



WINTER'S BERTH, PAINTING BY STEVE MILLS.

Steve Mills Shows New Art At Exhibition in West Tisbury

They saw it coming. Bruce Blackwell and Brandy Wight foresaw the caravan of cars that would pour into the parking lot of their Granary Gallery for the opening of Steve Mills' latest show Sunday, and they hired a special duty police officer to keep order. It was a good thing, too, because at five o'clock sharp, when the gallery doors opened, in burst a stream of 20 or 30 enthusiastic early-comers, followed by a steady flood of Steve Mills admirers, all eager for a glimpse of the Vineyard artist's latest work. For a time the crush was so great you could scarcely breathe, much less see the paintings from any distance.

Artists of merely notable talent do not inspire this kind of following in a place like Martha's Vineyard. And even if you had not seen the work of Mr. Mills in the past two years' shows, it was not hard to tell what all the fuss was about. Here is a young man whose 26 years belie the great world-wisdom of his art; here is a Vineyard painter who understands light the way an artist might hope to after a lifetime of seeing. And here is humanity; above all, humanity.

Take Posted, for instance, a portrait of a Chilmark stone wall stabbed with a sign-stapled stake whose message reads Posted: No Hunting, No Trapping, No Fishing. Behind the sign and the stones looms a dark, prohibitive spruce, its needly limbs obstructing what is no doubt a covetable view of idyllic up-Island meadows and perhaps the ocean. But what intrigues us and keeps drawing the eye back to this painting is human nature. The wall, the sign and the spruce are a fig leaf of the most teasing kind, and the natural inclination is to trespass — to step past the barriers and boundaries of propriety — and see the forbidden beauty that must lie beyond.

This year Mr. Mills is working in a smoother, faster-drying oil paint, using a doubly-primed, portrait linen canvas. This, he says, allows him to achieve even greater detail. Realism is a vital facet of his paintings which are actually stories and fables without words. Morning Solitude, for instance, speaks volumes to anyone acquainted with the life of Oak Bluffs. Here, the unrelentingly cheerful first light of the full sun shines obliquely on Seaview avenue. Green shrubs and strips of lawn and bright white ginger-

bread porches fairly gleam with purity, but there is a seamy aftertaste from the previous evening. In the middle ground, bathed also in this glorious light, stands the Seaview Hotel, looking slightly hung over. Along the ocean side of the street are a few cars parked overnight by clients who evidently thought it safer to walk home. And the macadam along the curb is spotted with crankcase oil from the bumper-to-bumper bar crowd the night before. The pristine wood trim on the houses and the curbside leftovers are treated with absolute equanimity and care; the comment is spoken by the subject itself. The new painting medium favors the rendering of architectural forms, which are portrayed impeccably here and in several other views of Vineyard streets.

But more about the Martha's Vineyard thread running through Mr. Mills' work. He sees the world the way an Islander does. Winter's Berth is a portrait of the Naushon, safely secured to her Vineyard Haven slip. Rust stains and all, this iron monument lies in her cradle of pilings, her snout snugly pressed against the Vineyard like a suckling pig at its mother's teat. Faithful to the last detail, this painting could only have been executed with the affection a Vineyarder feels for his link with the outside world.

There is a fascinating study of the Bourne Bridge in which the grays of mankind — asphalt, concrete, iron — contrast with the pure blue of the sky. The sky is the only natural thing, however ethereal, in the whole scene . . . the rest is all man-made. But the point is driven deeper by the title: only a true Vineyard could see the Bourne Bridge and think Almost Home. Indeed, the picture is of the upward sweep of the bridge, looking like nothing more than a boarding ramp to heaven. Isn't the Vineyard exactly that? Heaven? Especially compared with the knickknack-choked purgatory of Buzzards Bay's Souvenir Alley?

In Summer House, on the other hand, Steve Mills uses classic compositional technique to capture what he loves in the Island he calls home: the tranquility of the Chilmark marshlands watched over by a triple-gabled Cape on a gentle hill. Vineyard architecture harmonizes with Vineyard environment here, as lazy curves and sweeps of sand and sea grass

lead the eye gradually to the home which seems to grow naturally from the soft up-Island landscape. The creamy smoothness of Mr. Mills' new surface and paint medium serve here to make shapes friendly and fluid.

To see one Steve Mills show is to become hooked: What new discoveries will next year's crop bring? At the 1986 opening, gallery-goers will probably have to pick a number and wait in line for admission, but even this will be a small price to pay for a lesson in viewing the world through Mr. Mills' eyes.

The paintings of Steve Mills will remain on display at West Tisbury's Granary Gallery through August 31.