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THE ROAD PAVES THE WAY TO AN ARTIST'S SUCCESS

By Susan Saiter

Grant Haffner's Realistic Landscapes
Elevate the Mundane to the Iconic



"Haven't I seen this before?"

That's the first question that Grant Haffner's paintings raise. The answer is both no and yes. No, it's unlikely that anyone has exhibited paintings of power lines before. But yes, who hasn't seen those telephone poles and wires, in the way one sees without really seeing?

That's why Haffner's landscapes captivate people: They find themselves actually looking for the first time at what they've been regarding half-consciously every day as they drive along East End roads. His moody acrylic paintings reflect his adoration for the area, along with his regrets about the vanishing scenery that he grew up with—utility lines and all—that is slowly becoming a landscape of buried cables with big houses over them.

"In this painting," he said, gesturing to a piece done in shades of gray that was hanging in the Silas Marder Gallery in Bridgehampton, *"I really want you to feel sad."*

But Haffner himself is hardly the dismal type. On the contrary, he becomes ebulliently cheerful, even optimistic. *"Ask anyone, I'm always smiling,"* he said. *"I don't want to be depressing. I just want people to feel something, to share the moment I captured when I painted."*

The Overnight Success

With a rousing success from his first show, Haffner, 26, has something to smile about. His career took off last spring, following a bit of luck when he entered a lottery to be part of an Ashawagh Hall exhibit. The number he drew allowed him to show in July, just a few months away. He got to work—dabbled and drew like crazy, mowed lawns and attacked crabgrass in his lawn care business to pay the bills, pounded out his own press releases, and when the date of his show arrived, he was ready with his new work.

The next thing he knew, Lisa de Kooning was walking out with four of his drawings and another admirer had written a check for all four of his paintings. His work attracted the attention of Silas Marder, owner of the Marder Gallery who now represents the artist.

"There are photographs of me at that show with my mouth hanging open," Haffner said. *"That was the start of all this madness. It kind of rocketed me to keep painting."*

But, as with most overnight successes, there is a backstory. Haffner will be the first to tell anyone that becoming an artist requires sacrifice and soul searching. It took him years to decide to really throw himself into painting. The artist, who went through elementary and high school in Springs, came from a family that was very much into the art scene.

As Haffner painted landscapes, the poles became important: "It became apparent that you have to include everything you see." Opposite page: "Old Stone Highway." This page: "Napeague Meadow Road," and "Promised Land."



"My parents were always going to the galleries and doing the wine and cheese thing," he said. "They took me along, and I was drawn to the landscapes. When I was little, my parents told me, 'We're not going to buy you toys, you're going to draw instead.' And I'd bring friends over, and I'd say, 'Hey, let's draw!' They'd think I was really weird."

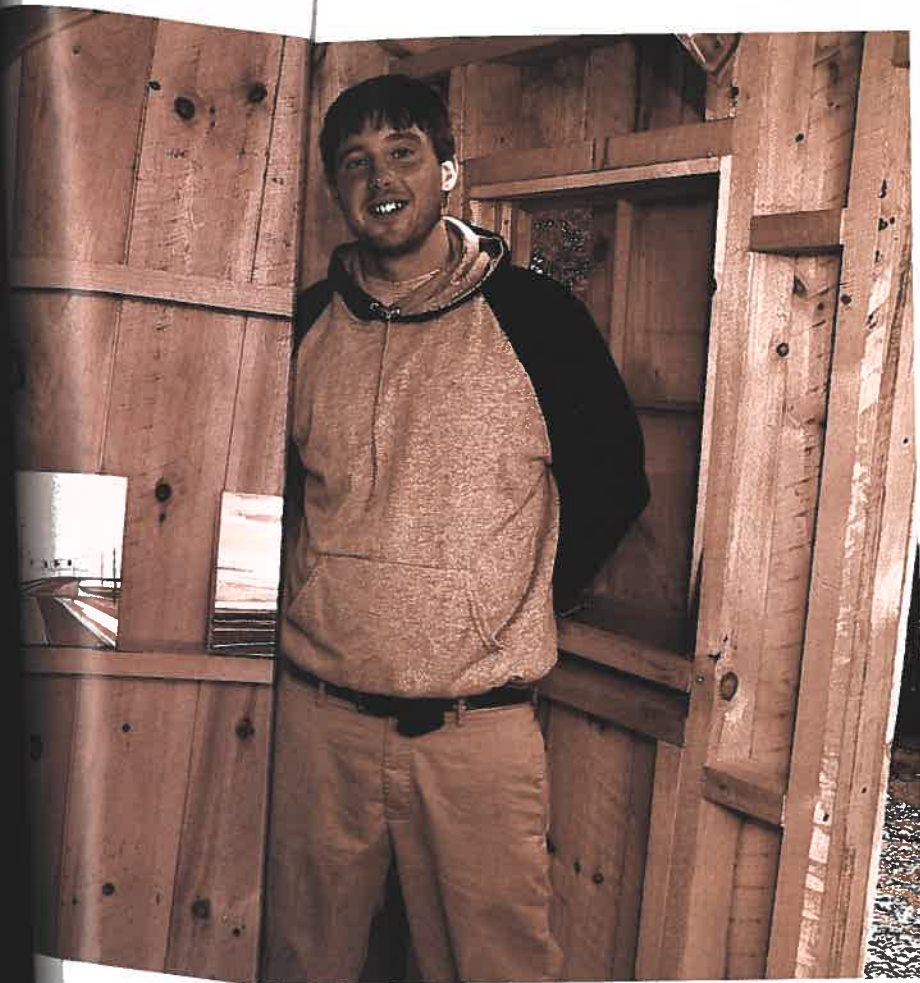
But when he finished high school with top grades in math, a fit of pragmatism took over and he gave the academic route a try, studying math and science at the University of Massachusetts. Midway in his college career, he realized just how much he didn't want to work with numbers and returned home to become a certified arborist. "I pretended to be a landscaper for a while," he said. "It's so difficult for an artist out here."

But difficult or not, he found himself out at the beach a lot, drawing and doing plein air oil pastels (that is, works created 'in the open air' rather than in a studio). Eventually, he enrolled at the School of Visual Arts in New York. "I was 24 years old by then, and I was in classes with all these kids who were out partying every night," he said. "They'd come in hung over, and I'd show up with huge amounts of work. After I'd learned the basics, my instructor said if I wanted to be a fine artist, I should just go for it."

Go for it he did, out in the countryside and in a basement studio his architect father had designed. But much of his time was spent, literally, on the road. "I would drive around, park and sketch landscapes," he said.



The artist invites viewers to look up.
"I want the feeling of the viewer being there alone."
Left and above: Haffner and his work at Silas Marder's Shed Show.
Right: "Napeague Meadow Road," and "Windy Mecox."



A Polarizing Moment

The landscapes did what he wanted, but there was something missing. *"It became apparent to me after a while that you have to include everything you see. I was purposely excluding the poles, and then one day, I said, 'Why don't I include the telephone poles?' There's a nice character to our telephone poles, they seem to be characteristic of our area."*

With a permanent marker, he tried it—sketched in the wires and realized he'd hit on something. He then added wires and poles to other drawings and paintings. It helped his drawing "Sagg Main" capture the somewhat forlorn mood he wanted. He focused even more on the wires in "Gerard Poles" and in one of his first paintings, "Twilight."

Many of his more recent paintings focus on the same real roads, from different angles and with different approaches. Maidstone Pavilion and Mecox Bay parking lot—along with their power lines—attracted his notice. At times, his paintings are so bleak the most interesting part is the area where the wires are twisted. Color dominates others: In "Promised Land," red takes over a Montauk sunset; in another painting a rainy East End scene is as deep blue as the bottom of the sea.

The road becomes irresistible in other works, as the viewer gets sucked in by the highway and mesmerized by where it's going. And with a focus on wires overhead, it's not surprising that Haffner's skies are big. The only humans involved in the painting are the viewers. *"I want people to look up. And I want the feeling of the viewer being there alone,"* he said.



*to look up.
here alone."
Shed Show.
by Mecox."*

Alone is something few of us feel anymore, particularly those who live on the East End. "Privacy is gone now," said Haffner. "Yet in my art, you are all alone. I want to capture what's here before the McMansions take over."

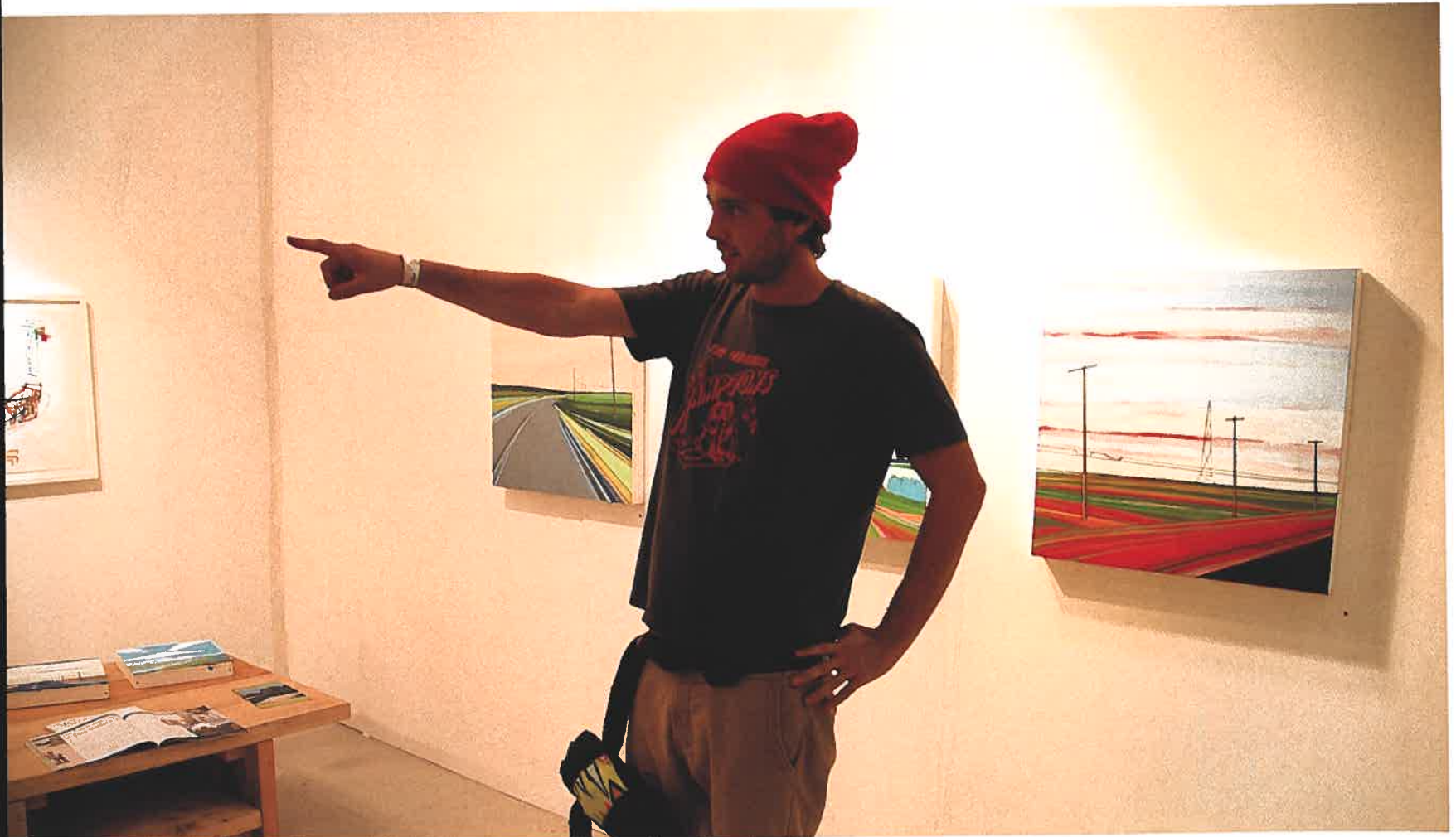
While Haffner still does lawn care to pay the bills, his daily work is painting. "It has to be like a job," he said. His latest work, while still very recognizably Grant Haffner, involves more experimentation and, paint. "I used to rely on my illustration ability. Now there's more paint on my canvases and a layered landscape. I'm still creating newer versions of the same scenes."

Just as Haffner hopes to keep the current East End landscape alive in his paintings, he also hopes to maintain the tradition of the East End as an art community. With a consortium of young local artists, he's preparing for a show next September at Ashawagh called "Bonac Tonic."

"I think it's so important for young artists to be able to show their work," he said. "Springs right now is a resort town. We're trying to bring back the artist community that used to be here."



Photography by Doug Young



Haffner at East Hampton Studios, for the scopeHAMPTONS event last summer.