

# Summer Ends for Artist Steve Mills: It's Time To Head South and Pick Up Brushes Again

By DAVID CORR

Steve Mills shivers as a northwest wind sweeps clouds across the Vineyard sky and seeps through the blue polo shirt beneath his white cotton sweater with blue stripes and the cream-white Levis hugging his hips.

The first big chill of autumn merely confirms for Mr. Mills what some inner clock already is telling him: It's time to fly south to Jacksonville for the winter.

Make that drive south, in the \$20,000 sports car with the Florida plates and the bumper sticker that reads: "Artists are quicker on the draw."

"I've got a lot of work to do," Mr. Mills says on the mid-September morning before his departure from the Edgartown home of friends, who housed him through yet another triumphant summer of showing and selling his paintings at the Red Barn Emporium in West Tisbury. "I try to get all my commissions done before Christmastime, so I can concentrate on the work for next year's show."

"I put the brush down July 19. That was my day to finish and come back to the Vineyard. Now I'm ready to go back south and explode on canvas. This was the time to get that energy up again."

Not that Steve Mills lounged about during his two-month stint on the Island where he spent his formative winters and springs and falls, and where he earned his way through college in part by selling pen and ink drawings to the Menemsha yachtmen who liked his visions of that summer waterfront scene.

No, summer is the time when the 27-year-old son of former regional high school music director Thomas P. Mills drums up business and inspiration.

"It's a lot of PR, going to cocktail parties and dinners and so forth," says the Bridgewater State College alumnus whose fellow graduates remember his official major as the fine arts and his unofficial major as the partying arts. But he insists the summer serves a purpose beyond the glad-handing scene.

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas P. Mills moved with son Steve and daughter Susan to Walpole after their son finished Grade 6 at Tisbury School. "I remember my father saying, 'Steve, this is not real life. We have to show you what's outside.'" But they always returned in summer, even after the subsequent move to Florida. Steve worked at Cronig's Main street market in Vineyard Haven until the store was sold. Later he gardened part time.

Finally, he wound up at Menemsha doing the pen and ink drawings that soon had people coming off their yachts and asking, "Are you the artist?"

The painting bug bit him during his sophomore year in college.

"It was in a sense an extension of my class work, producing more than painting," he recalls.

But Bruce Blackwell and Brandy Wight of the Red Barn Emporium in West Tisbury thought enough of his productions to feature the then 24-year-old fledgling in their Granary Gallery. And the mother lode has produced ever since.

"Being a summer resident is kind of a weird thought, after living here," he says. "But then, I didn't really see the Vineyard artistically. I was here all the time. I tell people now I have to pull the Vineyard out of me down in Jacksonville."

He continues: "I keep seeing things on the Vineyard that I never noticed before."

One vision that stopped a number of viewers in their tracks this summer was After A Summer's Night, showing a kerosene lamp on a windowsill, with the view out through a window screen to a pond. Mr. Mills says the pond is at Quansoo, where he spent the summer of 1985 in a house with no electricity.

His almost photographic attention to such details has struck an expanding and lucrative chord in Vineyard art lovers for three years — in so many that he needs a brief case to hold his records.

This morning he reaches in to pull out one of the books in which he keeps track of how much work he gets done in a day, and of details in his personal life that colored that day and that work. He also pages through a list of all 261 works he has sold since 1979: 106 commissions; 42 works all told in 1985, all but one of the Vineyard; and 160 since the first Red Barn show. The list includes what the work went for, who owns it and where it hangs: 20 oils in New York city, 25-30 in Providence and about 30 in Boston. Copies of the list will be laminated and kept in a bank safe deposit box.

"Occasionally I hire a secretary to come in and consolidate this mass of information," he says. "I log my hours per day. I sit down at the easel and clock it, in a sense. I know I have to work, say, six hours a day, six days a week, for the next 10 weeks or whatever."

All of which, to date, has only

intensified the demand at the Red Barn Emporium.

"We have close to 100 per cent sales ratio there," he says. "We keep doubling the prices every year just to slow down the sales, and we still can't."

"Everything I do, I think of where it's going to be appreciated. The stuff that's really for me... well, I've still got bills to pay. I'm sorry if it sounds cold and calculated and businesslike."

A few critics and colleagues have mixed their admiration with the same adjectives, in describing the feeling they see in the work of Steve Mills from the last couple of years. Too photographic. Too true to life. Too technically perfect. Where's the soul?

"Yes, I have photographs I work from," Mr. Mills says, "but a photograph is just an image."

"I know what the weather was that day, and take that back with me, and recreate the emotion I felt at that moment. I was so young and impressionable when I lived here. I hope I'm always going to be impressionable. If you're not, you've closed the book or written a chapter of ignorance."

Steve Mills recalls a visit from the woman in his life this summer. During a walk on a gravelly beach, he says, she picked up a pebble. The sight and feel of the object struck him as something new to detail in his work.

"She opened my eyes to it," he says, before continuing: "When you do commissions, people tell you stories about certain locations. I think there's a lifetime of learning here, maybe several lifetimes."

"A lot of it's so subtle. I think it's more people, and understanding what people feel and see... their emotions and feelings and insight. I never copy photos; I'm always changing colors."

Mr. Mills holds up a photo of one painting (he keeps books of such photos in the brief case for marketing purposes) and says that without referring to a projected slide, "That's an 86-hour painting."

"To some people it is taboo. But I've learned that while you can't please everybody, any form of realism will sell anytime, anywhere."

Especially if it is of the Vineyard.

"I don't think of myself as a photorealist," says Steve Mills. "Just a realist. Twenty years down the road I still want to be known as a realist... Someday I want to be able to walk into one of my paintings. That's what I'm striving for, to go beyond the

photorealist part of it.

"I've got so much to learn, before I get to the point of being the painter I want to be. You know you can always do better, and until that feeling stops, you keep doing it and doing it and doing it."

Mr. Mills says the Island artists who have helped along the way include Stanley Murphy and Kib Bramhall.

"They've been helpful in giving me not so much painting techniques, but in materials and how to use them," he says.

And what about role models?

"I'd love to emulate [John] Stobart," says Mr. Mills. "He seems to have a good business sense and as a result, now he can take the time to totally research a painting."

"If I could do five or six a year, that's what I'd ultimately like to do. Everyone wants to go down in history some way. I'd like to be known as one of the very best realist painters of the first part of the 21st century. But there's a lot of work to be done before I can start thinking very deeply in those terms."

As for expanding the horizons he shows on his canvases, and where he will exhibit them, he's looking no farther than Martha's Vineyard and Jacksonville.

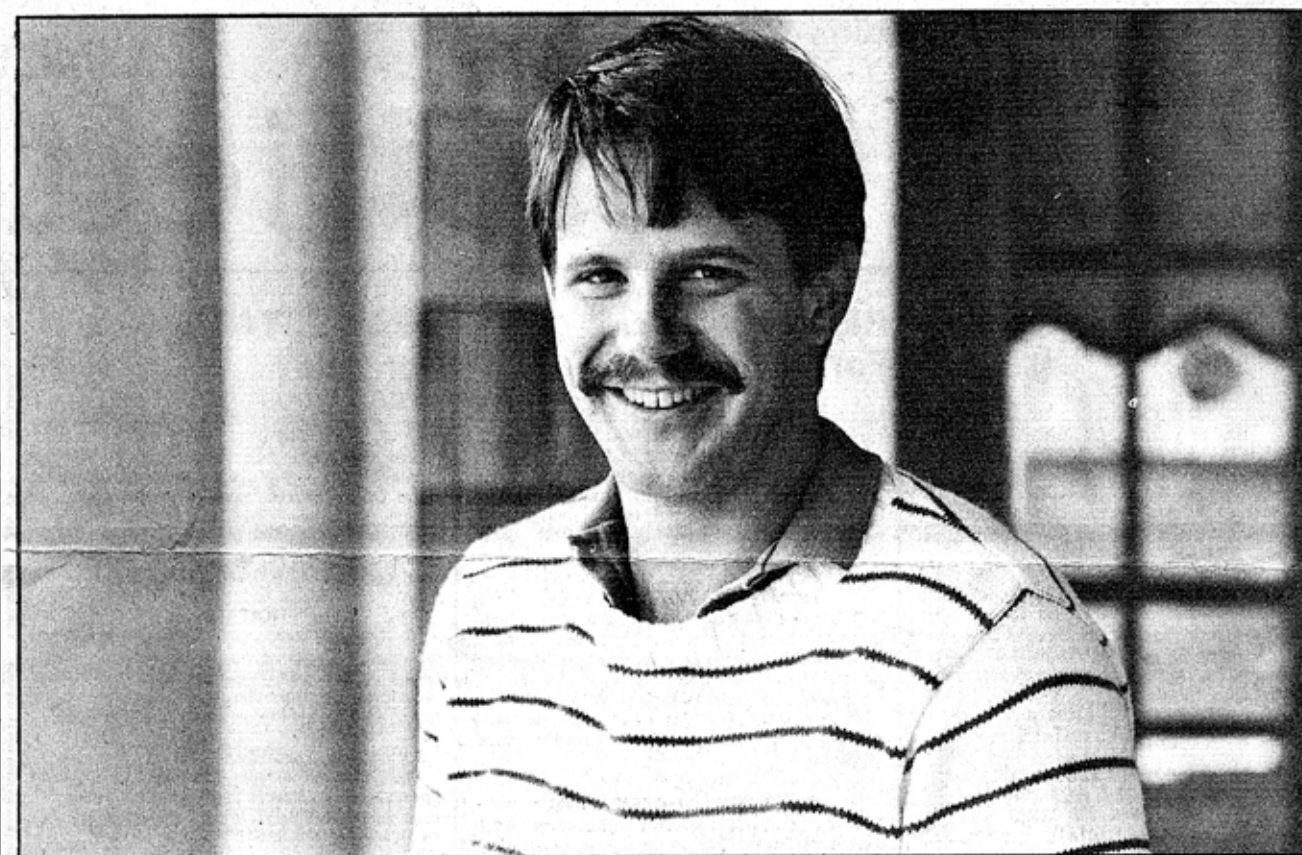
"What I'd love to do is set up a studio here — my own place," says Steve Mills. "But the Vineyard has changed so, and I'd have to make sure I had so much to do."

"And I'd probably have to be more settled in my personal life. There is somebody important in that life, and right now I couldn't stand being away from her all year. It's going to take a team, I think, to make it all work. It would be nice to have someone you love and trust to share the business aspect and the creative aspect."

"At any rate, I've got to get to a point where I do no more than 25 paintings a year. I would love to be able to show in Jacksonville; even Boca Raton has called long distance. And if I had the time, I would do it."

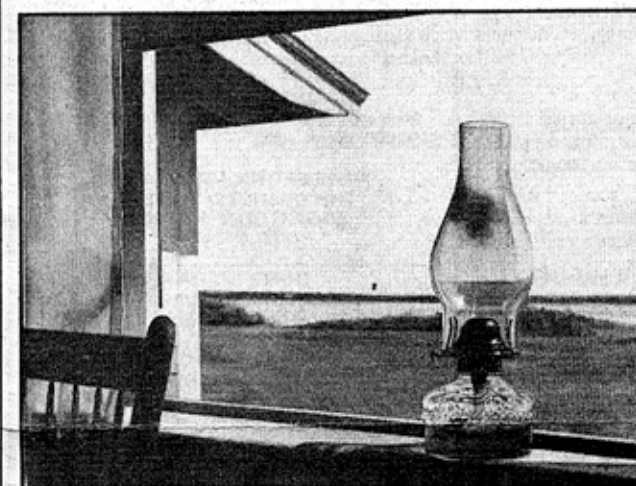
"So I'm certainly not going to New York to knock on doors. I'd rather go to a gallery that's interested in showing me than having to ask; the boys [Messrs. Wight and Blackwell] have been great that way. And that's the only way I would go into New York."

"I don't know. Maybe it's a lack of self-confidence. I'm not sure. Maybe it's too scary to walk into a big place without somebody holding your hand."

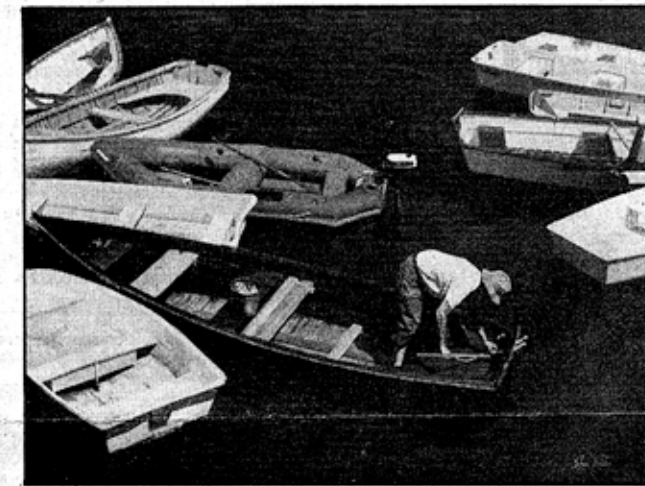


Alison Shaw

STEVE MILLS IS THE CONSUMMATE PROFESSIONAL IN ALL THAT HE DOES.



AFTER A SUMMER'S NIGHT.



SUNDAY TINKERING.



BOW WATCH.



MENEMSHA BASIN.