

# PASTEL

The background of the entire page is a painting of a beach at sunset. A single, weathered wooden post stands vertically in the middle ground, its reflection visible in the shallow water of the tide. The sky is a mix of soft pinks, oranges, and blues, while the water and sand are rendered in muted, earthy tones. The overall style is soft and atmospheric, characteristic of the 'Pastel' art movement.

No one paints  
South Jersey like  
Stan Sperlak

# MASTER





Stan's easel at his lookout. Opposite: "Quick Sketch." Previous: "Sturrey on the Bay."

**A**RTIST Stan Sperlak has pretty much the same mission as *Blue Roads* magazine... to bring out the beauty in the three counties of Cape May, Cumberland and Atlantic. We, however, use clunky things like computers and digital cameras to get our point across, whereas Stan uses his brushes and a masterly eye for color. So it seemed very appropriate to feature Stan in our premier issue. Here he talks about his influences and the natural wonderland that is south Jersey.

**Where were you born and brought up?** As a military family in my first 14 years we moved from my birthplace of Denver to Cape May then Honolulu, New York, Duluth, Minnesota, with in-between returns to my grandparents' home in Wildwood and Rio Grande. We settled permanently in Cape May County in 1975 when

I was 15 and I have lived as a "native" ever since.

**When did you start painting, and why?** Everyone draws as a child. We are so uninhibited and curious. I was no different, no prodigy, but I stuck with the whole creativity thing longer than most adolescents do. By high school I was into writing poetry which led me to playing the guitar, and my love of wild places (combined with the normal distain for structured school days) lead me to explore the woods and marshes of Cape May County on my many "unscheduled days off." I would always hijack my father's Nikon FM camera and go. So the unconscious involvement in the arts was tugging me on and I made it past the stage where most just stop doing things.

I know that by moving around the country, the long road trips, the wayside rests





*"Lake and Moon"*

and scenic overlooks must have imprinted on me, because i still have to stop dozens of times on any trip just to check things out... a little creek, the view between some old barns, crazy enough now that I am always asking folks to let me shoot some pics or set up my easel. My father always made sure we checked out museums and my mother was quite a talented crafter about the house so I knew art too. But what made me paint? All these things contributed. Even while shooting a million shots, I hardly ever thought about hanging them on a wall, they were just things I wanted to remember. But my lifelong love of plants was the major reason I think I became a painter. From the first spider plant in my bedroom to the seven-foot Yucca tree I plunked down in my parents' living room I was always intrigued by things alive and interesting to look at. I started to know all

the names by my sophomore year in high school and one day wound up applying for a job at a landscaping place in Cape May.

A couple years later I was established on my own, designing gardens, walks, ponds and working with the earth and always outside. I truly was in heaven. But it bothered me that I couldn't get some folks to understand a concept I had for their garden. My drawing really was pretty bad and I kept trying to find someone to teach me how to do artist's renderings so that I could convince clients to really stretch the landscape. This was long before computers made it easy, so I enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts in Philadelphia after seeing an ad in a magazine.

I knew someone there was going to show me how to draw a house the right way. Oddly enough I was initially disappointed (not that they weren't going to be



“Green Roof Farm”

able to teach me to draw, because that is probably the strongest academic resolve of the Academy), but that they said were going to help me draw houses by drawing naked people first! That was a tough experience, but I worked very hard at the task and soon was addicted to this form of drawing and the beauty of it all and before long I forgot why I had gone there. I was drawing still-life, visiting the museum, hanging out in the library, meeting other artists and seeing things in a totally new way. Before long I was in an outdoor class working with pastels from life.

It's funny, I was now painting all the things that I loved so much. Each day on the commute to school through south Jersey, I was tormented by how much was passing by my eyes while I was driving!

It was by accident that I met my mentor Pat Witt, the venerable marsh painter

of south Jersey. Someone had mentioned her at the Academy and thought she had passed away years ago. Since they weren't sure I called information and got her number. She was more than alive, she was starting a class outdoors on the marsh the next day! She made me take light, life and art so seriously and I have begun to pass her teachings on myself.

***Do you have a favorite painting among your own work?*** That's hard because like most artists I tend to be in love with the one on the easel. But I did a little 5 x 7-inch study of a Goshen field on a warm November day seven years ago that was just everything to me. A young couple from New York state asked about it and I sold it to them. I don't regret them having it. In fact that is such a reason to keep painting – it helps me know others are see-



*"Higbee Cliffs" - painted at Higbee's Beach, just outside Cape May*

ing things through my eyes, and what I am doing "works".

***How often do you spend on painting?*** Many of my small paintings take less than an hour as I tend to work fast and outdoors. In the studio I might go back and forth on three or four paintings over the course of a week or two. But it is sort of unfair to look at time involved in one finished painting because there is so much time involved in just looking, composing and dreaming, and there are so many works that never even get finished.

***What are your favorite places in South Jersey – both to paint and to have a good time?*** Places? Benny's Landing, which is a couple blocks away from my house – there are little fishing shacks along the sound. I always take my

students there and they are amazed at the small throwback fishing village. And my farm (which grows weeds and bugs at the moment) on the Crow Creek in Goshen – perfect solitude with a little insecticide. But I also like Nummy Island a lot. It's the little barrier island that is between Stone Harbor and North Wildwood. A 360-degree uninterrupted view from a sand bar. Skimmers and oyster catchers circling all day. As for enjoying myself, I love the Mad Batter in Cape May and the great art shows and food Mark and Pam put on. I have been fortunate to be a part of the art renaissance in Millville and wouldn't miss the Third Friday Art Walks that they hold each month. Dozens, maybe hundreds of artists, mixed in with art, food and entertainment lovers

***A lot of visitors here know little or***



*"Morning Marsh"*

**nothing about Cumberland. What would you say are the must-do activities?** Cumberland is so big, one should drive the county once each season, in spring when all the orchards and farms are in bloom. In summer when it's too busy at the shore, there is a way to escape to the slow-paced life out there. Then there's all the great fishing, fall when the fruits and harvests are in and winter when good Sunday driving will keep you warm and safe. Don't miss the route through Vivalde, Dividing Creek and Fortescue – it's another world.

**What do you plan to paint in the upcoming 12 months?** I keep planning on more figurative work, but models are hard to come by. I am involved in a food show so I guess you are going to see some fruit, but honestly I keep seeing myself

using my outdoor studies back in the studio not to copy from but as a jumping off point for more emotional color work and new compositions.

**Is there one favorite subject you have? Something you have painted over and over?** The sky is so crucial to me. I think so hard about it. Realistically it is just gas, and to be able to try and convey that element, versus the ease at which terra firma comes together, it is a challenge, so I keep trying new methods. Beyond that it would be a marsh, just like the reverence Pat Witt holds for them. Maybe it's the wonderful "sulphur" at low tide, or all the life that is in it, but I need mud on my boots and these salt marshes give it up pretty easily.

**When you paint a marsh, or dunes,**





"Bay Clammer"

***or a meadow, how do you set yourself up? How long do you stay there? Describe the process by which you'd paint.*** Check out the photo of my set-up (page TK). It's pretty easy. Not too much stuff so I can carry it all at once. I do shoot reference photos, digitally now, but I always paint from life first, then use the photos for something else later, bigger, smaller, changing the atmosphere, removing some trees! You know that is so cool to be able to edit when you paint. Too many people in the water? Everyone out! With a few quick strokes things are the way I see them.

***Who are your other favorite local artists?*** I have so many friends in the arts I would have to answer that by telling you instead about some of my heroes...all long gone. George Inness, Edgar Payne, Gran-

ville Redmond, William Lathrop. I keep my door open at my studio in Cape May Court House above the little garden company I continue to run (my real job) but art now accounts for over half of my income so I take it all pretty seriously. The Peter McPhee Gallery in Stone Harbor carries most of my work and are great people who carry many other fine South Jersey artists. My friend Jason Crafts is practicing the soon-to-be-gone art of hand-carving and gilding of frames he builds in Avalon at the Gilt Complex. We are collaborating this summer where he will be providing frames for some of my major works at a solo show at Peter McPhee Gallery in July.

*Stan teaches workshops and offers himself as a "plein air" guide to take other visiting artists to his favorite places. You can check out Stan's work on [www.stansperlak.com](http://www.stansperlak.com).*

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*"All Along the Atlantic" on the easel in Stan's studio in Cape May Court House*