

# Mills' show draws 600

By Gerald R. Kelly

At 4:30 on Sunday afternoon a person apparently browsing in the Red Barn Emporium suspiciously eyed a couple being admitted into the inner sanctum of the Granary Gallery where the Steve Mills exhibit was to start at 5. With determination she marched over to the folding screen that blocks off the gallery and demanded admittance.

"The show doesn't open until 5," said Bruce Blackwell, co-owner of the antiques and art gallery. Security was rigid until 5. Everybody is given an equal opportunity to buy.

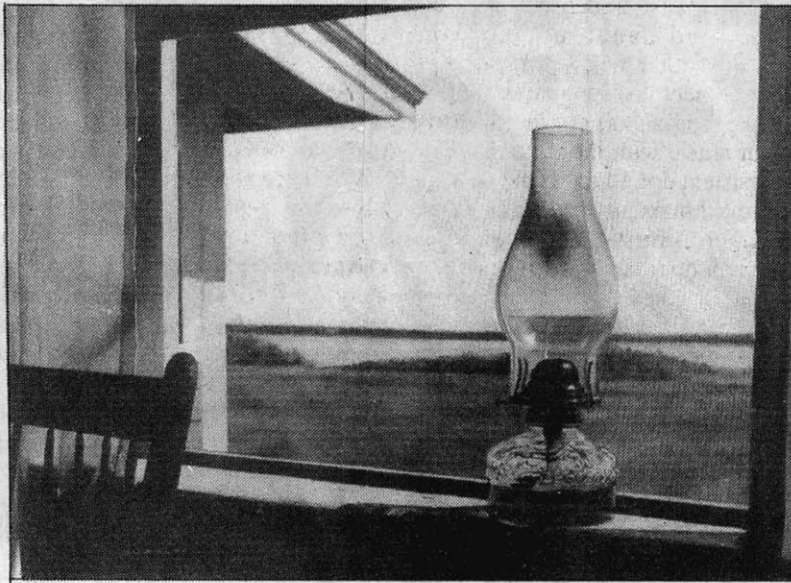
"I saw two people go in," said the woman, ready to fight for her rights.

"That," said Blackwell, "was Steve's parents."

The woman was properly put in place and the doors remained closed to the several dozen people beginning to mill around outside them. By 5 p.m., when the doors were cautiously opened, the crush of people was astonishing. There had been 600 people in a gallery that could comfortably hold, say, three dozen.

The people were summer and year-round Island residents and much too well-bred to jostle and elbow the way Filene Basement people act at a morning sale. The sight of hundreds of people moving through a gallery with exquisite courtesy, vying for the paintings, was rare and rewarding. Social amenities were stretched to the straining point as 28 red stars were stamped on the master list of paintings. By 7 p.m., only a few remained, and they were all of non-Vineyard scenes.

Why? What does this 27-year-old Islander have that causes other Islanders to flock after his paintings



"After A Summer Night," Steve Mills.

like so many groupies to a rock concert?

Edmund Wilson once used the phrase, "shock of recognition," to describe the esthetic thrill derived from reading a line of poetry and recognizing a universal truth or a personal revelation. There is a shock of recognition in the paintings of Mills, who moves about the Island and finds familiar scenes that have a deep meaning for him. The force of his paintings, like the force of fine poetry, lies in a communication between artist and viewer. Another poet called the act of poetry akin to taking a load of bricks to a rooftop, brick by brick, and then dropping it all at once on the reader. Shock of recognition.

There is a shock of recognition in "Crabbing," which is a painting of a rickety wooden bridge going over the tidal stream that separates the land from the beachland. On the

bridge is Larry Heppler with a long crab net, reaching for a crab. You have to have been there at one time or another to "get" the painting's entire message, but it is unmistakably an Island scene.

There are shocks of recognition in each of the two "Marsh House" paintings of lone, gray-shingled houses sitting like sentinels in a small patch of mown lawn surrounded by marsh grass, with great stretches of greenery unbroken by trees.

There is a shock of recognition in "Another Summer," an oil of the first Steamship Authority boat to land at the Oak Bluffs terminal at the beginning of the summer.

There is even, by God, a shock of recognition in "Quenames," a stretch of pebbled beach with late afternoon sun reflecting on the incoming waves. It is Island light clarifying, not bathing, the scene.

The shock of recognition is most obvious in the well-known Island landmarks he sometimes paints - the Ag Hall in West Tisbury, formally titled "Grange Hall" for the painting. It is occasionally found in details such as the two mud puddles in the uneven sandy road in front of the Ag Hall.

If you look closely enough at a Mills painting you may find unexpected, charming shocks such as in "The Sun Room," which has a great variety of patterns in the throw rugs and cane-back chairs and wall hangings. One shock comes when the small painting on the wall is identified as an Ann Leggett painting. It is an artful touch for an artist.

"Main Street, Vineyard Haven" is a highly representational painting that Islanders can pinpoint in time because they know when the Tisbury Inn was repainted to its present light gray color. Mills may be charged with being too photographic, but a photograph could not capture the quality and mood of the scene and, in particular, the Edward Hopper-like neutrality of the faces of the people in the paintings. The small boys diving for coins off the Oak Bluffs SSA dock are all small boys of the Island and Larry Heppler is all crabbers. No photo could pin down the qualities Mills found in a window of a winter house in Quansoo where the salt air had misted on the window, making the scenery slightly blurred. Mills included, in the painting, a daub of bird droppings, just to the left of the two kerosene lanterns on the "Kitchen Table."

Mills is a wonderfully Vineyard painter and this is doubtless the draw that brings the swarms of people to make his exhibits such startling successes. At one point, Bruce Blackwell mounted a chair so that would-be purchasers could spot him to name their acquisition so he could quickly paste a red star next to its name.