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GREG BENNETT

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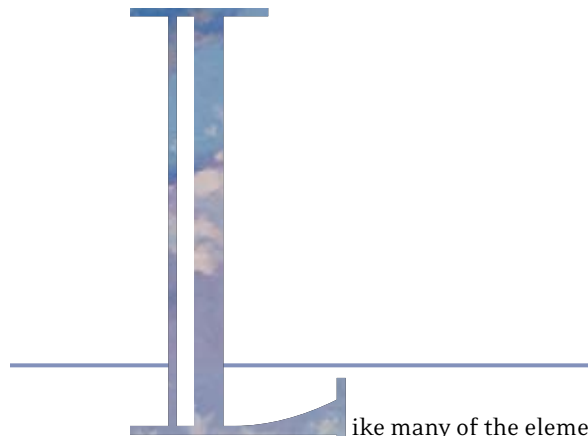
**LAND OR SEA, STRATHMERE ARTIST GREG BENNETT
PAINTS THE SUBJECTS HE KNOWS BEST**

SCAPES

Approaching Greg Bennett's beach block home in Strathmere, New Jersey, is a visual treat. A wide variety of colorful flowers grows around the yard that Greg tends daily. He answers the door, paintbrush in hand. Then we stroll to Twisties, the local watering hole, for sustenance, libations and conversation.

A sense of Strathmere's tight-knit community is palpable when you walk its streets. With a population of only about 100 year-rounders, as Greg explains, everybody knows everybody. "You stop about every half block to chat."

by Frank Kallop
photos by Bill Horin



Like many of the elements in his environment, Twisties is a place that has shaped Greg's work. More than once he has painted the quaint, out-of-the-way neighborhood tavern. He has also worked from its deck to capture the particular quality of light as the sun plays on the tapestry of bay and marshes that is Strathmere's back yard.

Strathmere is one of those Jersey seashore towns that most people have never heard of, where Greg serves as a volunteer fireman and an elected fire commissioner. Although it's part of Upper Township, which comprises the northern quarter of Cape May County, the town has always maintained its own identity and *de facto* leadership. In fact, a grassroots effort is underway to secede from Upper and join its neighbor, Sea Isle City.

Back at Greg's house in his small ground-floor studio, I'm treated to several paintings in various stages of completion. Some are older, some he is preparing for his summer show at Peter McPhee Fine Arts in Stone Harbor. One is a beautiful watercolor of the Sea Isle City Beach Patrol garage. One of the island's older buildings, perhaps from the 1940s, Greg has realized it in his trademark style. It is a crisp, detail-rich and colorful version of an ordinary object, in tones of ochre, green and blue. Another is large-scale, 30 by 36 inches, of the ocean and beach with a couple walking. It communicates a great sense of scale, perspective and atmosphere with a very limited pallet of grays, orange and blue.

Greg's most visited subjects are the seascapes and landscapes that surround him at the New Jersey seashore. His work is greatly influenced by his environment, and one can imagine that he would be a very different painter if he lived in a different place. "I pretty much paint subjects I know very well. I've been at the Jersey Shore a long time and I am lucky that the subject matter I am interested in happens to be very marketable."



Above: Building brushwork in his home studio.

Right: *Discards*, 2007, Oil on linen, 24 x 36 inches

Far right: Immersed in color. Greg's well-tended flower beds.



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et his work is not one-dimensional. Other subjects include a snow scene from Pennsylvania, and a colorful painting of two canoes along a riverbank in the mountains.

"The shore is where I live so it's accessible to me. I really like the mountains, but the mountains are far from here. So that theme occurs less often. But when I am able to travel to these places, even if I don't have my paints with me, I always have my camera and I take tons of photos and eventually I paint them."

His art education began before his teenage years, taking lessons privately in his native Bridgeton. The journey continued with a year at the York Academy of Arts in York, Pennsylvania, followed by an apprenticeship under John Terelak at the Gloucester Academy of Fine Arts in Gloucester, Massachusetts. "Gloucester was where it really all began for me," he recalls. "It was there that I decided to launch into the profession of being a painter."

He is that rare individual who knew what he wanted to do from an early age. It was the reason he left the York Academy—he wanted to paint, and the school was geared toward graphic design. It was a move that played significantly in the development of his style.

"Gloucester is located on Cape Ann which was a huge artists' colony at the turn of the century, a tradition which continues today. Studying in Gloucester, you're immersed in the American impressionists." He names William Merritt Chase and John Singer Sargent as perhaps his most significant influences, but he is careful to qualify the term. "I may look to them for inspiration, but that's where it has to end. I try not to emulate technique, pallet or composition. Otherwise it clearly looks like you have no imagination of your own, and you're just swiping another artist's style."



It's safe to say, however, that Greg draws inspiration from the American Impressionists' mastery of brushwork. In his work, you don't see a lot of "scumbling." Each stroke is a statement, individually loaded with color and value, very deliberately placed. It's almost as if the subject takes a back seat to the paint, the poetry of the light and the space.

His small studio, where he creates his oils and watercolors, is a comfortable space where Greg is surrounded by art books and mementos from many years of living on the island. He always works to music, mostly classical. "It kind of neutralizes. Otherwise my thoughts are disruptive to the work process."

Greg paints realistically but never in hyperrealism. His paintings look as if they were painted outdoors, although they are usually fashioned inside. "I still paint *en plein air* on occasion, but I find the challenges of painting in conjunction with nature and what it has to offer on a particular day to be a distraction. It's difficult with the changing light, the conditions and living on the coast—all the insects around biting you. When I continue working in the studio I remain in *plein air* mode, mentally. I like my paintings fresh and fluent. I don't want them to be stiff."

Photography plays a role in the process, starting when he records the detail of a scene. "At some point all my reference material is abandoned, and it's only my imagination that finishes the painting. If all I did was copy a photograph, that's just really boring. A lot of artists fall into that trap, becoming overly obsessed with detail, which sometimes leaves little to the imagination."

To Greg, imagination is an exercise in subtlety. His work is not surreal; he doesn't paint what's not there. Rather, he modifies the real world to fit his vision. He describes this by saying, "I'm talking about imagining a light source or putting more perspective into a painting. I'll change the way buildings are constructed or place my point of view higher to create more of an aerial perspective and generate more distance in the painting."

For Greg, technique drives the process. He sometimes describes himself as an illustrator, documenting the world around him. "I have little concern about psychological preparation for a subject—concentrating more on the color, light and shapes in a particular scene. In some regards I am illustrating a story."

He cites revisiting dead sharks on the beach as an example. He sold one painting on the subject and is working on another. The work in progress is about 18 by 24 inches, depicting five dead sharks and some clamshells. It is a beach close-up with no horizon, just a low-level perspective of the fish. Most of the pallet is comprised of the muted tones of the sand with some contrasting blues and a fishing lure in bright orange.

Left: Neal McPheeters and Greg at Peter McPhee Fine Arts in Stone Harbor, NJ.

Above: *Breezy Day, Hereford Inlet*, 2008, Oil on linen, 40 x 50 inches

“It

is a tragically common sight on the beach: sharks that were caught by fishermen and discarded because they consider them to be trash fish and a nuisance. There were many more sharks on the beach that day, maybe 15. But I worked on a deliberate composition with five. The one dominant shark really represents the agony that they must have suffered. The bright orange fishing hook and floater were not in the scene as I found it, but it's an element you often see on the beach. I felt the composition needed a jolt of color. And it lends some psychological drama. It was the instrument of their death.”

On the technical side, he uses very fine double-primed portrait linen because it provides a smooth surface that does not compete with his brushwork. His pallet is basic: titanium white, cadmium yellow light, yellow ochre, raw sienna, cadmium orange light, cadmium red light, azarian crimson, cerulean blue, cobalt blue, ultramarine blue and veridian green. He will occasionally use sharper blues when necessary, including cobalt turquoise light or phthalo blue.

He describes his approach as “muddling along in mid-tones,” with most paintings dominated by just three colors. “In the end a painting might look very blue or green, but one formula I keep returning to is yellow ochre, cobalt blue and alizarin crimson. I might add white to make a very nice gray. You can change it to a warm gray or cool gray by adding more ochre or blue or crimson, whatever direction you want to take it in.”

As he has matured as an artist, he has gained a higher level of control. “When I was younger, I'd just want to dive in there and do the details to get to that 'wow' factor. But now I work in a very restrained way, building up many tonal layers. Eventually the painting will start to spark. Only then will I punch up the highlights and the dark tones and get into transparent glazes to spice up areas or accentuate brushwork.”

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Right: *Winter behind the Boathouse*, 2005, Oil on linen, 40 x 32 inches



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How he approaches the blank canvas depends on the image he envisions. “If there’s a great deal of detail and accuracy is important, I’ll start by drawing to ensure my proportions are right on. If it’s a simple landscape I’ll often go right into paint, sometimes working with stains to get my composition down and a good idea of the colors I want to use. There isn’t any one direct route to the final result. Each painting has to be better than the last, even if it’s a subject I’ve done a hundred times.”

Sometimes removing paint contributes to the look of the final work. “I’ll come in in the morning and assess what I’ve done the day before. At least half the time I see an area where I could have gone in another direction, and I’ll scrape it off. Sometimes I end up liking the effect it creates and I leave it alone. If you look at some of my landscapes, you’ll see areas that are just raw linen that really don’t have any paint. They did once, but I took it off. Whatever is necessary to achieve the effect you’re going for, to me it’s fair game. It doesn’t mean every square inch of the painting has to have a beautiful painted quality to it. It’s one of the reasons I am not a big fan of photorealism. It tends to be overwhelming. The eye needs a place to calm down.”

Impressionism fits his philosophy. It leaves something to the imagination—the whole story isn’t told. “Some elements are more loosely painted, so the painting looks fresh every time you view it.”

Greg looks around his studio. “Each painting is an emotional journey for me,” he says. “But in the end it’s up to the viewer to take it from that point. When it’s done, signed and off to the galleries, it’s up to someone else to make their own connection—hopefully one strong enough that they’ll want to take it home.”

Frank Kallop is a painter and an educator. His work has been the subject of solo exhibitions throughout the East and West Coasts and he has earned many awards and accolades from his peers. He is an adjunct professor at Richard Stockton College, Pomona, N.J., and also conducts drawing and painting workshops from his studio in Linwood, NJ.

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