

Confessions of a Hard-Edged Realist

Cromartie book reveals a life in the arts among the super-rich

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Armed with a miniature tape recorder, James Cromartie detailed every morning for three years the experiences of his life thus far as a Nantucketer and an artist.

The result was the newly-published book "Nantucket Portrait: Fun & Games with the Super Rich and The Birth of Hard-Edge Realism," a detailed telling of his adventures in art and on the island over the past 40 years.

Published by Schiffer Books of Pennsylvania, Cromartie worked alongside now-retired writer John W. Nostrand, who transcribed and edited Cromartie's stories into chapters.

Illustrated by many of the artist's paintings of Nantucket done over the years, found within its pages are also the images and stories behind Cromartie's major historical commissions that include The White House, The U.S. Supreme Court,

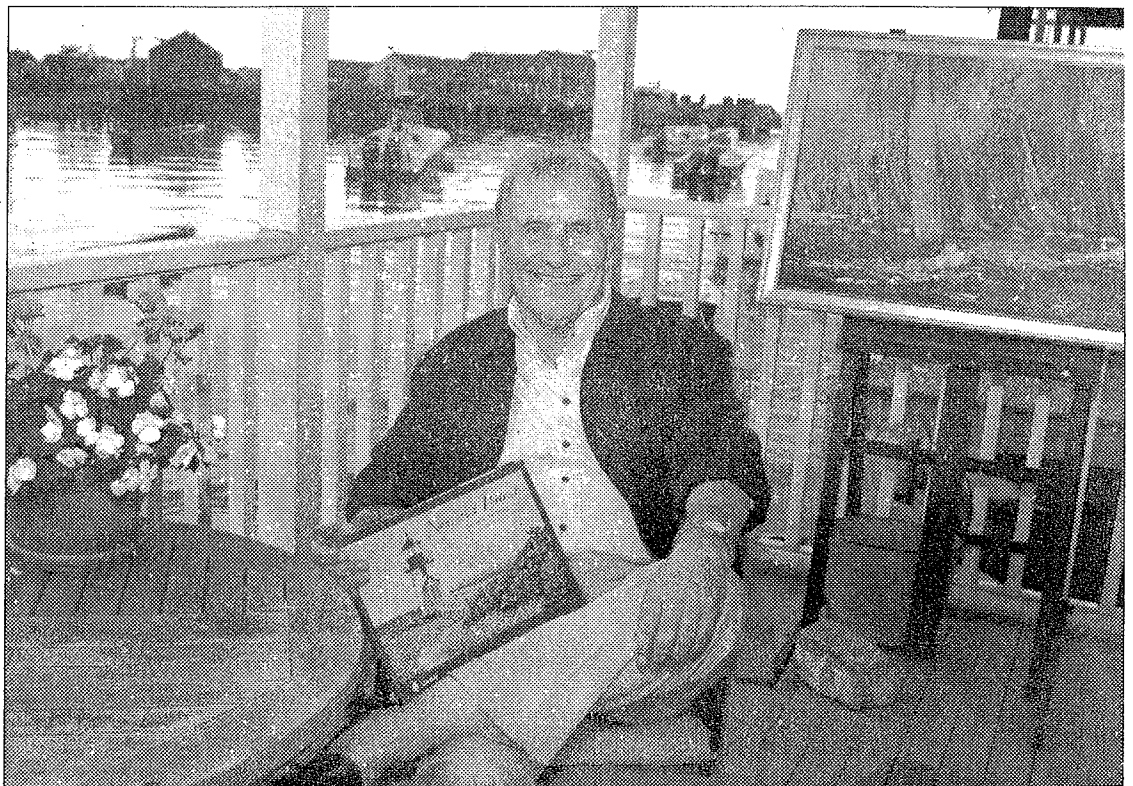


Photo by Bevin Bixby

Painter James Cromartie with a copy of the book he wrote with Chatham author John Nostrand chronicling his growth as an artist and life on Nantucket.

The U.S. Capitol and the Smithsonian castle that borders the lawn of the National Mall. Also detailed are his friendships with some of his most famous patrons including Nelson Rockefeller and Roger Firestone.

Originally from Charlotte, N.C., Cromartie, who to this day maintains a pronounced southern drawl, came to Nantucket as a

young man and an already burgeoning artist.

Of his beginnings as a realist painter, Cromartie, now 64, said with a smile, "I was just messing around until the third grade. I didn't get serious until then."

His earliest influences – including Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth – were found while in grade school

and they have made a lasting impression.

"I would look for hours at Andrew Wyeth's paintings in a book," said Cromartie. "I was amazed I couldn't see any brush strokes and I said to myself 'how did he do that?'"

There began Cromartie's journey into hard-edge real-

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ism, a genre that he is most-ly credited with creating, he said, when he was only trying to emulate Wyeth.

Years later when he made it down to the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pa. and saw many of Wyeth's originals, he realized that there were brush strokes everywhere, but he had been unable to see them on the printed pages he had studied so hard for years. After mirroring what he thought was another artist's style for so long, he found he had inadvertently created his own, launching him on a journey that would take him around the world and into the company of many of society's elite.

Beginning his tale in his early 20s, Cromartie recounted how he found himself enjoying his first summer on Nantucket, inspired by the beach and the sometimes ramshackle old waterfront homes. Here, working in his first gallery on Old South Wharf, he met Nelson "Rocky" Rockefeller and became fast friends with him even before he knew who the well-known philanthropist and giant of American society was. He, along with a select group of other wealthy art enthusiasts, said Cromartie, sought to bring realism back into the mainstream, as abstract had taken over much of the art world's attention. Many of these patrons were very impressed with his unique perspective of acrylic painting and began purchasing his work.

His ultra-realistic style, he said, is due to the time-intensive process of using fine brush strokes on layer after layer of paint, culminating in a great depth and realist viewpoint not seen very often. Beginning each canvas with the darkest colors on his palette and progressively painting the lighter ones one layer at a time, he said that many of his paintings take between two and four months to complete (some take much longer, as was the case of his commission to paint The Supreme Court, which took



Courtesy of James Cromartie

An iconic island image, Brant Point Light, as painted in the hard-edge realist style of James Cromartie.

nine months). This and the fact that he described himself as "a recovering perfectionist," means that his catalog of paintings is smaller than many other artists and this proved to be an issue when it came time to publish "Nantucket Portrait."

Besides his body of acrylic work, Cromartie has a vast stock of watercolors, which many times he said he uses as a precursor to the final piece. Many of these found their way onto the pages of the book, graphically illustrating his journey through life on Nantucket.

"Nantucket is the crossroads of the world," said Cromartie. "It is a wonderful place and it seems almost everyone comes through here eventually."

Cromartie recounted minding his gallery one afternoon in the mid 1990s, when several British women entered. One stood steadfastly close to him, conversing, while another in large sunglasses and a hat

browsed the pieces of artwork. After some time, he said, he had become engaged in conversation with this mysterious second woman, talking about the raising of sons, as they both had several, and finally his art. She said she was interested in a piece, but had no money with her. As she did so, she removed her glasses and in an instant the artist realized he was speaking with none other than Diana, Princess of Wales. She requested he hold the piece and said her secretary would be in touch. Cromartie recalled stammering an answer in the affirmative, and days later sold one of his paintings to the now late English royal.

This is one such instance that illustrates the book's unique title, one of five that he said he let some of his most loyal patrons choose for him.

"I thought this might be the only one to offend some of them," said Cromartie,

"but they all got a real kick out of it."

"I feel like one of the most fortunate people alive," he said. In sharing his story he hopes to inspire and assist young artists, as he was helped those many years ago. The stories he has amassed over his 40 years on Nantucket are too many to list, and many are recounted in a tell-tale manner throughout the book.

The scribe of all Cromartie's stories, Nostrand said he had known the artist casually as a potential client for almost 35 years. Their professional relationship was forged six years ago when the writer, a resident of Chatham, Mass., wrote a story for *Cape Cod Magazine* on Cromartie and Kerry Hallam, with whom he shares his gallery on Easy Street.

From there, at first joking discussions concerning a book began, and soon became more serious as the untold stories of Cromartie's life were presented to the writer.

"Jim has led a life I can only imagine," said Nostrand. "All the words in the book are his. I simply took his wonderful stories and put them into a sequence. He is a born storyteller, so the words were all there."

Understanding the artist's gift for storytelling, Nostrand said he wanted as much of the nuance of Cromartie's talent as possible to come through the pages, and believes the end result, for the most part, has achieved that goal.

The two are considering a second book continuing where the first left off, beginning around the time where Cromartie started to experience wide success. In the epilogue of "Nantucket Portrait," the artist writes, "This book tells about the struggle and success towards my goals of artistic expression. There is more of the story yet to tell..."

"Nantucket Portrait: Fun & Games with the Super Rich and The Birth of Hard-Edge Realism," is now available at island bookstores and will go on sale nationally this fall.