

# Steve Mills: A Specialist In Intricacy

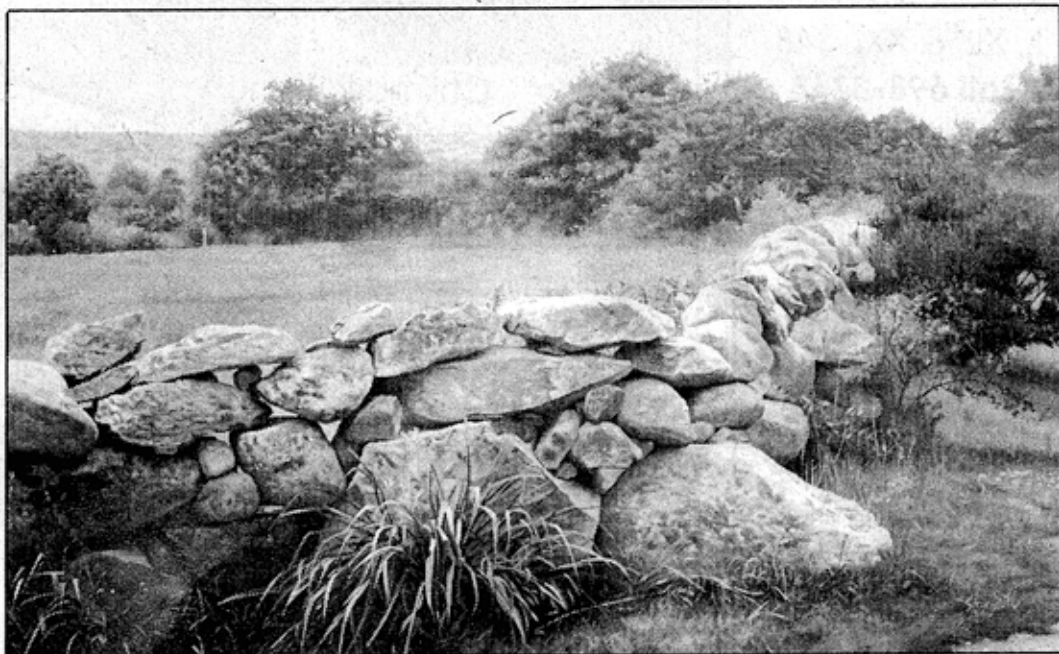
Story by Jib Ellis

Steve Mills is a pleasant, orderly man with an adoring of intricacy, both in his painting and with cordless minutiae around his house. Steve wears a friendly, almost fiendish grin at the mention of any hand-held electronic gadget entering onto the market, but takes a more paternal pride in neo-realist paintings.

His paintings have the startling reality of first-flight photography with the muted texture of easel art. One work from his upcoming show "Portal to A Bygone Era," depicts the view from the car deck of a ferry,

through the iron portal. The scene is familiar enough to all Vineyard travelers, with the tilting, quilted metal floor of the boat and giant cleats, but it is enhanced by a minute painting within a scene of the now retired Naushon, the last actual steamship, passing in the distance. "You can even see the people on the deck of the Naushon," artist Steve Mills said with beaming contentment, "you can see the colors of their raincoats."

Mr. Mills is 30, was born in Boston, but grew up in Oak Bluffs and Chilmark, winters and summers, and much of his work captures Island scenes and themes. He works in acrylics and oils and divides the year between the Island and Jacksonville, Fla. He has not had an exhibit for two years, and says he feels a genuine development in his work. His Aug. 6 opening at the Granary Gallery in West Tisbury will feature 28 new paintings, ranging in price from \$600 to \$16,000, representing periods of labor from 10 to 110 hours per work, featuring



"Timeless Fence" oil on linen, 16 by 26, 1989.

Vineyard life and scenes.

## More Music than Art

Steve grew up playing trumpet, far more involved in music than in art. His father Tom Mills, the founder of the Minnesingers, was music director for all the Island schools, but Steve did find time for his art. He attributes the foundation of his early art to training with Eugene Baer in the Island school system. Steve is still drawn to the Vineyard's feast of vistas and personalities. He described the Island as a creative Mecca and the place where his artistic career began to truly unfold.

While sketching in Menemsha as a teenager, Steve was offered \$75 for an early work, and his artistic confidence had an important toehold. He was drawing on the porch of Alley's store in West Tisbury when Jacqueline Onassis admired his work and had a private showing. Steve has sold 355 works to date, many on the Vineyard. The range of celebrities with Steve Mills art includes Beverly Sills, Vance Packard and Jimmy Dean. Steve also has his own collectors, one with 30 paintings and another with 17 and several with smaller collections,

between two and ten of his works.

Steve and his family continued to summer in Chilmark after they moved to Walpole. He finished Wapole High School in 1977, and went off to college. His first academic direction was meteorology at University of Lowell, in distant hopes of being a weatherman. That ended in a factory job for a year before he headed to Bridgewater State College. "It was nearby," he said, "and I commuted at first. They had a music department and an art department." He recalls that the music left him still unfulfilled. Steve explained he had always dabbled in art and one day cautiously showed his portfolio to professor William Kendall of Bridgewater's art department, who was amply impressed. Steve said, "He was truly my mentor."

The new art major had both a concentration and a budding career. Steve graduated from Bridgewater magna cum laude in 1982, and had his first show at the Clement C. Maxwell Library in Bridgewater. A year later, Steve had his first Vineyard show, Vineyard Reflections, at the Granary Gallery, where he has shown a half dozen times since and will

show again next week.

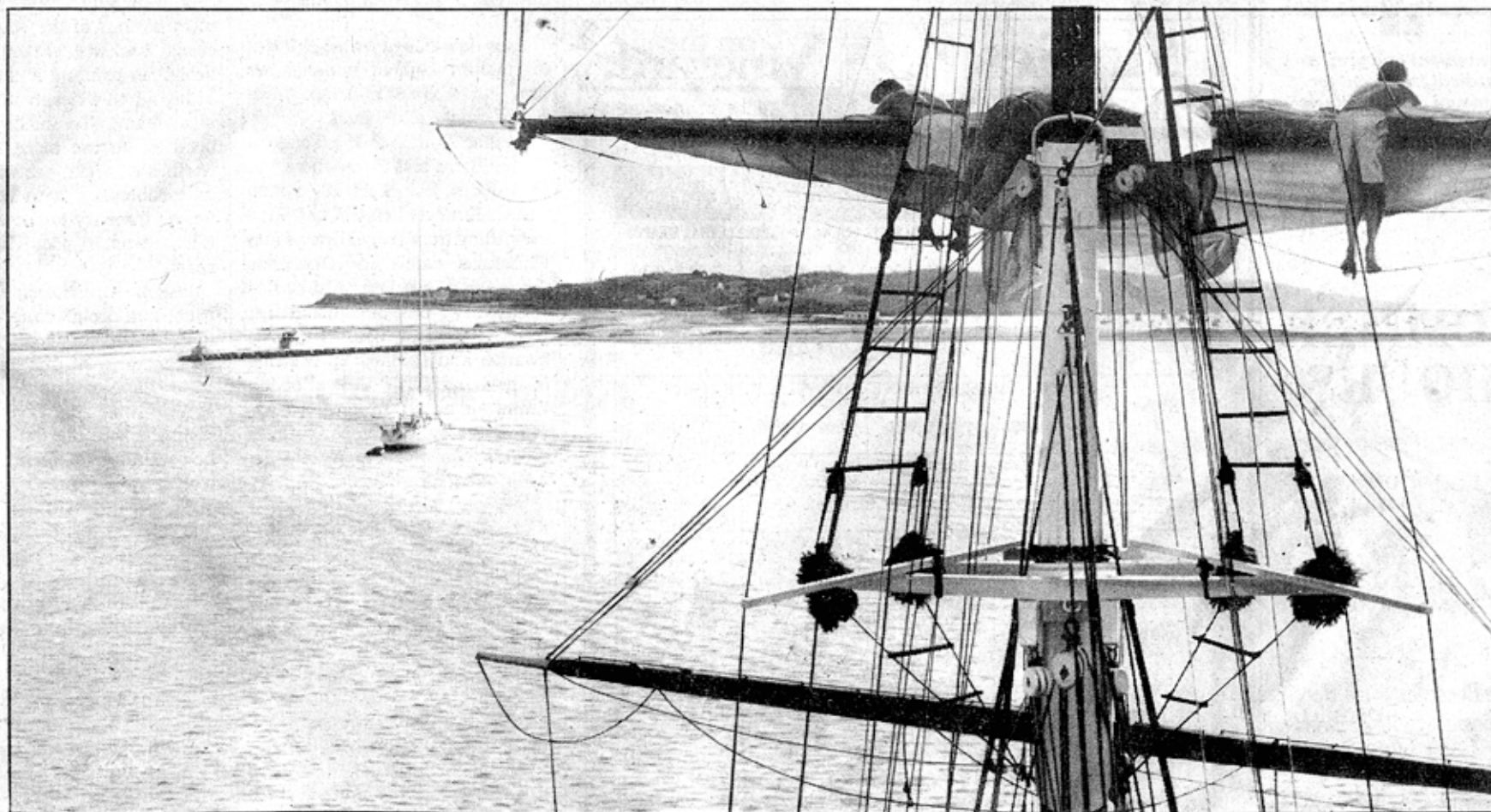
## An Early Bloomer

Bruce Blackwell and Brandon Wight trusted their own taste, when many galleries would have required a track record for a summer show, and took a chance on a young artist right out of college. They hosted his first show when he was 22. Bruce Blackwell explained this week, "We didn't really take a chance on Steve. We had been looking at his work while he was growing up. We knew his parents when his father was teaching here. When he was in school he used to bring us in and show us his works."

Steve said his own taste in art runs to "anything that really gives an illusion of stepping into space." He is outgoing and, sitting in an outdoor chair on a deck in Oak Bluffs, next to Susan Helfrich, his female friend visiting from Jacksonville, he seems to have avoided the eccentric side of art. He earns a good living as a painter without any hours as a fry cook and thrives on his eye and work. To avoid the solitude of painters, Steve works in the afternoon and says he listens to the soaps. He paints within easy range of his hand-held remote control, that ongoing love of intricacy.



Steve Mills at work.



"On the Yard at Cuttyhunk", 22 by 40, by Steve Mills, 1989.