

GALLERIES

Beyond reality: Photorealist painter Steve Mills

By Tamar Russell

Photorealist painter Steve Mills has been drawing and painting since he was a child growing up on the Vineyard. (He sold his first painting when he was 11.) He earned money for college by selling the paintings he did on the docks of Menemsha.

Still, he chose meteorology as his major in college but realized quickly that it was not for him. After working in a factory for a year, he returned to Bridgewater State College as an art major, and graduated magna cum laude in 1982.

Mr. Mills found he had an extraordinary knack for capturing details in his paintings. "I fell in love with it," he says.

At his first solo show at The Granary Gallery in West Tisbury in 1983, all but two of his 35 paintings sold. In 1989 he became affiliated with Gallery Henoch in New York City, and established a successful reputation by producing and selling over 500 paintings in the first 20 years of his career as an artist.

However, with the time it takes to paint in the photorealist technique — some paintings taking more than 500 hours — it has proven impossible to do more than one gallery opening a year.

It begins with an idea. Mr. Mills creates seemingly impossible compositions in excruciating, minute detail. His paintings of glass jars, marbles, stacks of folded newspapers (each letter of text readable), seascapes and crossword puzzles look more



PHOTOS BY SUSAN SAFFORD

Top: Steve Mills at The Granary Gallery next to his oil painting, "On the Edge." Right: Mr. Mills offers giclee prints of his most popular paintings.

like large photographs than like paintings.

Once his vision is identified, Mr. Mills shoots large photographs of his subjects. Although the work is solitary, he consults with his galleries via email, and refine the details. He works very closely with the galleries, collaborating back and forth. "They help me to see," he says, adding that "it helps to have a second set of eyes."

From that point the still life composition is put into Adobe Photoshop, where he layers close-up micro-images of each

tiny section — a piece by piece patchwork of the whole. One image often ends with 20 or 30 other images layered on top of it, creating a huge graphic file. It is a meticulous process, one Mr. Mills observes with religious care.

With a digital projector the image is projected onto the blank canvas or an aluminum panel and finalized with Photoshop tools. He then blocks in the first crucial coat of

paint, which is the bulk and base of the color. This can be completed in a day.

He works back to front to begin building multiple layers of color, some of the water

scenes having two layers, but his newspaper still lifes would not be believable without a greater number of layers. Mr. Mills creates an illusionary word based on a nearly exact copy of reality.

Leigh Mills, his wife of 10 years, explains, "Steve takes something people see every single day and focuses in on

"All I paint is an illusion, that is the fun part. I enjoy the game of the mind-bend and people enjoy the ride..."

- Steve Mills

mind-bend and people enjoy the ride... Art is a great equalizer, and we have been blessed by the experiences it has brought us."

Now based in Florida, he says, "Still-life work is universal and both markets [Martha's Vineyard and New York] can carry them."

He adds, "But I always paint for myself. It is mine unless I sell it, and that is what I like about painting for the galleries versus painting commission pieces."

Over the years, Mr. Mills has made 280 commissioned paintings.

"We have admired him for 25 years. We always wanted a Steve Mills," explains the wife of a couple who commissioned a painting. She explains that they also wanted it personalized, which it was, but that it exceeded their expectations. Mr. Mills changed the date on one item in the composition to the birth date of the couple's twin sons, something that he often likes to do in his work. "Now that we have it, it is more than we thought it would be," the happy owner says. ♦

Paintings by painters Mary Sipp-Green, Scott Terry, Steve Mills, and jeweler Ross Coppelman are currently in a show at The Granary Gallery. The show runs through August. The Granary Gallery, 636 Old Country Rd., West Tisbury. 508-693-0455.

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