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Entertainment

## Truro painter Thomas Watson goes forward into the past

**By John Greiner-Ferris / Banner Correspondent**

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When it comes down to it, most of us simply want to find our place in this world, and our lives are a quest to fulfill that need. Truro painter Thomas A.D. Watson might ponder this notion a little more than most of us, though, because it often seems that he was born in the wrong time period — almost a century too late. That weighs on him.

Watson grew up in rural Vermont in a self-sufficient family that hunted, fished, grew its own food, and even made its own toys. It was a hard life, but to this day, Watson continues to admire its simplicity and down-to-earth values. His happy childhood ended when his parents divorced and his mother moved to Cape Cod, while his father, an accomplished illustrator, stayed in Vermont. From the time he was 12 to 18 years old, Watson never saw his father. “I did live with Dad for a year after college,” Watson says, “and it drove me nuts, because he was married to his work. It was all he thought about.” But time may have tempered that memory. After a moment’s pause, Watson continues, “I can relate to that now. I’ll be 54 this September, and there are creative things I want to accomplish.”

It also drove Watson nuts that his father pursued illustration instead of fine art painting, as his grandfather did — his father’s father — who was a founder and editor of American Artist Magazine. “Dad would have made an excellent fine artist,” Watson says. “Instead, he got into the illustration racket.”

Watson, a graduate of Rhode Island School of Design, has found success as a fine artist, and he has done it on his own terms. While his work is in private collections and those of corporations, museums and embassies around the world, the only way to see it locally is to visit him at his studio at 45 Depot Road during visiting hours (9 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays and Thursdays, June to September) or by appointment (call 508-349-1631, or email [tadw@thomasadwatson.com](mailto:tadw@thomasadwatson.com)).

He also has an annual studio reception, and the next one is on Tuesday from 5 to 8 p.m. “I’ve always been proud that I’ve sold my own work,” Watson says. “And I’ve especially liked the chance to interact with the people who buy it.”

Watson says that the reason he paints is to spend time with the ghosts of his past. Those ghosts include a mother whom he loved dearly, an older brother who was his childhood hero, the grandfather he never knew, and, of course, his illustrator father. Look at one of his recent landscapes, and that yearning for the past becomes clear. Watson’s timeless, slightly abstracted paintings of the Cape and the Adirondacks seem to ache for that sense of place he had growing up in Vermont. His paintings are almost completely devoid of human beings, and if one or two figures do happen to make an appearance, they are depicted small and at a distance, completely subservient to the landscape. Watson seems to paint from the haunted viewpoint of a man who has gone out the back door to take a walk to clear his head, saying he’ll be back in an hour. And you just don’t know: maybe he will come back, or maybe he won’t.

It’s not that Watson lives in the past — he seems to live *because* of it. Talking about a recent trip to the Adirondacks with his teenage son, Watson revels in the father-son memories he has collected — how he and his son woke every morning before dawn to fish for trout; how throughout the day he and his son sat side by side, Watson painting and his son tying fishing flies; how his son unpacked the copy of Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories that he had given him but never read — “Some of the best outdoor literature out there,” Watson says. But the real clincher to the trip was the day that Watson’s son, after rowing an Adirondack guide boat, expressed an interest in owning one. An old-timer had one in his barn and gave it to him, and Watson and his son together will be refurbishing it this fall. “Because I missed out on so many years with my father, I thought, here’s my chance to get those years back,” Watson says. “When periods of harmony and happiness come down the pike, you take them, because the opportunity will go away.”

Watson is a shy, reclusive man. “I didn’t inherit the gene to interact with people,” he says. A couple of years ago he began questioning his role as an artist in the community in which he now lives, not where he lived as a child. This led him to begin painting the boats that work the waters around Cape Cod, and that, in turn, has led to his being asked to make a painting of the fishing boat Joan and

Tom for next year's Blessing of the Fleet. The request delights him, and makes him proud. "This is a way I can give something back to the fishing community," he says. And, maybe, it will help him find that sense of place and purpose in life.