

# A Successful Artist With His Photorealistic Paintings Selling Like Crazy, Steve Mills, '82, Debunks the 'Starving Artist' Stereotype



"Twist on the Vineyard" 30 x 40" oil on linen.

Karen White

While back, Steve Mills was having a bad year financially when his girlfriend's mother asked a piercing question — "What are you going to do for a real job?"

The query didn't make him angry, just determined. "You don't get it," he said. "I'm going to be an artist even if it kills me."

Not only has art not killed Mr. Mills, it's made him a comfortable living. His brand of photorealistic paintings has caught the eye of art sophisticates in both New York and Martha's Vineyard, who snap up his paintings of marbles, sandpipers and schooners like Ben and Jerry's ice cream on a hot day. And not at bargain basement prices, either — one of his canvases, "Prophet," sold for a record \$52,000.

"I'm having a blast. I wouldn't trade this for anything," said Mr. Mills, who lives in Jacksonville, Fla., with his wife Leigh (not that old girlfriend with the inconsiderate mother). "People who are more talented never had the opportunities I had. I feel fortunate to be in the right place at the right time."

What Mr. Mills has is an eye for detail, a feel for color and composition, and a knack for picking subject matters close to the heart of art buyers. His paintings can call up the charm of "olde" Cape Cod or emanate Americana nostalgia.

Out of 500 paintings he's completed, Mr. Mills owns 10 and has sold the rest. At his first commercial show at the Granary Gallery in Martha's Vineyard in 1983, one year after his graduation from Bridgewater State College, his canvases sold for around \$400. Now, reproduction prints of his works can command that price.

Although he had a lifelong interest in art, even selling a picture of a clipper ship for \$10 at age 11, Mr. Mills had never taken an art course and never considered it a viable career. He first went to college to be a meteorologist, but things didn't pan out. He then tried one year in a factory. Another dead end.

When Mr. Mills enrolled at BSC, it was as a music major, following in the footsteps of his father, a public school music director. By chance he took his limited art portfolio to Dr. Stephen Smalley, who took one look then ran Mr. Mills to the BSC registrar's office to change his major to art.

Once he had finished his first art course with Professor William Kendall, it all began to make sense. "It was awesome. It was a design class, and I began to understand why things were where they were (on the canvas)," he said. "At Bridgewater, I was allowed to explore what was within me, to experiment and find my own style."

Mr. Mills' works are so realistic they are often mistaken for photographs. His creative process involves taking one or more photographs, projecting them onto a canvas with a slide projector, and manipulating the scene to create the image he wants. He then uses the projected image as a guide to create a painting that "goes beyond a photo," he said.

Scattered pennies in a mason jar ... a lone fishing pole stuck at ocean's edge ... empty ferries at the Vineyard dock kissed by an orange dawn. His paintings sell so well that the former restaurant waiter, professional fund-raiser and factory worker has held no other job than "artist" since 1985. Who said all artists are starving?

"Things have been so amazingly wonderful," he said. "I feel like a guardian angel is looking over me." ■



Steve Mills, '82, and his wife, Leigh.

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