

Artist Francis Mesaros has been a roofer, bartender, performer and agent. Now he's found his real avocation.

## PAINTINGS FROM A LIFE

BY ELLEN FISCHER



Using a painting knife, Francis Mesaros places a wedge of oil paint on a seascape. A large canvas is composed of thousands of deftly placed wedges.

Opposite: As they move down from the horizon line, the applications of paint become thicker and heavier. At the bottom of the painting the strokes may protrude as much as an inch from the canvas.

His paintings are as mesmerizing as the sea itself. Composed of thousands of crescent-shaped wedges of oil paint, Francis Mesaros's canvases contemplate the eternal theme of sea and sky. At the horizon line, which occurs about a fifth of the way from the top of the painting, the waves begin as tiny slivers of paint that advance down the canvas, row upon row, in ever larger, scale-shaped strokes. By the time they reach the bottom, the semi-circles of paint are thick and dimensional; they cantilever from the painting's surface like shelf mushrooms at the base of a tree.

Reflections are what Francis's paintings are about. Each glistening, dimensional stroke catches the ambient light that falls upon it, sending forth a sparkling highlight that is as real – and as evanescent – as the glint from an ocean wave. Reflections are also what the artist is about. Francis uses his seascapes both to mirror, and to induce, a reflective state of mind.

Francis was born and raised in New Jersey. His father, a machinist, was from Hungary and his mother's ancestry was Czech. His siblings are Audrey, Stephen (who died in early childhood), Bobby and Mark (Francis's fraternal



twin). "We went to St. Elizabeth Church of Hungary," Francis says. He recalls that in his youth most of his father's friends spoke Hungarian, and Francis informally learned as much of his father's tongue as he could. To demonstrate, he stands and recites the *Hail Mary* in Hungarian. The words roll from him with a melodic ease. He was raised in "the traditional Catholic tradition, which is a beautiful, beautiful method," he says, adding that he believes there are other "beautiful methods" by which one can aspire to spirituality. "When you're brought up in a tradition, it has to do with a method and pointing you in a direction."

As a child he was affected by ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). This made social interaction difficult. The solitary activity of painting, however, came naturally to him. As proof of this he displays a tightly composed landscape that he painted at age 15. Even then he was interested in textural effects; the painting was



Francis displays a landscape painted when he was 15.

executed with palette knife, brush and the artist's fingers. The pointed end of the brush was employed as well; Francis used it to give dimension to the portrayal of marsh grasses. He emphasizes that while he has painted since childhood, over the years his art has changed from rote representation. It now reflects a spiritual reality that has come to mean more to him, he says, than outward appearances.

Francis divulges that as a boy he felt an acute existential loneliness. He prayed for a sign of God's presence in the world. A response came in the form of an interior locution when he was 19. He was in his room praying, he says, when "a feeling came into the room and it scared me." He saw no one, but felt someone, some thing, standing near. Then the presence enveloped him. "I had a feeling that I was being held by a mother, given the love and protection of a father." Out of nowhere, it came to him that his brother Bobby, who was in the Air Force, would soon die.



The tools of Francis's trade are painting knives. A selection of shapes and sizes await the artist's hand.

Opposite: Francis mixes large batches of color before setting to work. He modifies the value and hue of the basic color as the painting progresses.





*Orderly rows of scalloped waves are broken by freely applied impasto in this dark seascape.*

Suddenly, as though reliving the moment, Francis shouted, "No! Don't let him die! Let me die instead!" Then, quietly, "And the beautiful feeling that embraces us all spiritually, said, "That's not the way it will be." The feeling passed, and Francis opened his eyes to the familiar surroundings of his bedroom. A week later, 22-year-old Bobby was killed in a car crash.

Not long after his brother's death, Francis left New Jersey for Boulder, Colo. He painted and sold his work "here and there," but life for him then was not all about painting. Francis earned his living first as a roofer, then as a

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roofing contractor and finally as a bartender. Bartending taught him a valuable lesson about relating to others. "When you walk out of the door onto this beautiful circus of a creation, you're on stage," he says. He adds that he was the "best bartender" because he made it his job to love his customers, even though some of them were "little lost fish in the fishbowl swimming around and around." Francis was not a lost soul. He didn't hang around the bar after hours, either. As soon as his shift ended, he went straight home to paint.

He was about 27 when he painted "Winter Spider." Inspired by a potted plant hanging in his window, he began on the painting that got him thinking in an abstract vein. It was also his first attempt in monochrome, and the first picture that he painted entirely with a palette knife. It was almost the painting that didn't get finished. A friend's enthusiasm for the work-in-progress gave Francis the push he needed to complete it. The seminal work is still in Francis's collection. "See how thick it is," he says of the paint-encrusted surface. "I like the way the thick paint catches the light, brings out its dimensionality. The pot was red and I made a little red reflection that I saw." He points to a small accent of color, placed just so, in the abstract composition.

Returning to the east coast in his late 20s, Francis decided to broaden his means of expression, taking acting lessons at HB Studio in New York City and studying piano and voice at Middlesex County College in Edison, N.J. "I love acting," he says. "Acting is pure psychology... And I love music. I love performing music." His collection of musical instruments – he owns a number of beautifully crafted guitars, both electric and acoustic, and a baby grand piano – bears witness to that, as well as his avocation of songwriter. "I love being able to cry to a song that can bring you there," he says.

Full of hope for a future in the entertainment world, Francis paid a visit to several New York talent agencies and found them wanting. Disgusted by their exorbitant fees and big promises with little return, he started his own agency, Test Shoot International. "It was a preparatory scouting firm and school," he says. He guaranteed



*"Winter Spider" was painted when Francis was about 27 years old and living in Boulder, Colo. (Photo courtesy of the artist.)*

each modeling or acting hopeful who came to him 10 weeks of classes, a photo shoot, and a role in a cable TV infomercial. And he did it all, he says, for a third of the price his competitors charged.

Francis found Carol, the love of his life, about this time. They married and had 16 years together before Carol died of cancer at age 43. She was everything to Francis.

*Francis and his wife shared a belief in the miraculous and made pilgrimages as far away as Lourdes and as near as Conyers, Ga.*

"Great sense of humor and levelheaded, down-to-earth," he reminisces. "She was my soul mate and confidante." Francis's self-styled "hyper" personality ("I'm 54 years old and I get excited like a kid again") continued to draw baleful looks from strangers, but Carol's constancy bolstered him against the world. The expiration date on the best of life's experiences is always short, and Francis says that he is grateful he and Carol made the most of their time together.

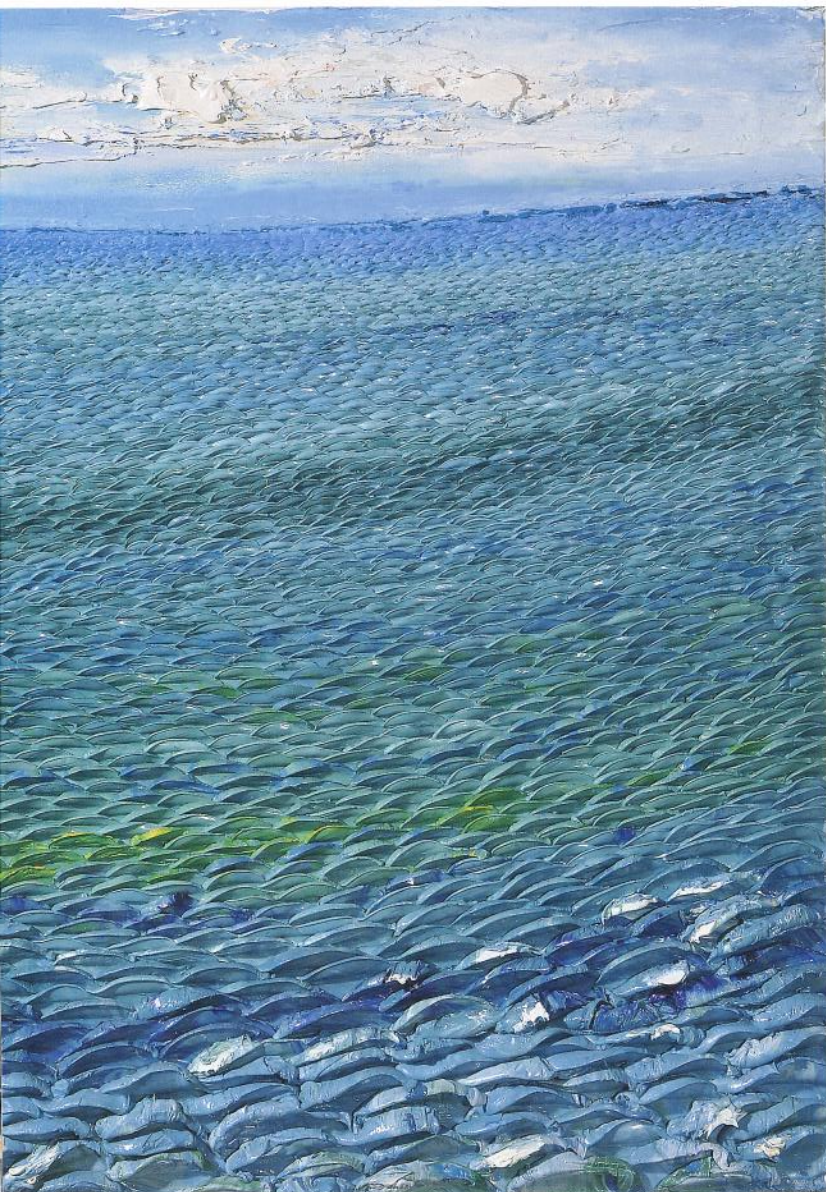
The two shared a belief in the miraculous and made pilgrimages as far away as Lourdes and as near as Conyers, Ga. The latter is the home of Nancy Fowler who, at the time, was relaying messages from the Blessed Virgin to the faithful who flocked outside her door.

Francis and Carol also enjoyed a variety of temporal activities. "Carol was a very good downhill skier," he says. "We'd water-ski, play tennis, fly a glider, go horseback riding. I'm a three-time certified scuba diver, and she got certified so she could dive with me." The couple rejoiced when Carol became pregnant, but tragedy was imminent. The baby, a girl, died at the age of four months. "And then, three months after that, Carol was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer," Francis says.

He painted throughout his marriage, and when things got tough, he made paintings that reflected the state of his heart. "How can I forget this," he says of a canvas that shows a full moon just touching the sea's horizon. "It's called 'Life is Black and White Now.'"

Francis recalls the trauma of nursing his wife in the final weeks of her illness. "This person is looking to you for comfort. And although you're crushed inside —" he pauses, gathering his thoughts. "I learned a lot," he says. "I went upstairs and I painted this."

The canvas is stark black and white. In the impasto that signifies moonlight on water are splotches of white paint the size of quarters. Francis explains that he mixed a lot of medium with the paint "to make it loose. And I just shook the brush like this," he says, shaking a phantom brush over the painting's surface. "This is an emotional one," he says of another dark painting. "This is 'No More Sunshine.' I painted it when Carol died. And then I went into this 'Eternal Ocean' style," he adds. He indicates a



*This serene work is part of Francis's Caribbean series. His paintings are "about how you focus," he says. "It's as simple as that."*

predecessor of his current 'Caribbean' series. "That is when I started to heal."

Francis came to Florida last year after selling Loco Amusements (an arcades games company that succeeded Test Shoot International) to become a full-time artist. He lives in a house in Sebastian that he purchased with his new love, Izola Fix, who works as a paralegal in New York City. In between her visits, Francis's Pomeranians, Zoë and China, keep him company. He's found a few human friends here, too. Dawn Miller and Deb Gooch are both artist-members of Gallery 14 in Vero Beach. They first saw Francis's work about six months ago. It was "so fresh

and real," Dawn says, that Galley 14 found a spot in its 2010 winter season to display it. Titled "Paintings from a Life," the exhibition was an overview of Francis's career. "I don't think I've met a more dedicated artist in my life," Dawn says with conviction. Francis's example taught her to "shut the door and turn off the phone."

Francis's studio is not only in his home, it *is* his home. It is a long, wide room with metal shelving units lining one wall holding hundreds of boxed tubes of paint, neatly arranged by color. Francis goes through a lot of paint. To the left of his easel, a pile of cerulean blue rests on a large palette; to the right a stainless steel table holds a couple dozen painting knives of various sizes and shapes. Standing with his back to the easel, Francis declares, "This is my life's worth. Right here. Without this I am nothing."

He picks up a painting knife. "This is going to be a masterpiece," he says of the newly begun painting on the easel. "This is going to take over five thousand strokes. By the time next week comes, I won't be able to walk straight up, but I'll be all right... I'm going to work right now."

He deftly lifts a semi-circular crescent of paint from the palette and begins applying it to the canvas. "I'm here alone, day after day and week after week," he says. Working rapidly in measured, rhythmic movements, he lays the paint on bit by bit in a tidy row of turquoise scales.

"Everything's about how you focus, and where you put your attention. It's as simple as that," he explains. "It's very, very, very meditative." The studio is silent. Another artist might put on a favorite CD to work by, but that's not Francis's style. "Nope. I think. I think about life, and I think about our position in the world. I think about our society, and the human species as a whole, and what we're trying to achieve, and where we are in the big book. And I pray."

He also sets goals for his art. At present he is in the midst of negotiations for shows on three continents, and plans to complete a 6 by 15-foot diptych for exhibition in New York City. Then there is the matter of his legacy. He feels that his painting technique is so special – a unique gift from God, in fact – that he intends to patent it. So far, the attorneys he has consulted "have not been able to find anyone that's doing anything in this technique even remotely close in the United States," he says. "I have the possibility of being the ninth person in 60 years to have a patent on a technique."

Francis believes that holding a patent will make him the indisputable owner of the method in which he paints. For him, fame is on the horizon, and he speaks of the day when someone tells him, "We're going to put you in a history book as the guy who came up with this technique." He adds, "I've been chasing this my whole life." ❁