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Painting the Town
Frank Sills in his Mount
Pleasant studio

MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE



Charleston rooftops, oil on linen

A FORMER BROOKLYN-BASED ARTIST SHIFTS
HIS GAZE TO CHARLESTON

written by JANA RILEY *photos by* DOTTIE RIZZO

FRANCIS SILLS



Charleston (re-build), oil on linen

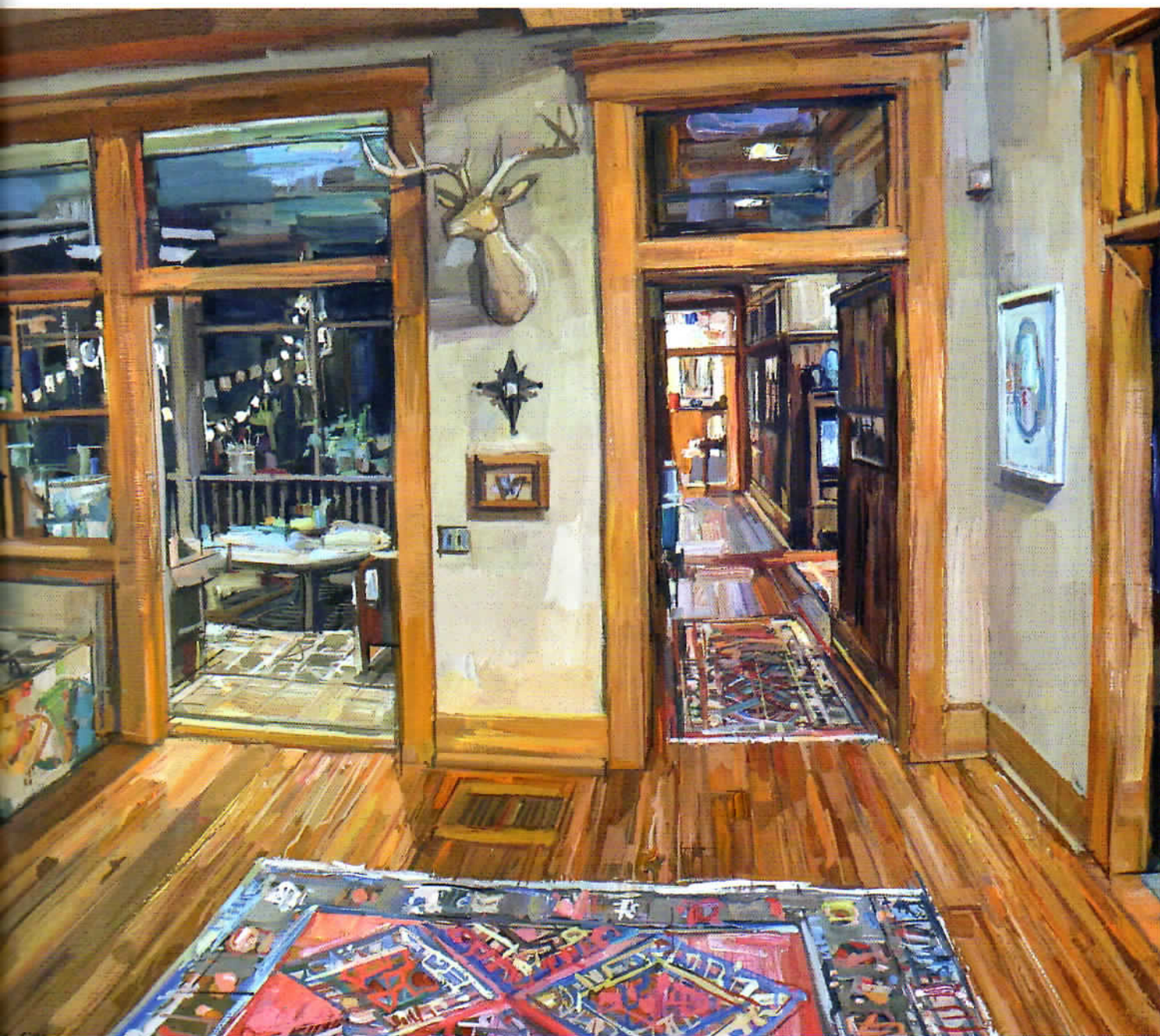
"I paint the things in my life, the places I see all the time," Sills says. "When I moved to South Carolina, I wanted a change of pace for my work. I still painted stuff that I was seeing all of the time, but it was a new environment. The light is so much brighter here in the South; it changed my palette a good bit."

A native of New Jersey, Sills found himself drawn to art from a young age, whether through drawing, painting or making models. With an artistic grandfather and supportive parents, he always felt encouraged to pursue his passion, though that didn't stop his parents from worrying when he decided to major in painting at Syracuse University. "I went to a Lucien Freud exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of art and thought, 'This is it. This is what I want to do.' So I came home and told my parents that I wanted to major in painting," Sills recalls. "They said, 'If this is what you want to do, and is what makes you happy, then we want you to do it, but logically, you also have to make money.'"

Determined but reasonable, Sills honed his oil painting skills while in college, and then opted to continue graduate school at Parsons School of Design in New York City so he was qualified to teach art later in life. There, he met his wife, an abstract painter, and they settled in Brooklyn. Sills fell into the interior design world: mixing paint for handmade wallpaper, painting faux finishes on furniture and working with wall finishes including gilding and plaster work. They had two children together, and after visiting his sister's house in Charleston one year, they fell in love with the city and decided to make the move south.

AT

When Francis Sills seeks inspiration for his artwork, he doesn't have to look far. The painter, who specializes in realism with an impressionistic focus, draws his muses from his present surroundings, whether it be a five-foot radius around his easel in his art studio, his own backyard or the town in which he lives. To this end, the paintings stored in his home studio workshop tell the stories of the homes and cities he's shared with his wife, Faith, and his three children, Jasper, Carys and Griffin. Their time in Brooklyn is made evident by industrial landscape paintings, visions of a small brownstone backyard and dark, deep colors, while their move to Charleston in 2011 is marked by a drastic change in palette, copious amounts of light and the appearance of coastlines, ancient oaks and church steeple-heavy skylines.



clockwise: *Night painting*, oil on linen; *Marion Square (Winter)*, oil on linen; *Front yard*, oil on linen

Within months, the family traded their Brooklyn brownstone for a light-filled home nestled among the trees in the Old Village of Mount Pleasant, and Sills began searching for inspiration around his new home. It didn't take long.

From a distance, the paintings often look like photographs, clear and colorful, but as one approaches, the realism breaks and abstraction occurs, and that is when the wild but deliberate markings come to the surface.

"We were driving back from Kiawah and I saw a sign for the Angel Oak," Sills remembers. "I thought, 'Yes! This is what I want to paint.' So I did. I could probably paint that tree for the rest of my life."

An oil painter with a heavy focus in realism and impressionism, Sills has always been drawn to settings with a great deal of architectural elements. His mind often translates even nature scenes—including visions of the Angel Oak—into structural, geometric realities. From a distance, the paintings often look like photographs, clear and colorful, but as one approaches, the realism breaks and abstraction occurs, and that is when the wild but deliberate markings come to the surface.

As Sills spent time around the Charleston area, he sought to find interesting perspectives featuring the gritty, industrial, decaying themes that he enjoyed painting, but often had a hard time finding such places. When he did, access was limited, so he took to well-worn paths near

the South Carolina Aquarium and through the heart of downtown Charleston, but shifted his view from the typical. Sills points to one painting in particular, an industrial scene featuring cranes, buoys, cables and machines with the often-depicted Arthur Ravenel, Jr. Bridge just barely noticeable in the background.

"I was on the dock by the aquarium painting this and people kept coming up to me, saying, 'What are you doing? You're missing the bridge! Why don't you paint the harbor over there? It's so much prettier,'" Sills remembers. "So I'd point out the beauty in what I was seeing, and gradually, I'd see them open up to that—the possibility that both perspectives could be beautiful."

Sills also found a muse in the rooftop jungles of air conditioning units, skylights, pipes and satellite dishes, lugging his "granny cart" to the top of parking garage roofs and painting for hours at a time, focusing nearly all of the foreground on the unusual view, the traditional Charleston skyline just a whisper in the background. "It's a whole little world up there," he says. "It really is fascinating."

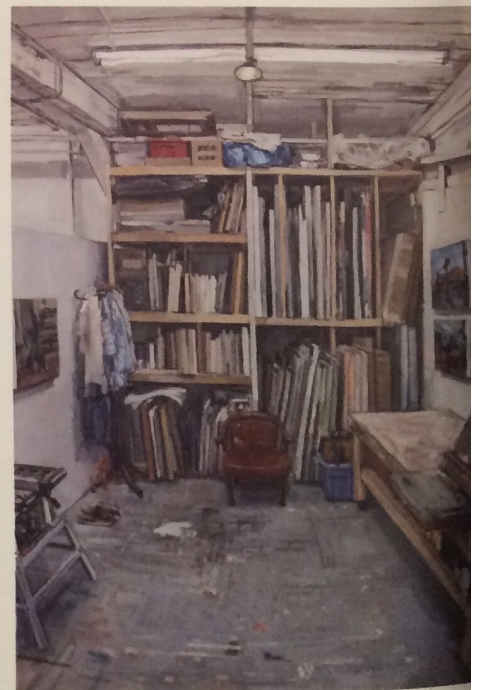
These days, Sills paints every day, rotating through four or five paintings at any one time, spends time raising his three children and teaches drawing at the College of Charleston. The classes, he says, force him to pull back and examine the basics of drawing, which refines his art more each year and helps keep his goals in perspective.

"You can always get better at painting," says Sills. "So that's what I'm always striving for, to have the paintings flow out of me more—and maybe have my work featured in a public museum collection one day. So I just keep my head down and just keep on painting." ♦

The works of Francis Sills can be viewed and purchased at Horton Hayes Fine Art at 30 State Street in Charleston, Kenise Barnes Fine Art in Larchmont, New York, or through their respective websites.



Charleston Harbor, oil on linen; *Studio interior*, oil on linen





Strokes of Genius
Sills adds the finishing touches to a painting