



WORK IN PROGRESS: PAINTING AFTER FIRST 20 HOURS.

DETAILS ADDED AT 173 HOURS.

For Artist Steve Mills, Magic Resides in Details

By C.K. WOLFSON

"My mom tells this, when I was in kindergarten and we all got crayons, I wanted the pencil. Because I love doing detail."

A Jacksonville, Fla. resident, he sits on the porch of a rented, Vineyard summer house, squints into the sun, and reveals some of the magic: "To paint glass, you don't look at it as glass. You look at it as form and color. And basically, if you dot your I's and cross your T's with your paint brush, when you step back — it will be glass."

But what allows 44-year-old photo-realist Steve Mills to wave a brush over flat canvas and make beads of moisture appear inside a painted seltzer bottle, or the light bounce over a pair of painted eye glasses, or legible text shimmer across a painted newspaper, has to do with discipline, precision and the madness of true dedication.

"The type of art that I do — when I step back from it — it's like, wow. I mean I get a kick out of it when I roll back and look at it and say, yeah, that looks pretty cool. It even fools me sometimes at how three-dimensional I can make it. And I like to pass that reaction on to people. They can't believe that paint can be made to look that way."

Mr. Mills recounts being approached

by someone at his recent Granary Gallery show who said, "You seem to want to drive yourself crazy with the most complicated type of things." And I answered, "Yes. Because I think that's what people appreciate."

The son of Minnesingers' founder Tom Mills, the artist spent his childhood and 41 summers on the Vineyard, played the trumpet, had thoughts of being a meteorologist. Then, at Bridgewater State College, he began painting, and like putting puzzle pieces together without looking at the cover of the box, he realized he had discovered home.

"I was going to make a living as an artist come hell or high water. I got lucky."

His definition of luck: "I had known Brandy Wight and Bruce Blackwell since I was a small boy, and they took me into the Red Barn Gallery. At the first show, we sold 33 of the 35 canvases."

Mr. Mills was painting realistic landscapes and water scenes, but he needed something more edgy, more urbane when, in 1991, the Henocho Gallery in New York offered him a solo show. He made what to him was the logical leap into whatever it is that comes after real: paintings that force the viewer to be fascinated by the details, to be awed by the ordinary.

Still, he knows there are people who study his work to find mistakes, and knows there are those who might think it's easy to paint projected images. "I say, well, here's a brush. Sit down and show me what's cheating. It's not as easy as it might sound. It's hard to explain to people who have never painted."

In conversation, Mr. Mills is fast talking and enthusiastic, friendly and informal — nothing to signal how systematic and precise his working methods are.

He logs his work time in 15 minute increments and knows to the hour how long each painting takes to complete. (His average time is 130 hours a painting.) He often works until 4 a.m., then makes an entry into a daily log book be-

fore going to bed.

"It's so thought out, so carefully planned," Mr. Mills says, "by the time I get to the painting, it's already figured out. You're almost on autopilot. You can sort of multi-task. I can get on my headset and talk on the phone for hours."

The first day of painting he tones the canvas, working from back to front, and starts by laying out broad areas in layers of thin colors. The next day the colors get blocked in close to what they are going to finally be. "That's a fun day because you really get a feel for what the painting is going to look like. Then you have to go back in. There's going to be a whole other layer of paint on top of that."

With the television tuned to the history channel, Mr. Mills sits in front of the easel — often for 80 hours a week — his telephone headset in place, as a series of separate slide images are projected over his shoulder.

"It's not just when you're at the easel, there's a whole period of time that you need to stay in that zone. So like I told [my family], you've got to let me

stay focused because I'm coming down to the wire for the show. They may not understand it, but they respect it."

He uses a double zero or number one brush for details — something like painting a room carpet with a hair. Because he was losing feeling in his fingers, gripping a brush handle half the width of a pencil, he finally devised a rubber grip which widened the brush handle to a more comfortable size.

"But when I'm painting I am relaxed," he insists. "What stops me from painting sometimes is that my back will hurt, or my hand will cramp up, and I physically can't go further."

And by the time one painting is finished, he claims he already has the next one started.

His 46 by 60 inch, \$78,000 painting, *Puzzling Times* (finished in 333 hours), a still life in which Mr. Mills uses the rendering of a New York Times crossword puzzle as the ground on which an old book, pens and magnifying glass are arranged, was conceived in collaboration with Granary Gallery owner Chris Morse. The crumbling old book belongs

MR. MILLS WITH HIS COMPLETED PAINTING: PUZZLING TIMES.

to David Wallis' mother. Mr. Morse brought in the magnifying glass.

"I kept looking at it, moving it around, taking pictures," said Mr. Mills. The reason we chose the pens and pencil was because of the color. The red brought in something beautiful, I think."

Mr. Mills says his goal, ultimately, is to "create what someone would consider to be a photo-realistic masterpiece. Every painting is a step toward that ultimate goal. What would that take? I don't know. If I knew that I'd be making a masterpiece every single time.

How does a musician know when he's written the most beautiful piece of music possible? Right now, what I consider a successful painting is when I've learned something new. But it's like a life lesson. Sometimes you don't realize it right away."