

Painter Steve Mills Exhibits At Red Barn in West Tisbury

By DANIEL WATERS

Mozart, too, was confident enough in the mastery of his art to play the occasional joke on his audience.

Sunday, at the Granary Gallery opening, a woman approached what appeared to be a canvas wrapped in crumpled brown paper and string, scrawled upon in red magic marker.

"What's this? 'Don't Open Until the Opening. Steve Mills.'" Then "Oh, I see, what it is."

Mr. Mills' *trompe l'oeil* joke was not the only painting to startle the eye at this new show, but it captured the spirit this consummate photorealist brings to his paintings: a blend of youthful humor and uncanny understanding of how human vision perceives the world. Year after year gallery owners Brandy Wight and Bruce Blackwell have hosted the Steve Mills opening, and each year a large and enthusiastic crowd has gathered outside the gates awaiting the appointed time, eager to see how Mr. Mills will have evolved since the previous summer's show.

This year brought subtle changes, and a growth in sophistication. Aside from his now exclusive use of oil paint on linen (whose double layer of gesso allows better detail and offers less resistance than the "teeth" of coarser canvas), Mr. Mills has continued his study of light. In the current paintings, he has stretched his technique to explore the ways the world changes when the properties of the atmosphere are altered.

Neighbors is a prime example of this exploration. Here two up-Island stone walls cross in the foreground, where four lot boundaries meet. One of the walls meanders slowly off into the meadowy distance, where there are a few cottages and a tree-covered hill.

The colors throughout *Neighbors* are the grays and bayberry-greens native to the Vineyard, but somehow a subtle salty veil of haze grows over the view as the eye moves into the picture. This is accomplished not by a film of light paint added as an afterthought, but through deliberate, patient study of how hues become creamier (though details are no less distinct) as the Vineyard air softens the light.

Just as remarkable is *August Rain*, which portrays a steamship docked at Vineyard Haven, seen from the Coastwise pier. The pier planks are glazed with rainwater, and reflections of pilings in the wet wood planks play hundreds of games with colors in the foreground.

Through the water-laden air, the steamship seems even more enormous, its colors distance-dampened and mist-muted. Ghost-like, it is distinct in every detail, yet the dark range of the eye's spectrum seems to have been tampered with, the way the ear feels when someone gradually turns down the bass on a stereo. But this is the way

light works. These light games are not tricks of Steve Mills, but tricks of nature which Mr. Mills has captured, *flagrante delicto*, in paint.

In his struggle to convey and preserve his vision with absolute fidelity, Mr. Mills resorted in one instance to introducing a slight three-dimensional texture to his painting surface.

After a Summer's Night is a portrait of a kerosene lamp on a windowsill. A smudge of carbon black on the lamp chimney alters the color of the sky by mellowing and darkening it; the milky yellow kerosene in the lamp reservoir changes and twists the wick and the windowsill; the old curved glass of the chimney warps the perfect texture of the window's mosquito screen.

But it is the mosquito screen which was the object of this (triumphant) departure from traditional technique: The screen is perfectly conveyed, shadows and perspective and all,



PAINTING BY STEVE MILLS.

gradually blurring as it recedes from the eye. Through careful use of fine string, in combination with meticulous application of his painting medium, Mr. Mills has managed to reproduce exactly what mosquito screening does to a landscape when a human eye must look through it. There is a sort of confused delight, as the eye decides which is more important, the view itself or the much nearer pattern which is superimposed upon it.

Of *After a Summer's Night*, Mr. Mills says: "It was just an experiment that didn't work too well. Whatever you do, don't mention it in your article." But then artists are not the best judges of their work . . . newspaper reviewers are.

The paintings of Steve Mills will be on display at the Granary Gallery, at the Red Barn Emporium on Old County Road in West Tisbury, through Labor Day week.