

Art

The Accidental Artist

By DIANE TAYLOR

Photography by BEN DEFLORIO

Mark Nielsen is one of those rare individuals who always knew what he wanted to do. And even though he moved to Corinth, Vt., from Boston, Mass., specifically to devote more time to painting watercolors, he never intended to become an artist. Nielsen wanted to be an architect.

"I was always making model houses out of cardboard and cellophane for the windows," Nielsen recalls. "When my parents told me I could actually make a living doing this, from that day forward, I never seriously considered anything else."

Nielsen owes his first commissioned piece, so to speak, to the Unitarian Universalist church in Concord, Mass. His Sunday school teacher was working on a multicultural lesson and asked all the children to create a model home from another culture.

"I made a stone hacienda from Mexico," Nielsen says. "It was my first real house."

As a senior in high school, Nielsen spent a summer working at an architectural firm in Boston and his boss consistently attempted to talk him out of pursuing his dream. "I drove to and from work with this man every day, so we had a lot of time together, and he really wanted to open my eyes to what architecture is," Nielsen says. "After all the bad stuff he told me, he



Artist Mark Nielsen at his home studio in Corinth, Vt.

figured if I still chose to be an architect, it was my own mistake."

Nielsen went on to earn a degree in architecture from Carnegie Mellon Uni-

versity, completing the five-year program in just four years. After college, he settled in the Boston area, working for Payette Associates, where Nielsen designed hospitals for seven years.

"I loved it," Nielsen says. "Hospitals are very complex puzzles. And I really enjoyed the professional people I worked with on those projects — the nurses and doctors and lab technicians. I liked working with them to create the best design for their particular needs."

Nielsen eventually ventured out with a partner to establish his own architec-

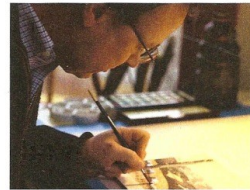
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tural firm, Cyma 2, where they specialized primarily in residential design. At Cyma 2, Nielsen confronted many of the downsides of architecture that his high school mentor had warned him about: lawsuits and difficult clients, managing employees, generating \$40,000 in revenue each month just to meet expenses. "It was a high pressure environment," Nielsen says.

To get away from the stress, Nielsen and his wife, Lora, vacationed in Vermont, relaxing with close friends in Post Mills and exploring the environs around Lake Willoughby in the Northeast Kingdom. Around eight years ago, they participated in an artist's retreat. Lora signed up for writing. Mark, on a whim, chose watercolors.

"It didn't take that first summer," Nielsen says. "But when I returned the next summer, I took the course again with a different instructor, and that's when it clicked for me. For the first time in my life, I had found an answer to the question: What would I do if I weren't an architect?"



Painting became Nielsen's new passion. He returned from the retreat and set himself a goal of completing one watercolor each week. When he had created a body of work that he was satisfied with, he set up his first exhibit in his church. He watched in awe as 24 of his 30 paintings were sold to eager customers.

"It was a 'Field of Dreams' kind of experience for me," Nielsen says, referring to the Kevin Costner baseball movie. "Like 'if you paint it, they will come.' I was totally taken by surprise by the success of that first show."

Now working from his new home in Corinth, Nielsen says that as an artist he finds himself drawn to the abandoned



Pioneer, 19" x 27", watercolor

buildings that he loved to explore when he was a child. The scope of Nielsen's work certainly is not limited to architectural themes; his repertoire includes rural landscapes from the United States and Scotland. But the architect in Nielsen remains evident in much of his work. His most striking pieces are not the light inspired creations of a sunny

landscape, but the darker, deeper colors of old structures that once teemed with life but are now quiet and neglected.

"I never expected the subject matter of my paintings to resonate with people as much as they do," Nielsen says. "But

people are attracted to the life and the sense of mystery that remains in these old buildings." UVL



Holyoke Alley, 12" x 12", watercolor

Towle Hill Studio

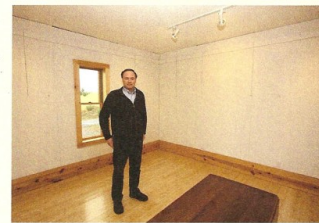
Mark Nielsen has operated a nonprofit art studio before, making it — and naming it — an oasis where artists could perfect their craft, show their work, and sell it without losing money in gallery commissions. But Oasis Studio was located in downtown Boston, happily situated among the hustle of an urban environment well known for supporting the arts.

By way of contrast, Towle Hill Studio sits atop a lonely hill in Corinth, Vt., a town with a population circa 1,500.

Rural Corinth wouldn't seem to be the hub of much of anything. And yet, since Towle Hill's inception in May 2009, Nielsen says the studio has been warmly received.

"The receptions bring in anywhere from 50 to 150 people," Nielsen says. "We have good attendance and we make sales. So, by that standard, it's been a huge success."

Exhibits at Towle Hill Studio are intentionally short, 8 to 10 shows lasting



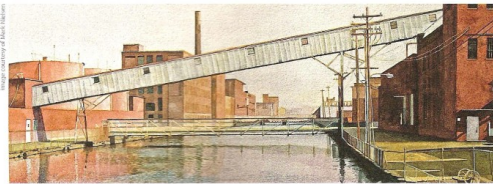
one weekend every two to four weeks starting in May and ending in October. Guest artists are responsible for their own set up, they assist with some of the marketing tasks, and they keep 100 percent of any

sales of their work.

Looking at the long term prospects for Towle Hill, Nielsen knows he can't rest on his early laurels. "Quality is key, as is the need to keep introducing the studio to new people," Nielsen says. "People eventually run out of wall space to hang art. You can't keep selling the same things to the same people forever."

Marketing Towle Hill presents a challenge, but one Nielsen hopes will not eat up too much of his time. Since he made the move to Corinth, he has continued consulting on architectural projects, signed on as executive director with the Lower Cohase Regional Chamber of Commerce, and is vice president of the Vermont Watercolor Society. "My biggest challenge right now," Nielsen says, "is finding time to paint."

View the Towle Hill Studio schedule at www.towlehillstudio.com



Holyoke Canal, 9" x 24", watercolor