

## local artist

# Stephen Harlan

BY ALDEN MAHLER LEVINE



"Heard About This Place"



"Shade of Pale"



Stephen Harlan

Stephen Harlan's artwork is striking: still scenes, peaceful, with knife-sharp images picked out against colors just a shade too bright to be natural. The images are printed on aluminum, canvas, or ceramic tiles in limited editions. They look like photographs, perhaps altered ever-so-slightly in the development process, but framed and captured in a split second by a discerning eye.

But Stephen Harlan is no photographer; he's actually a "digital painter". His process starts with pencil sketches purely from memory or real life, which he scans into his computer and then uses as templates. It's the same process as traditional painters, he maintains. "I use it as a background, very crude," he says. "Then I block in colors just like a traditional artist does. The advantage I have over a traditional artist, being that I paint these digitally, is that I can zoom in... I can basically paint a pixel at a time. And eventually it turns into a photograph. My whole goal is to basically have a hyperrealism."

In fact, Harlan thinks his paintings might be superior to both photographs and those created with more traditional paints. If fans want a print of a traditional painting, it has to be reproduced in some manner and then put onto a backing, and each step in that process changes the image a little. Harlan's process allows him to design the digital file exactly the way he sees it in his head and then produce it in exactly one step, keeping every copy consistent and preserving the colors and his designs. "It almost looks like you're looking at HDTV, it's so bright. I share the wonder and enthusiasm every time I

pull a new test out of the box with somebody seeing it for the first time. I'm just amazed at the technology."

It's also immediately obvious that Harlan loves the beach. He and his wife both grew up in Florida and lived in California and Maryland before arriving at their current home in North Carolina. The unifying theme of Harlan's images reflects these many seaside experiences, capturing the stillness and serenity of idealized coastal life without quite identifying a location. And Harlan says he has no plans to move away from beach-themed work. "People recognize my art, and as an artist, it's that stamp that you want people to remember. A couple of the newer pieces do have stark, bright backgrounds, and that's a little different for me. But the reaction to those pieces has been very positive, so we'll see what happens with that."

Certainly his art sells better in coastal areas, Harlan notes, but it isn't beach-vacation souvenir fare. "There are lots of great local artists selling at art shows and fairs," he says, "and I'm certainly open to people casually seeing my art for the first time, but that isn't my target." That's why those seeking a Stephen Harlan have to head for a more exclusive gallery. "Galleries attract people really interested in collecting," Harlan explains.

On 30-A, the gallery working to connect Stephen Harlan with fans of his art is Curate, located in the heart of Rosemary Beach. Owner Gary Handler wants Curate's focus always to be a on building relationships between its collector-customers and featured artists.

"Of course, someone can fall in love with a painting upon sight," he says, "But when we can provide the opportunity for someone to engage with the artist, the artwork becomes more than just something to hang on the wall. It becomes something personal, something to which the collector has a connection."

And Stephen Harlan fits right in to the Curate vision. Handler says, "The illumination found in his work is perfectly matched to the gorgeous light and color that lie in the landscape surrounding us. His recent visit to Curate was very successful. Collectors thoroughly enjoyed the chance to meet him and understand his artistic inspiration and the unique way that he approaches the creative endeavor."

And if you're ready to be a Harlan collector, he's ready to show you the images of his mind. "I like to draw you through a doorway, or draw you down a hallway, or down a dock, or make you feel like you could get into that boat," Harlan says. "It's not perfect. It's maybe a little bit off-centered, or something's a little bit different or a little bit skewed. Each piece is different and each takes on a life of its own."

*To see Stephen Harlan's work in person and for more information about the broader art collection at Curate, contact Gary Handler at [curate30a.com](http://curate30a.com), (850) 231-1808, or [gary@curate30a.com](mailto:gary@curate30a.com).*