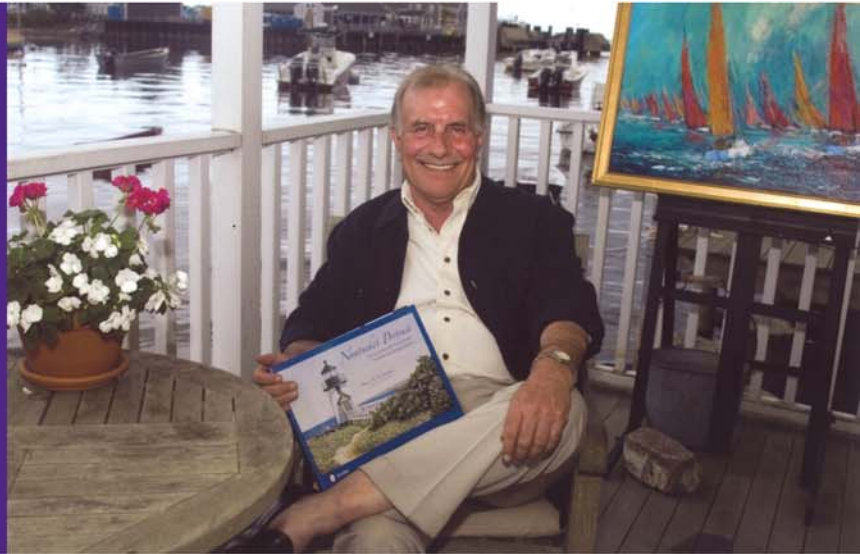


James Cromartie

America's Leading Hard-Edged Realist



“One afternoon, this beautiful young woman walked into my gallery. She had on a baseball cap, these great big sunglasses, a sweatshirt that read Martha’s Vineyard, blue jeans, and tennis shoes. There was an older woman with her, who had a Spanish accent, and this huge guy that stood outside the gallery who I thought played for the [Boston] Celtics—and I sort of got focused on him because he was so big. The older woman kept asking me questions and she was always between this young woman and me. Well, the older woman asked me about Tom Brokaw [who owns one of my paintings] and so we talked a little about Tom Brokaw, then the younger woman came over and said, ‘Excuse me, what kind of flowers are those?’ pointing to the Brant Point with Roses painting. I told her they were *Rosa Rugosa* and that they came here [to Nantucket] in the 1800’s and grow right on the beach. I then told her a funny story about the day I was doing the drawing for that painting and how my son Andrew

wanted to go to the beach. We went to the beach and he was supposed to bring back the flowers for the drawing, but when we got back to the studio there were no flowers. I asked him, ‘Where are the flowers?’ and he said, ‘That’s girl’s work. I’m not doing that.’ And the young woman laughed and said, ‘My boys are the same way.’ So we talked about boys, but of course I didn’t know she was talking about *those* boys! She told me a few stories about her boys and then said, ‘Well, I think I’d like to take this painting,’ and she took off her sunglasses and as soon as I saw her eyes I knew it was Princess Diana. I guess I kind of went into shock because I said, ‘Do you know who you are?’ So that’s how I met Princess Diana, and she bought the painting that’s on the cover of my book, which is my favorite.”

Such is the life of **Jim Cromartie '66** whose gallery and studio is located on Easy Street in Nantucket, MA, a haven for art collectors and the super rich, detailed

in his new book *Nantucket Portrait: “Fun and Games with the Super Rich” The Birth of Hard-Edge Realism*. “There’s this old saying about how to catch a marlin—if you want to catch a marlin, you have to go where the marlin are! So that’s how I ended up in Nantucket. I wanted to sell my paintings and people who visit and live in Nantucket buy art.” Cromartie credits a Theta Chi fraternity brother with introducing him to Nantucket. “Of course in college I knew that Nantucket was a playground for the wealthy, but what I’ve come to experience is that this island is very much like eastern North Carolina. It’s very family-oriented and there is a slower pace of life here. I visited a couple of summers with my fraternity brother and felt like I had come home, not gone somewhere different, so it made it easy for me to come back. After graduation I worked with my dad in real estate for a while, but after about six months he could tell I was not particularly happy. So he said to me, ‘Why don’t you go



Brant Point with Berries



007



Bucket of Daisies

out and give this art thing a shot. You can always come back and do real estate. What could it hurt? If you make it, great, and if you don't it's not that big of a deal. He just set me free."

It wasn't long after Cromartie settled into Nantucket that two notable, influential Americans found their way into his gallery—men who ultimately helped launch Cromartie's career. "If it had not been for Nelson Rockefeller and Roger Firestone, I never would have made it. I was renting this little gallery on Old South Wharf and we [Cromartie and his first wife Barbara] had been there about a month when I sold a painting to Herb Holmes, then head of PBS in New York City. He and his wife Shirley picked up the painting from the gallery one Sunday and ran into Happy and Nelson Rockefeller when they walked back up the wharf. Apparently Governor Rockefeller admired the painting and Herb offered to introduce him to me. So they come back to the gallery, Herb introduced us, we talked for a while, and Governor Rockefeller ended up buying several paintings that day. Well the next summer, he showed up with his roommate from college, who happened to be Roger Firestone. They came in with a Beatles record and a bottle of scotch, so I closed the gallery, put on the record, and we talked about art for a long while. I learned that neither of them liked abstract artwork and they were very interested in acquiring realistic artwork. (It turned out that they were supporting 30 young realists around the country—this had become one of their missions.) So we talked about realism and that's when I explained to them what I was trying to do—I was trying to create paintings that stayed realistic no

matter how close you got to them. At one point Roger turned to Nelson and said, 'Why don't we buy all of his paintings.' After what seemed like forever (although it was probably only about 15 seconds) Nelson said, 'Okay, let's do it.' Right at that moment the Mormon Tabernacle Choir started singing the *Hallelujah Chorus* in my head! It was a whole new world [for me]. So we did this thing for four straight years, where they would come and spend an afternoon with me at the gallery and buy all of my paintings. Nelson and Roger jumpstarted the revival of realism in this country, but they never wanted any publicity about it. It takes a long time to be able to paint this realistically and they put a floor under me while I mastered those skills."

Cromartie's "skill" is hard-edge realism, which he is credited for introducing into the art world. It's a technique that puts thin layers of paint over paint, starting from dark and transitioning to light to achieve the desired effect. Inspired by nature, Cromartie's style is reminiscent of Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth, imbuing realism with paint that rivals the realism of photography. "I used to study paintings in art books. There's one Andrew Wyeth work called *Christina's World* that I was particularly fascinated with. Even with the magnifying glass, no matter how close, I could see the painting there were no brush strokes and I was intrigued 'How in the world can you do a painting and not make any paint strokes?' So I worked and worked on this technique. When I finally saw an Andrew Wyeth in person and was able to walk up close, I saw that there were paint strokes everywhere! What I realized is the paintings in the books had been photographed from

a few feet back and the paint strokes had disappeared, so [in my pursuit to paint without brush strokes] I had accidentally come up with a new style of painting."

Hard-edge realism has turned out to be quite profitable for Cromartie, who has made his living completely by being an artist—a rarity for many in his profession. His style is so revered that he was commissioned to create the official paintings of the Smithsonian Institute Castle, the Capitol, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the White House. (Cromartie's fourth great-grandfather James Hoban designed the White House.) The Smithsonian gives prints of their painting as gifts to visiting dignitaries, and his paintings of The Capitol and The White House were chosen by the U.S. State Department to hang in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. "I feel that hard-edge realism is the outgrowth of what was started by Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth. I've taken their style and brought it to the next level. You know, there's this saying in the art world that amateurs copy and professionals steal. And what that means is that an amateur will just copy a painting, but a professional will steal it and add something to it to make it their own." Hard-edge realism is a result of Cromartie making Hopper and Wyeth's styles his own. "If there's one thing I've learned it's to figure out what your dreams are, find the courage to pursue them, and don't stop for anything. The most committed always wins." Actually living his dream as a successful artist in Nantucket, a place that he loves, certainly makes this East Carolina graduate a winner.



The Capitol



The White House



The Supreme Court