

# Mills shows inside of Island

By Gerald R. Kelly

Around 20 elegantly clad Islanders were milling about in the parking lot behind the Granary Gallery in West Tisbury last Sunday, waiting until 5 p.m., when the doors would open on the exhibition by Steve Mills.

Beverly Sills, who did not want to cope with the crowds, had already come by to buy a portrait of the Wesley House. A few other paintings had also been sold. Some were not for sale, such as the painting of the Granary Gallery, which was the property of Brandon Wight and Bruce Blackwell.

But 26 of the 30 paintings were snapped up almost immediately and the exhibit was an enormous success for Steve Mills, who was enjoying himself to the hilt. His most serious problem was choosing which painting to reproduce for mass sales. The last one had been a harbor view of a fishing boat rendered golden by the late afternoon sun. Now he must choose between "Autumn Pods" and "Seaview Avenue," between nature and architecture. He was advised to pick Seaview Avenue, since it was classic American seaside resort architecture.

Mills is as Vineyard as Beetlebung Corner or Dutcher Dock. He has insider's information in many of the paintings, such as the one of

fisherman Louis Larsen standing on the pulpit of his swordfishing boat with an old-fashioned harpoon and, high overhead, a spotter plane circling the area and radioing Larsen where a swordfish might be basking on the surface of the sea. Mills would know that the spotter planes used to take off from Tradewind Airport in Oak Bluffs, filled to the brim and then some with gasoline for the full day's flying ahead.

Mills would also know that his "West Chop" was a painting of the house of Mollie McAlpin, who was the president of Martha's Vineyard Community Services until she died.

He would know the circumstances behind his remarkably lovely painting, "Posted," which captures so well a sylvan glade in Chilmark, with its perfect juxtaposition of stone wall (a single stone lying near it, ejected, perhaps, by nature over the years), a spray of scrub oak and a magnificently spreading, shading pine. The bright yellow sign that makes the painting a statement, reads, "No Hunting. No Trapping. No Fishing." And, says the painting silently: "No Islanders." It would be an Islander who painted that.

"Quansoo" typifies Mills' precise use of Vineyard light, which is to Island artists as crucial in their art as was the burning, revealing sunlight of

Arles to Van Gogh. Vineyard light on a clear, dry summer day is special to artists and scenery observers. It does not bathe the Island as much as it clarifies it, making objects stand out brilliantly. In "Quansoo," the few rollers come in on a flat expanse of Chilmark's South Beach, all under a summer sun.

"Red Dory" reveals Mills' talent for capping a painting with a focal point. As the distant spotter plane in the painting of Larsen completes that painting, here, a small red boat is the exclamation point in a subtle mist that gentles the outlines of other boats in the harbor.

"Gradual Clearing" is another purely Vineyard picture. The sky is parting like a curtain on a stage, opening on the drama of the afterstorm as birds hesitantly return to the recently turbulent air.

"Almost There," is off Island, but only Islanders will appreciate why it was painted. The Bourne Bridge is a trigger that sets off emotions in Islanders returning to the Vineyard. Once a Vineyard traveler gets to the bridge, the knowledge that Woods Hole is only minutes away is something special. Mills sees the grace and beauty and poignancy in the fence erected not too many years ago to forestall the shocking number of suicides off the bridge during the bleak Cape Cod winters. The fence may have partially blocked a stunning

view of the canal, but it has a splendor of its own.

"Country Road" is a painting of the Panhandle, circling around the Whiting farm in West Tisbury. It would take a native such as Mills to know the importance of the road and its special, brief beauty. He would know, probably, of a half-hearted attempt by the state to eliminate a sharp curve by widening and straightening the road. The effort was stopped cold by Everett Whiting, who rejected the savaging of a gentle Vineyard roadway.

If an Islander were to leave the Vineyard and spend months away and then come across this show in some distant city, a true Islander would have to stop whatever he was doing and return home at once for a long, life-giving dose of Vineyard. In its way, this show, too, is a long, life-giving dose of the Vineyard.



"Country Road," by Steve Mills. Only a yellow road sign indicates the fact that this is the Panhandle Road in West Tisbury, not Middle Road in Chilmark in this remarkable painting.