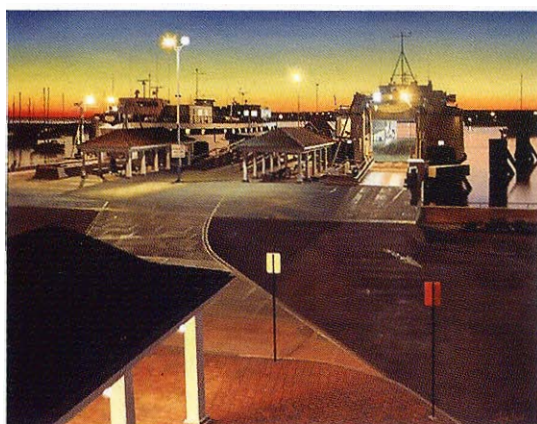




"Jacksonville 1988" 24 x 36 Oil on Linen



"First Light-First Boat" 24 x 34 Oil on Linen



"Dawn" 18 x 26 Oil on Linen

## For Jacksonville's Mills, Heaven Is in the Details

By Josh Sweigart

In attempting to recreate reality, painter Steve Mills translates it into a form breathtaking in its extraordinary detail. With mathematical precision he renders familiar scenes, often taken for granted, into works of art that make one take a second look at simple things they see every day—a newspaper, a bottle, a board game.

Though the photorealist has been compared to such masters as Andrew Wyeth, Norman Rockwell, and Richard Estes, Jacksonville's Mills is just now making a name for himself in North Florida. Although Mills moved to the region in 1982, he has just started showing his work here for the first time in a decade. The vast majority of his true-to-life paintings (which have been displayed and sold for tens of thousands of dollars

in New York and Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts) were created in a home studio just south of Jacksonville.

In St. Augustine's Sanmar Gallery, where samples of his work are displayed, hang several samples of what was born in his mind while sitting in our own backyard. Bruce Marble, owner of the Sanmar, is fanatical about the experience. "He is the most skilled realist I have ever met," said Marble. "His work is true to the goals of photorealism."

The Sanmar's limited edition giclee print of Mills' painting "The Prophet" shows the artist's realism in both form and appeal. The appeal is one of irony: the scene shows the *Wall Street Journal*

trumpeting the mid-1990s triumph of the stock exchange, with a crystal ball lying conspicuously beside it, presumably belonging to the seer who truly knew what was going on.

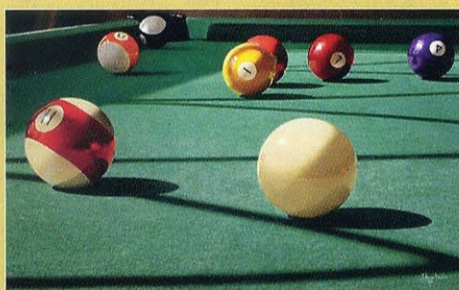
But the picture isn't just ironic. The newspaper is full of text, unmistakable from set print, and the crystal ball and glasses on the table refract light in a way that only Mills and reality can.

Mills' humor is subtle yet prevalent in all his works. Some of the pieces contain hidden messages to his wife, Leigh. One of his most entertaining pieces was what appeared to be a wrapped canvas bound with string. On the front it said, "Don't Open Until the Opening." Several people asked what it was, before it was revealed to be, of course, the painting itself. In this same vein, he has had people walk up to his finished works and, mistaking them for photographs, ask when he plans to start on them.

Human subjects are often absent from Mills' works. This is perhaps because the individual that matters is the viewer himself. Another example of this is "Puzzling Times," also at the Sanmar Gallery. In the center is a crossword puzzle, again with that impossibly vivid print, accompanied by frayed dictionaries and a magnifying glass that warps the letters on the page. You know there is a person there, sitting just where you're standing, rubbing their forehead and pondering a seven-letter word for gift.

This detail—a love of the obvious yet unseen—is the defining principle of photorealism, also known as trompe l'oeil or neorealism. A photorealist can't simply observe an object like a glass bottle and paint it, because the refraction and tricks of light change with the slightest motion. The art form relies on photographs to trap an object in space and maintain a perspective that would be impossible otherwise.

Louis Meisel, the champion of photorealism who gave it its name, always refers to this as the truest form of art, because it demands the most painstaking attention to detail and quality. In a 2001 interview, Meisel said the form "draws people's attention to things they'd never otherwise see, and maybe couldn't see because of the changing nature of the subject matter."



"13-10 Corner" 28 x 46 Oil on Panel



"Acosta Bridge" 20 x 28 Oil on Linen



"Gagel Bridge Party" 48 x 64 Oil on Linen



"Fogged In" 24 x 34 Oil on Linen



"Pelicans 3" 14 x 20 Oil on Linen



"Easy Money" 22 x 32 Oil on Linen

## "A Star Is Born"

It could be said that Mills and photorealism were destined for each other, as he has always had a consummate obsession with the precise. "When we were all in kindergarten we got crayons," he said. "I wanted a pencil." While growing up in Martha's Vineyard he put together scale models of ships and trains, then turned to music where he was just as fascinated with composition as with raw emotion. His scientific mind originally led him to study meteorology at the University of Lowell in Massachusetts.

He dropped out of Lowell and worked a few odd jobs before returning to study music at Bridgewater State College, where a professor saw his early artwork and guided him into the study of art until he graduated magna cum laude in 1982.

Mills came to Jacksonville to prepare his work before his first show at Martha's Vineyard's Granary Gallery in 1982. Fresh out of college, he came down to stay with his parents and prepare for the show that would define his career. He sold 33 of his 35 displayed works at the show. He quickly gained a following at the gallery, showing storefronts and boating scenes of the island that was his childhood home. The *Boston Globe* quoted people as saying, "A star is born."

He liked the people and "subtle charm" of Jacksonville and found it a great place to live. Ever since that first show, his time in the area has been monastic, a time to focus on his work.

"I've been very lucky. I've been in the right place at the right time," Mills said in an interview not long after the show. "Everyone on the Vineyard is buying my work now. Here (in Florida), well, here I work. I paint. It's just where I can really work." He still spends his summers at the Vineyard, taking 600 to 800 photographs, picking up commission work, and "doing the PR thing," he says.

By 1990, Mills had shown his work in New York, California, Texas, and Florida, while maintaining a reputation in Martha's Vineyard as "a perennial Island favorite whose translations of photographs into paintings seem to grow more vivid and more flawless

with the passing of each year,” according to the *Vineyard Gazette*.

Mills' last show was in 1993 at Jacksonville's Cornerstone Gallery, and the opening of his present display brought well over 1,000 people. They came to see his work and support the cause he dedicated his opening to—the genetic disease cystic fibrosis.

The artist painted a special piece, *Martini Al Fresco*, specifically for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation's annual Moonlight Martini gala. The first of a limited edition giclee print, the highest quality print available, was auctioned off at the gala to benefit the Foundation's Florida chapter. A portion of the proceeds from every print sold is still benefiting the cause. "I think it's important to give back to the community," he said, referring to the region he calls home.

### Staying True to the Form

As time has gone by, Mills has zoomed-in his lens. The attention once given to a landscape is now given to one of many coins piled into a glass jar or billiard balls lying on a table ready to be shot. This is part of his ultimate goal. "I aspire to paint beyond photorealism, inviting the viewer to reach into my paintings," says Mills. "My ultimate goal is to paint what would be considered a photorealist's masterpiece. All my paintings are steps towards this goal."

His goals stop there, however. Unlike many modern artists, Mills attempts to make no broad statements about society or politics. He strives only to challenge himself and hopes others can glean some of his joy in the minute textures of life found in his paintings. "I get a kick out of trying to prove to myself that I can amaze myself," he said. "Hopefully this translates to other people."

Mills is markedly devoid of much of the pretense and flamboyancy normally attributed to artists. When not painting he works on cars, does woodworking, composes music, and considers himself a "homebody" at a home he shares with his wife, his younger daughter, and a feisty poodle named Jewel.

The difference is that Mills' technical mind often enters the other realms. He knows specifically how much time he spends on all of these things because he keeps a log, to the minute, of how much time he spends painting as opposed to his other joys. This log includes every painting he has sold since 1979—he sold 42 works in 1985—and who the piece was for, as well as who owns it, and where it hangs. He laminates copies of the log and keeps them in a safe deposit box.

He says he does this so he knows how much time a commissioned piece would take him. But, sitting in his tidy studio filled with measuring instruments, several computers and cameras, and a drafting table he built himself, one gets the impression that precision is a part of his being.

In this studio, he keeps track of specifically when he comes and goes. Being right-handed, he works from the upper left-hand corner of the canvas to the lower right, careful to maintain the same level of what he calls "sophistication" throughout. For what it's worth, he easily spends 300 hours on a painting, sometimes more, sometimes less. He works an average of six hours a day, six days a week.

His inspiration often starts inadvertently and ends up as design. For example, one day he was walking out the door of his house, and something caught his eye. He had been keeping his spare change in a wine bottle for several months, but suddenly it hit him. "I looked over and said, 'Hey, that's cool looking.'" He immediately followed that thought to the next logical step in his mind: "I should blow it up to four feet by six feet." And he did. Mills says ideas often come to him like this. "You can do a lifetime of painting in your backyard," he explains. ■

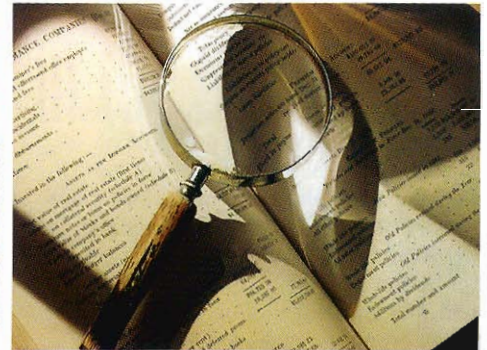
*Editor's Note: Artwork by Steve Mills is available at Sanmar Gallery, 46 Charlotte Street, St. Augustine*



"21" 40 x 56 Oil on Linen



"Daylillies" 20 x 30 Oil on Linen



"Reflecting on Light" 30 x 44 Oil on Panel



"Hop Ching Checkers" 28 x 50 Oil on Linen



"500 Sunflowers" 28 x 42 Oil on Linen



"Puzzling Times" 46 x 60 Oil on Panel