

Angling Art

With Warren Stern

Galen Mercer's *Catskills in Sunlight and Shadow*



This is the second essay in the *Quill* on angling art. The first appeared in the Spring 2018 issue and discussed Arthur Shilstone, focusing on his *Evening Light*. This essay will discuss Galen Mercer, an artist considerably younger than Shilstone and, like Shilstone, a major figure in the world of sporting art. His work has been featured in *Gray's Sporting Journal* and numerous other periodicals and exhibited in venues throughout the world. It is highly prized by private collectors and has received accolades from such prominent figures as Jack Hemingway and Guy de la Valdène.

Mercer, born in 1962 in Toronto, maintains his studio by the Battenkill River in Arlington, Vermont. His work spans the globe and should appeal to men and women interested in any sporting pursuit. His Catskill paintings should be of particular interest to readers of the *Quill*.

Mercer is a rare breed—a man who is as much an angler as he is an artist. In his midfifties, he enjoys good health and has retained youthful enthusiasm for angling and an optimistic attitude toward life. He enjoys fishing all over the world—particularly Key West, Patagonia, the salmon streams of Eastern Canada, and the chalk streams of Ireland and France—but he remains devoted to the Catskills. And no wonder: he began fishing there at the age of fourteen and, all in all, has fished in the region for forty-two years, including fishing daily with Art and Kris Lee for sixteen years. His methods to this day include those he learned from Lee: light fly rods, shallow wading, sight fishing, and careful observation. He enjoys bamboo rods and is friends with legendary rod makers Hoagy Carmichael and Per Brandin. Mercer's talents including writing, as demonstrated by his remembrance of Lee in the Fall

2018 *Anglers' Journal* and his discussion of Brandin's innovative rod-building techniques in the Spring 2018 issue of the same Journal

I will use Mercer's recent work *Catskills in Sunlight and Shadow* as a case in point. The setting is the East Branch of the Delaware. The work shares some features of Shilstone's *Evening Light*: both are centered by the reflection of sunlight on water, filtered in Mercer's work by darkening clouds, Shilstone's work by the gloaming of the day. Both feature darkening shades of green foliage, and both are set against a backdrop of hills so similar as to suggest two different approaches to depicting the same place.

But the works are quite different. Mercer's medium is oil on canvas, in contrast to Shilstone, who works in watercolor on white paper. Shilstone softens colors and organizes the painting around the figure of a sportsman whose movements direct the eye into and around the painting. Mercer, in contrast, paints in vivid colors—here, mostly shades of purple—and his landscape does not include a human figure or any evidence of human life at all. He relies on shape, color, and form to draw the viewer into the picture.

The absence of any living being and structure made by man is a conscious and aesthetically valid decision. A figure in a landscape painting invites the viewer to focus on the figure and wonder what happened before and what will happen after the action captured by the work. But omitting a figure encourages the viewer to enter the scene from the vantage point of the artist. More than that, one feels a sense of awe when confronted by a scene that existed long before humans appeared on earth and, one hopes, that will continue to exist in all its beauty when we are gone.

I was so stuck by the painting that I asked Galen for comment. He kindly obliged with a statement that reflects his love of place:

The Catskills have been a part of my life for more than four decades, and there are qualities unique to those mountains and rivers that I've not experienced in the same register anywhere else on earth. Of many things, one is the way shadows walk the hills. The depth, contrasts, and, yes, mystery that exists when you have light passing over such furrowed, richly abundant greens is unique. The contours of these mountains, undulating and smooth from a distance, are actually extremely rocky; they literally snag the light, which doesn't glide over things as it does elsewhere. This rock, much of it slate, also conditions local color, and there's a profound amount of blue in Catskill greens (hence "Blew Hills," a colonial Dutch term for the Catskills). The volatility of mountain weather is another aspect, the variety of cloud forms and the quicksilver changes of light. And since I prefer larger water, there's also the size of the rivers. This painting depicts a flat on the Delaware's lower East Branch, among my favorite places to fish and paint. To date, it has resisted most of the banalities that affect the region and on some days can still seem genuinely ancient and spooky. The place was made for painting.

"Shadows walk the hills," to my mind, perfectly captures the essence of this work and the beauty of the Catskills. And though no angler appears in the painting, it reminds us of why we pursue the sport. 🐟

