

# Hooked on the fishing fleet

Painter Rez Williams of West Tisbury has been creating a distinctive and deeply personal chronicle of New Bedford's iconic fishing boats for nearly fifteen years, and his enthusiasm for them shows no signs of diminishing.

BY JIM MILLER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MIRANDO

Rez Williams talks with the soft-spoken erudition of a college art professor, which he was before 1975, when he came to Martha's Vineyard and became a successful painter. A conversation about his work flows from the vivid colors of Vincent Van Gogh to the conceptual artwork of Martin Creed to the six-hour-long *String Quartet II* by composer Morton Feldman. He stands in his barn studio in West Tisbury on a chilly spring morning and says that New York School painter Philip Guston's later work "while still gestural, was much more retinal," and observes that a piece of farm equipment in one of his own paintings is "very corporeal, almost figurative." He speaks in paragraphs that break apart under the strain of ideas, and coalesce back together by the end. The discussion has the lively feel of a seminar; taking notes is helpful.

In contrast to his reserved academic demeanor, Rez Williams produces large paintings of vibrantly colored fishing boats, paintings that are as mercurial and moody as the ocean the boats work. Some depict the hulking vessels at rest, others show them steaming toward or alongside the viewer, and yet others show them in the distance, appearing vulnerable between

a dynamic sea and sky. The perspective begins down along the waterline, so the vessels loom, and Rez extends the color palette well beyond the reality of the boats and their environment. The juxtaposition of this quiet artist who sails over from the Vineyard and the big, boisterous New Bedford fishing fleet that he's been painting for nearly fifteen years is not lost on Rez.

"For me with the fishing fleet, it's the 'otherness' that really attracted me initially...When you go to New Bedford you're in a completely different world," he says, noting the dark prevalence of crime and AIDS there. "But then you see the fishing boats...like hot rods. They're colorful, and a little crazy....Their boats would sink for want of a light bulb in the engine room to find the cause of a leak coming in." Rez describes the boats as personal expressions for the fishermen, but as for getting personally closer to the men themselves: "They know I'm a WASP from the Vineyard, plus I probably look like a lawyer for their wife...so I keep it low key....I have had a ride on a boat once, but that's about as far as I'd like to go."

Facing: Rez Williams in his West Tisbury studio. He works in oil paints, primarily on large canvases, as with *Alaska Dockside*, a painting of New Bedford fishing boats, behind him.





*Stars of the Sea, New Bedford, oil on canvas, 48 by 64 inches, 2011.*

Rez does all his painting in his studio. To scope out his subject matter, he sails his nineteen-foot sloop (he calls it his “research vessel”) over to New Bedford, stays for a couple of days, and rows around in his dinghy taking snapshots, which account for the waterline perspective. “It’s my version of camping....I just sort of try to take it in.” He assimilates the color, the forms, the water, and the sky.

While sailing in 1997, Rez noticed the color first, on a boat named Santa Barbara. “Can you imagine a commercial fishing boat painted magenta and lime green? I mean, what kind of head would think that up? A combination that would not go in Tommy Hilfiger or a normal aesthetic of what a fishing boat should be like. My hat was off to the guy who did that,

and when I saw that, I wanted to see what more there was.”

There was more. “There’s the brutality to them, there’s the rigging, there’s the complexity, there’s the know-how, there’s the rust, there’s the devil-may-care.” But in discussing the attraction of the boats’ forms over the long term, Rez gets more abstract: “I’ve always had this interest in flat surfaces, because a painting is a surface painted; it’s flat. The fishing boats are basically torqued flat surfaces; you twist it, but there are lots of flats, so that there’s a sort of synergy between the painted surface and the surface painted.”

But the boats are not the only colorful aspects in the paintings. The water and the sky often contain vivid hues and designs. “Going back to the idea of a painting as a surface painted,



*Lady of Grace, oil on canvas, 54 by 72 inches, 2006.*

when the cubists took the aristocratic setup of an object and the space around it and made it democratic by breaking the space and breaking the form and reintegrating it on a flat surface, that was the beginning. And so what I’ve got here are pretty aristocratic planes of objects, fishing boats, and the danger would be to let them dominate. Even though the paintings are of fishing boats, for me the paintings are about the painting, and so the sky and the water have to work like the steel in a way that contributes to the feel...so the surface hopefully gets unified.”

When asked about these more fanciful, non-objective aspects of his paintings, Rez puts it simply, “I’m an artist, not a reporter.” He says that all art is filtered through the artist, and of his own work Rez notes that he began as a totally non-

representational painter and he explains that the term “abstract” is often misused to mean non-objective. “Any work of art is abstract.”

In fact, he says, “My long-term plan is to make them less particular and more non-objective. That’s where I started. It would be nice to close that circle again, but with an object that’s real.” But in sum, all the thought-through explanations fail to capture the drama inherent in Rez’s paintings. “I’m interested, in the paintings, in getting across that same knock-your-socks-off feeling that I have when I’m in front of the boats. It’s a feeling of excitement, just excitement. Your nerve-endings feel alive....I try to get that into my paintings. I try not to make the paintings boring.”



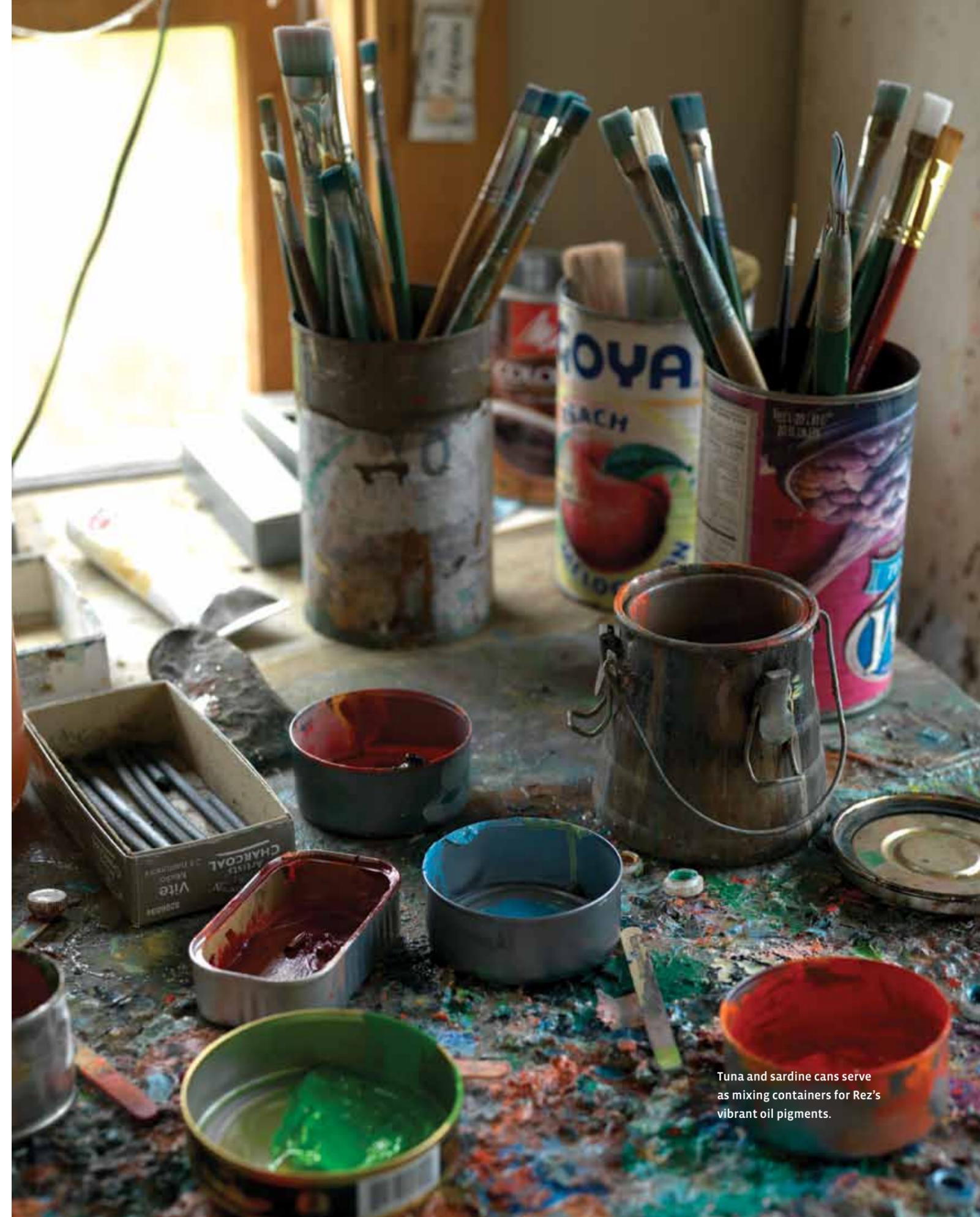
*Rock N Roller*, oil on canvas, 54 by 72 inches, 2001.

After nearly a decade and a half of painting about fifteen canvases of fishing boats each year, Rez has yet to find a subject more appealing. When asked about this, he mentions Wayne Thiebaud's many paintings of pies and Piet Mondrian's grids. "It's funny. You'd think maybe a semi-truck or a choo-choo train...but I've always loved boats, I've been around boats since I was a kid." Windmills? "I think they're too Puritan; they don't have the grittiness." He once mentioned in an interview that the Vineyard landscapes he used to paint were never as beautiful as the landscapes themselves. "I have the opposite feeling here, which is another reason why I keep doing it."

Born in New York City and raised on Long Island, Rez began to visit the Vineyard in 1969. Reflecting on more than forty years of change and growth on the Island, Rez, a former president of

the Sheriff's Meadow Foundation, says, "There is still a Vineyard sense of...a very strong sense of place." But he has noticed a change in some of the people who come here. "The 'me me' quality is much more dominant....It's just a different feeling towards the landscape and the community. These people don't want to be part of the community....I came here in the great hippie wave of the seventies, so I probably have a skewed view.... There weren't any 'masters of the universe' here then....In those days you could parlay a teacher's salary into a piece of property."

He tells of building "an Eighth Avenue loft in the middle of the woods" in West Tisbury when he first arrived from New York: "I built the structure myself, and I didn't know what I was doing. And I had a level that I kept dropping, and being a city boy I didn't understand that if you keep dropping a level it no



Tuna and sardine cans serve as mixing containers for Rez's vibrant oil pigments.



*Numbers Reflected*, oil on canvas, 30 by 40 inches, 2011.



*Starry Sky (Lual)*, oil on canvas, 30 by 38 inches, 2010.

longer functions as a level. I thought, well, it's called a level, it must be level....So I put the level on one wall and it would read level and I'd nail it up. And I put the level on the other wall that was to be joined, and it would read level, and I'd nail that up. And I'd look at them and there would be a trapezoid. And I kept doing this for at least a day," he says with a chuckle.

Rez feels a deficiency in the arts scene on the Island, particularly the lack of a non-commercial arts space to display the work of accomplished artists, something "between a gallery and a museum." And he feels that the pressure from market forces on the Vineyard ("the boondocks") affects much of the art produced here. "It's tough in a seasonal economy such as ours, a resort community....Where there's a greater intersection of commerce and culture, you get more interesting collision. But here the artist has to work harder to make the product identifiable....There's a thinner membrane and more seepage between marketing and art." Despite this criticism, he's quick to add that artists hustle to market their work everywhere, and that "everyone has to make a living." As for his own work, Rez admits that with the Island economy down from its peak, he will likely have to shift his pricing structure downward, but sees no particular defeat in that. "It's only money, filthy lucre."

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But he has made his art career work here, in a series of solo exhibitions at galleries on- and off-Island, with his latest coming this July and August at the new Shephard Fine ArtSpace in Oak Bluffs. He had his last show there three summers ago, when it was the Nye Gallery.

And Rez has stayed happy in his Island home, though he long ago abandoned his “loft” for an old farmhouse in West Tisbury. “I love it. There’s three-quarters of an acre, which is more than enough since I have to mow the grass...and a perfect studio.” His painting studio resides on the ground floor of the roomy barn and houses dozens of canvases in various states of development; he often puts paintings aside to “cook” before finishing them. His wife, mixed-media artist Lucy Mitchell, has her own studio upstairs in the barn.

So it looks as if Rez won’t be moving elsewhere, or on to some other subject matter beyond the fishing fleet, at least for the time being. “Well, I keep thinking I should, morally. Why can’t I get off this? And I don’t have an answer. So the short answer is no, I don’t think so,” he muses. “It doesn’t bore me. That’s the thing. If I found myself repeating myself, then yeah, it’s time to hang it up.” ♦

An exhibition of new paintings by Rez Williams can be viewed from July 22 to August 5 at Shephard Fine ArtSpace on Uncas Avenue in Oak Bluffs, with an opening reception for the artist on Saturday, July 23, from 6 to 8 p.m.



*Out of the Light*, oil on canvas, 38 by 52 inches, 2010.