rain-begetting clouds are an angry iron gray, swirling and knotting themselves into muscular furrows that threaten to crowd a small wedge of blue sky and sunshine out of the picture.

The scope of the painting is almost cosmic, the point of view so all-encompassing that this is really a picture of three distinct moments: before the storm, during it, and after the storm has passed. Each has its own atmosphere, and as the eye sweeps across the canvas the narrative comes to life.

"I love contrasts," says Mr. Mills. "I love light and dark." He also loves to juxtapose serenity and fury; man and Nature.

Steve Mills's newest pictures show him exploring the properties of light. Spring Shadows is a large acrylic study in whites. Two pairs of carriage house doors have been swung open wide, perhaps for the first time since winter. The sun shines bright, and a cat lounges in the welcome new warmth. But the subject is really these doors, which are freshly white-washed. Within the white is the texture of wood grain in the planks; the bluish

shadow of chains hanging from the bolts; the seams between the boards; the nail holes; and even the remarkable impression that the new whitewash has coated over previous years' whitewash, which in places had begun to blister and chip. Mr. Mills's meticulous brush and unerring eye make this more than a mere picture of carriage house doors; it is an entire life history of the carriage house, its owners and occupants. Like Building Storms, it captures more than one moment in time.

Then there is an oil called Porch Swing. Here a grapevine-tangled arbor shreds sunlight into splashes and dapples across an open, comfortable porch whose house, with its sagging shutters and peeling screen door, has seen many a lazy and chore-free summer. The picture is about a two-person swing which hangs invitingly from the arbor by chains and stirs latent quick!-grab-the-swing-before-my-sister-does! impulses in anyone who was not an only child. The human presence is so palpable (if not visible), it seems the swing's owner has only just stepped indoors for a glass of lemonade.

In Off Gay Head, an oil, the accomplishment is the sea. This is a Devil's-Bridge-eye view of the fabled cliffs, with a gentle sunny sky whose clouds match the round edges of the eroding cliffs. The sea, too, is soft: waves are not sharp, nor is the water broken. Instead, it is a wonderful, deep-hued gem of an ocean with depth on depth of blue and just a wink of a jewel-like sparkle on the wave tips — not of foam, but of sun. You would swear Mr. Mills had spent not just 25 years, but an entire lifetime observing the sea. He paints like someone with much older eyes; and Vineyard eyes, at that.

Steve Mills continues to broaden and deepen his grasp of his subject, and the Vineyard audience watches his growing maturity with fascination. When a crowd again flocks to the Granary Gallery for the next Steve Mills opening, a year or so from now, it will be to see what new lessons Mr. Mills can teach us about our this Island which we too often take for granted, and in what new ways he will sharpen our eyes.

The paintings of Mr. Mills will be on display at the Granary Gallery through Saturday, August 18.