

Mathematician's Mind, Artist's Hand Converge in the Work of Steve Mills

By RACHEL NAVA ROHR

In a three-and-a-half-foot-square painting, an enormous can of Coca-Cola Classic encased in not-yet-dripping beads of condensation is so precise, it hardly betrays the brush strokes that brought it to life.

In fact, at first glance, the only insurance that it is not a many-times-magnified photograph hanging on a wall in the Granary Gallery, is the slanted script signature painted in the bottom right corner: Steve Mills.

Mr. Mills is a photorealist — a title that his technical ability earned him early on.

"I swear people look for mistakes," Mr. Mills said, sitting on his friend's front porch in Edgartown. "They're going to have to use a magnifying glass," he added matter-of-factly.

Then there's the \$42,000 price tag — another hint that Classic was not the product of a microsecond click of a camera shutter and a high-quality printer, but rather 400 hours of manual labor and heaps of oil paint.

That's really how long it took Mr. Mills to paint it. He knows. He keeps track — just another manifestation of a very mathematical mind that may seem uncharacteristic for an artist.

"I like precision," he said simply.

He logs his painting hours in 15-minute increments. He plans the whole composition before a dot of paint hits the stretched linen. He works from hundreds of photographs that bring every detail of the subject into sharp focus.

For Classic, Mr. Mills compiled 400 photographs to create the image he painted from. Those hours working with photographs are not part of his hour-tally.

"I like to think that my painting goes beyond photography," Mr. Mills said. "I like to think that you feel like you can reach in and touch what it is."

It is likely a combination of his thoughtful planning and striking technical ability that has allowed Mr. Mills to sell nearly every one of the 676 pieces he has painted. (Yes, he keeps records of that too, along with the hours spent, date completed, date sold, location sold, sell price, sell price with inflation since the sell date and the dimensions of the painting.)

Mr. Mills' trompe l'oeil paintings

from past years look so three-dimensional, the Granary hung a sign at the show pleading customers not to touch them. But technical precision has its limits.

"I could recreate your face down to every pore," Mr. Mills said. "But I'm not going to pull your soul out."

Born in Boston and raised on the Vineyard, Mr. Mills's family moved to Walpole when he was a young teenager. He came back to the Island every summer, and still does — at least for a couple of weeks — although he has lived in Jacksonville, Fla. since graduating from college.

He estimates he works on his art an average of 10 hours a day, and the only vacation he takes is on the Vineyard.

Mr. Mills's love affair with minute detail started early in life. As a child, he would ask his teachers at the Oak Bluffs School for a pencil, when all of the other children were using crayons. And in his 20s, he admits he once glued a mustache hair to a toothpick to form the tiniest possible paintbrush.

Between the popularity his work and the length of time each piece takes, Mr. Mills can stock just one show a year at the Granary Gallery in West Tisbury and send one or two paintings to Gallery Henoch in New York city.

Mr. Mills, who is 47, has been showing at the Granary nearly every year since he was 22. Mr. Mills's first solo show was at 24, a year after he graduated from Bridgewater State College with a degree in art. He had known the owners, Brandon (Brandy) Wight and Bruce Blackwell, through his parents since he was about eight years old.

"I've always been in the right place at the right time with the right people," Mr. Mills said. "There are a lot of people with unbelievable talent that are never going to have that opportunity."

Given the chance, Mr. Mills proved his art was in demand. At his first solo show in 1983, 33 of the 35 paintings sold. In 1986, the Granary started hiring police officers to control traffic at the show opening. In 1987, a 28-piece show sold out in 10 minutes.

"In some cases, people will plan their vacation around when Steve is showing," said Chris Morse, who has owned the Granary for 10 years and

has worked in it for nearly 20. "Everyone's always excited to see what he has done, because there's a wow factor with his work."

The show running now at the Granary includes eight new pieces. Five are close-up studies including the Coke can, bottle caps, paint tubes and a crumpled-up Wall Street Journal. There are also three Vineyard scenes of sandpipers on the beach.

Although the show officially ends on Sunday, the pieces will hang at the Granary — which is open year-round — until they sell.

"This year I started exploring really close-up stuff," Mr. Mills said of the collection. Classic was one of the most challenging. "That was a huge learning curve," he said. "Now it's part of my repertoire and I can apply it."

In several of the pieces, Mr. Morse was involved in the concept and composition stages. He contributed the wine corks in Corks. He came up with the idea for 7 Up Side Down, a study of bottle caps, and bought the little collection of soda and beer caps on eBay. A man bought the \$25,000 painting on the condition he could also have the caps.

"I don't know how many gallery owners spend that kind of time with their artists," Mr. Mills said.

Since Mr. Mills lives in Florida, the two men collaborate via e-mail, routinely sending ideas and photo compositions back and forth.

"It's something I really get a kick out of doing," Mr. Morse said. This kind of collaboration also helps Mr. Mills and other artists to be in tune with the customers' tastes. "They're not here to hear what people are saying," Mr. Morse explained.

Mr. Mills is always open to a new idea or challenge, since he approaches each piece with the same goal. "I want to try to impress myself," Mr. Mills said. "It doesn't always, but when it does, I feel like it was a successful project."

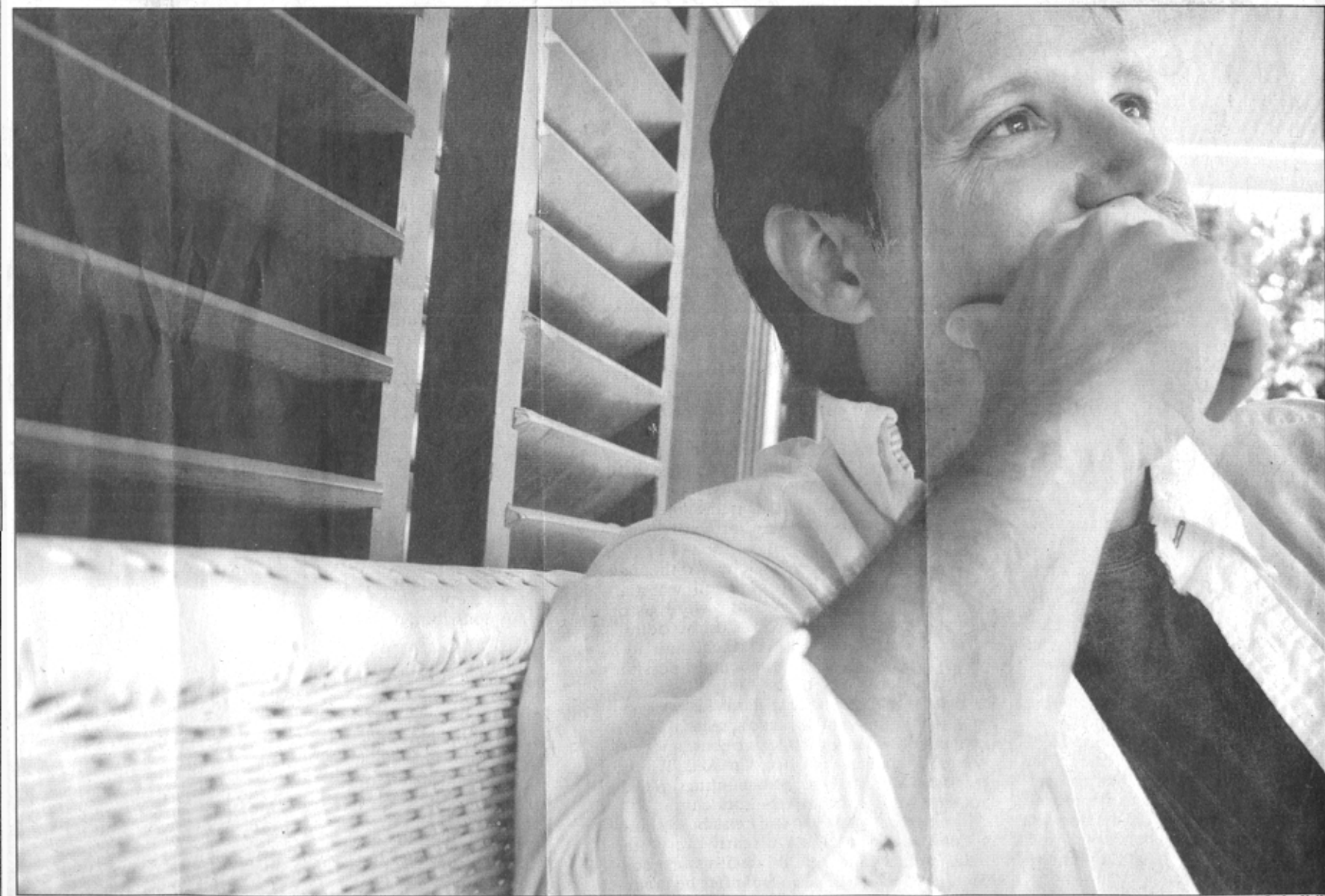


PHOTO-REALIST STEVE MILLS SHOWS HIS WORK AT GRANARY GALLERY IN WEST TISBURY.

Luke Kelly