



A TROUT POOL AT DUSK

# GALEN MERCER

*Alluding to sport through landscape.*

*by Brooke Chilvers*

Hardly is a fisherman or fly rod present in Galen Mercer's canvases picturing the pools and riversides of the Gaspé Peninsula and the Catskill's most famous sporting rivers. No taut lines. Instead, you might see the empty canoes of salmon fishermen, like those in *Heading Up*, being slowly engulfed by encroaching shadows. No wide-brimmed hats. Instead, a fleeting, soaked-in-blue skyscape over the Baie des Chaleurs—a submerged valley of the Restigouche River, first visited by Jacques Cartier in 1534—that evokes the resonating promise of angling, as do the windblown billows that dominate the low emerald horizon stretching toward forever in *Flats Off Key West*.

"I'm attracted to both extremely low and unusually high horizons," explained the Toronto-born artist, "as both impart an element of surprise to the viewer."

Mercer is not interested in telling a story or capturing a moment of sporting glory in his paintings. In fact, he seeks to diminish the angler's very presence. His aims are "to open a lens on something broader—the pauses and quiet moments." Then he adds, "I am far more interested in the sport's intangibles, whatever they may be."

Mercer's landscapes allude to the splendid art of fly fishing by conveying what the angler sees unfolding all around, translating onto canvas the moment the senses conclude, *This is the place to cast*. Sometimes, he just bathes the invisible angler in the scene's magical light. "Light is color, and color is emotion. Getting these things to sync is the trick," he confides.

It's a place the viewer has seen, maybe many times, even if only in the mind's eye. It's how one would want to remember a spring sundown that sets ablaze the soft hillsides along the Delaware River, its barely still waters shimmering the mirrored images in *June Evening, Delaware*. In *Setting a Drop*, the disappearing daylight makes its last stand on one flame-colored hillside and plunges the other into twilight, signaling the end of the day's sport.

Mercer shuns scenes that are static and is naturally drawn to impermanent settings that are "in flux," such as moving waters and shifting skies. "There seems greater poignancy and interest in something indistinct or transitional."

Like Monet with the ever-changing seas around Étretat, he perceives every nuance in fishing waters. Mercer could paint *A Trout Pool at Dusk* a dozen times at different seasons or times of day—each with its unique suggestion of sport.

In a thoughtful interview from October 2019, former Beatle Paul McCartney acknowledged his family's role in his success. His jazz-playing father banged out tunes for group sing-alongs with the lad's talented siblings and tipping aunts. "A lot of music went in. . . . My computer got loaded with a lot of data," he said, pointing to his head. "So that when I finally came to write [music], I printed it all out," McCartney revealed, then humbly reminded, "I am also a genius."

So be it with Mercer (b. 1962), whose father, Glenn, painted in watercolors while running a large (à la *Mad Men*) commercial art studio first started by his father, James, who also painted in watercolors. Mercer's mother was an expert draftsman who once did design work for the fashion industry.

Glenn was also an avid fly fisherman, and his son describes himself as "a painter with ruinous tendencies towards fly-fishing travel." A yearning for sport finds itself into many of Mercer's works, his landscapes vow to lead to transformation or an epiphany—the reward for seeking out this sacredly illuminated place on the river at a moment full of potential pleasures, even if the river has turned to ice.

Mercer's shared talent for painting and passion for fishing were early recognized and cultivated by his elders with outings to museums and galleries, summers apprenticing in the studio, and sketching expeditions in the field. "We'd set up our easels and I'd try to understand and imitate their working methods," described Mercer. "A river makes a great studio."

By age 10, he was devouring angling literature and furiously tying flies, while developing his ability to see his surroundings through "the lens of art." Thus, it's not surprising that he prefers sight fishing, pursuing trout on the Catskills' slow-water flats and permit in the Florida Keys.

As ideal for success as it all sounds, Mercer describes himself as a fractious teen, "for no good reason," he added. At the unconventional Canadian school Thornton Hall, he met his first mentor, the "fiery



Welsh headmistress” who’d known Dylan Thomas, who grounded him in art history and technique.

Bravely shrugging off a university art scholarship, he moved instead to the Catskill Mountains, where the 19-year-old’s trajectory was deflected by his encounter with an amazing couple: author and fly fishing virtuoso Art Lee (1942–2018) and his wife, Kris (1939–2016), a photographer by trade. Mercer was already producing artwork for North American outdoor publications when, in 1982, Lee requested some original illustrations. “That job unintentionally became a life,” said Mercer, whose studio for many years was within sight of Junction Pool, where the Beaverkill and Willowemoc come together. Still a shrine to fly fishermen, the Beaverkill represents the birth waters, in the 1960s, of catch-and-release fishing.

Lee is described as a “legendary angler, writer, raconteur, and mentor,” a conservationist, and an eccentric. And Kris Lee as “talented, self-reliant, and

possessing considerable grit,” hauling her heavy equipment around to shoot stills for her husband’s freelance articles and his column in *Fly Fisherman*. For years, they were also the principal consultants to the prestigious sporting agency Frontiers International. The job took them—and Mercer—in that first year alone, “to Christmas Island for bonefish, Quebec and Iceland to fish salmon, and concluded with six weeks in autumn spent on the Henrys Fork of the Snake.”

During the 18 years Art and Galen fished and traveled the world together, Mercer’s career blossomed. Along the way, while fishing for trout, he developed his preference for long and exceptionally light fly tackle by makers such as Dennis Franke, Per Brandin, and Tim Abbott, who have all built specialized rods for him.

Discussing the influence of other artists on his work, Mercer admits that for inspiration he prefers painters such as J. M. W. Turner to more traditional sporting art. His admiration for Frank Benson, who



FLATS OFF KEY WEST



JUNE EVENING, DELAWARE



HEADING UP

fished Atlantic salmon for 40 seasons, stems less from his treatment of sport than from how the American Impressionist “owned unusual color, had a great sense of design, and possessed a marvelously fluid brush.”

He is sparked more by dynamic “break-out” paintings, such as urban painter George Bellows’s (1882–1925) sweeping Hudson River views and Maine coastal landscapes, or realist artist Thomas Eakins’s (1844–1916) seminal handling of shorebird shoots along the Cohansey River in southern Jersey, where *Starting Out After Rail* shows no sport at all, only a skiff called a “Delaware ducker” leaning into the wind.

Mercer’s stunning use of color, his deconstruction of “fishy” landscapes into interacting pigments that stir the heart and activate the brain also derive from a study of modernist painters. When he becomes interested in an artist, he says, “their work consumes me like a forest fire. I study it minutely, obsessively, dream about it, buy every book, see every show.”

He mentions Stuart Shils (b. 1954), whose monotype paintings are collages of color drawn in color; Patrick Heron (1920–1999), “the Color Magician,” whose translations of “real visual experiences” into light and color have their roots in Cézanne, Matisse, and Braque; Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) whose flat, solid color in large fields actually “frees color from objective context and becomes the subject in itself”; and Wolf Kahn (b. 1927) whose iridescent color-field landscapes

are described as “making light from color.”

No wonder in paintings such as *Catskill Brook*, *Fourteen Below* and *Bright Weather, Upper Beaverkill*, there is only color—radiant color in all its reflective incarnations.

“Few things are as personal as one’s basic palette,” says Mercer, who is forever tinkering with his, adding and subtracting pigments, experimenting with the same shade but from different manufacturers, benefiting from “a slightly coarser grind or tone or viscosity.” He lists his present palette of oils as burnt sienna, alizarin crimson, cadmium red medium, yellow ochre (domestic) by Williamsburg, Indian yellow, cadmium yellow medium, permanent green light, viridian, cobalt blue, French ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, cobalt violet, and titanium white. Black he always mixes, and rarely the same way twice.

In addition to brushes, he also uses palette knives as well as his fingers, sponges, scraps of cloth, even sticks. He devotes months, often years, to “come to terms with a region, to fully absorb that landscape’s light and form and essential colors.”

Abhorring set formulas, Mercer says his aim is to become ever more spontaneous, even drawing in paint, loading his brushes fully and handling them more aggressively to “exploit their spring.” He enjoys the inherent qualities of the medium in its many manifestations. “Nothing thrills me more than the expressive splash, drip, or stain,” he says, confessing that he goes through a lot of paint. Rejecting the constraints of photorealism, he believes that “Exactitude is not truth.”

Although Mercer is equally at home in SoHo as along the Battenkill in West Arlington, Vermont, where he lives with his wife, Jaimie, he says, “For me, the entire point of being in the field is to reduce one’s sense of importance, to realign with a larger and timeless order.” He sees game fish under his snow-bitten streams and the suggestion of spring spawning in awakening blossoms. ■

*While writing this column, Brooke learned that Ernest Hemingway once commented that he couldn’t “take another f—ing word on the Beaverkill.”*



CATSKILL BROOK, FOURTEEN BELOW