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Realist Steve Mills
Portrays Martha's
Vineyard



by Edward Feit

Steve Mills feels fortunate in his success as an artist at the relatively young age of twenty-seven.

"I sometimes get the feeling someone is watching over me and guiding me," he says, "so I cannot ever take full credit for anything I have done. I do appreciate my good fortune and am proud of my work, yet I know I have many faults and much to work out, both in my art and in myself."

Each painting, for Steve, is a step toward becoming the artist he one day hopes to be. So, though he has sold all his work, and collectors are waiting in the wings for more, he gauges the success of a painting by what it has taught him.

"I hope to improve until the day I stop painting," Steve remarks, "for what is the point of going on if one does not master something new?"

Although born in Boston in 1959, Steve is virtually an islander, for he spent his childhood on Martha's Vineyard, first in Oak Bluffs, and later in Chilmark. Even after his family had moved to Walpole, Massachusetts, when Steve was in the seventh grade, they continued to spend their summers in Chilmark. Until the family's Chilmark house was sold two years ago, Steve could come and go as he pleased. He now stays on the Vineyard through the hospitality of his friends. Though now a 'summer resident,' with all that implies to real islanders, Steve still thinks of himself as something of a native.

"The Vineyard is a great place for an artist," he says,

ISLAND IMAGES

"with so many talented people — dancers, singers, writers and actors, as well as painters — it is a mecca of creative energy. I gain a great deal by bouncing ideas off them."

Unlike many artists, Steve felt no early yearning to become an artist. Assuming everyone could draw as well as he did, he saw nothing special in his gift and considered art a hobby.

After graduating from high school, Steve felt totally lost. With no clear goal, he tried meteorology at Lowell University, then worked in a factory for a year before entering Bridgewater State College with the notion of studying music.

Still unsure of his future, one afternoon Steve took his portfolio to Steve Smalley, chairman of Bridgewater's art department.

"That afternoon I became an art major," Steve laughs. "I came home with a big smile on my face and told my mother that I had finally found my goal."

The suicide of a close friend, who had recognized Steve's talent and encouraged him to pursue it, deeply affected Steve and influenced his career.

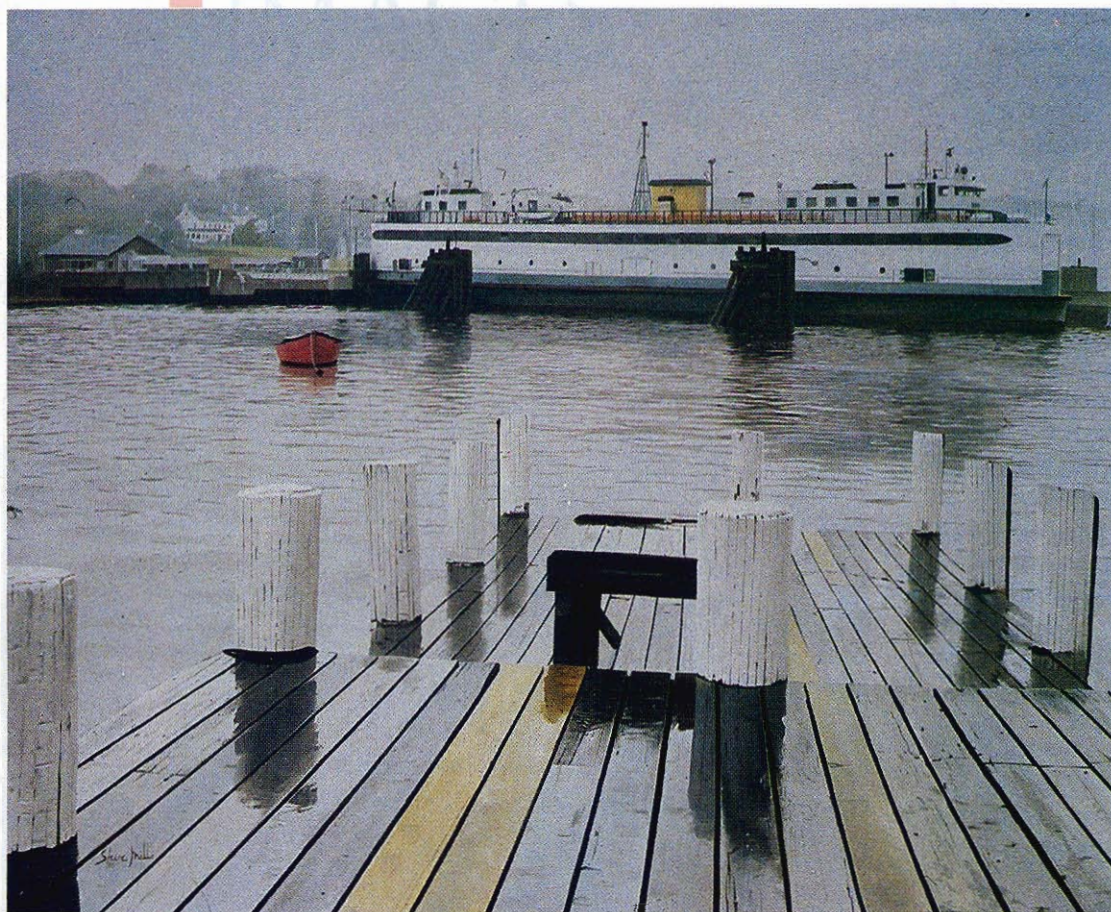
"After he died I felt I was painting in his memory, and I still think of him when I sit down at the easel. He gave me the courage to believe in my future in art."

Shortly thereafter, Steve began sketching at the Memsha docks, where a man, noting the quality of his work, offered him \$75 to do a pen-and-ink drawing of his yacht. This chance commission reaffirmed to



Opposite: "Porch Swing," 20" x 16" oil on canvas (1984). Mills rarely portrays people in his work, but his paintings evoke a feeling of human presence. Above: "N. Water St.," 24" x 18" oil on linen (1985). This painting represents a challenge in perspective and is significant for its reproduction of light and shadows.

ISLAND IMAGES



Steve that art was to be his future.

Steve seeks to recreate reality in his art. The challenge to depict what exists fascinates Steve, who does not care for abstraction. He believes that viewers cannot judge what they cannot recognize. Only when viewers know what they see can a painting influence their perceptions of the real. If, in portraying reality, he can spark a reaction in others, Steve has done what he set out to do.

"I am trying to set a mood, to give the viewer a sense of space and time," Mills says, "rather than make a strong statement. I am still trying to discover myself, and must know myself better before expressing deep

philosophical ideas. I'm 27 now and hope by the time I'm 50 to know myself well enough to paint what could one day be thought a masterpiece. All my paintings are exercises to that end."

Although drawing on his imagination for his pictures, Steve also relies on photographs to aid his memory, mentally editing his slides, moving things around, changing colors, and adding and deleting details.

Realist painting calls for very intense work and great care for detail. Steve does most of his work in the studio, but he points out that an artist who sticks to his studio can become too systematic. Steve feels the need, at times, to emerge into the fresh air, to mingle with oth-

ISLAND IMAGES

ers. He meets this need by painting on location. Working on the busy porch of Alley's General Store in West Tisbury is especially refreshing to him.

Art lovers have commented on the absence of human figures in much of Steve's work. The human presence is there, however, even when people are not depicted. A figure was part of the original design of a surf scene Steve was painting, but he omitted it in the end and showed only footprints in the sand. Figures in "Beachcombers" remain in the background, subordinate to the main theme, as they bend over to search.

As he matures, Steve's work is changing, and his themes are growing broader and more universal.

"I cannot forever rely on the Vineyard for inspiration," he says, "and am less interested in recreating recognizable scenes. I want to paint pictures that will have meaning for people who may never have visited the island."

Nevertheless, "My pictures will always have a sense of New England," Steve adds.

"As long as I keep my nose to the grindstone and produce work of good quality, I think I'll be fine. I hope to eventually earn enough by painting to allow me to experiment. There are things I'd like to try that are different, not avant-garde, but radical in terms of my own goals. Right now, my work is my bread and butter, and that matters, even to the artist."



Opposite: "August Rain," 22" x 28" oil on linen (1986). Mills thought about this theme for about a year before painting this picture, which captures typical Vineyard weather. Above: "Summer House," 12" x 16" oil on linen (1985), was completed in one sitting, wet on wet.