

# Thomas Aquinas Daly

*Sporting art as autobiography.*

by Brooke Chilvers

HE WOULD BE in New York City for only 24 hours. Nothing seemed to tempt him here. Not a Broadway show, not the promise of fine dining, not even the mega-exhibits on Dadaism or Mayan art. This was artist and sportsman Tom Daly, in town from upstate New York for the opening of his 2006 show at the Gerald Peters Gallery and out again as quickly as the passing of shimmering twilight in his watercolor, *Newfoundland Dusk*.

If you don't recognize the earmarks of Daly's works, you might mistake them for an uncovered cache of Winslow Homers. If you remove the lone fisherman, the soft humps of worn-down purple mountains in the distance summon up the landscapes of the Hudson River School. His dappled spring pastures and cows recall the rural realism of the 19th-century French Barbizon School. His meditative still lifes (to be discussed in a separate column) glow like pearls in a string dating back to the much earlier Dutch Masters.

But Daly's watercolors and oils are distinctively Daly. Visually deep, loose and luminous, and small enough to be worked on his lap instead of an easel, their appeal is the opposite of trendy, blown-up, photorealistic acrylics with their unemotional, technically skilled renderings of fur and feathers and their unnaturally flat, in-your-face perspective.

They are also distinguished by their "tonal lyricism" and harmonious marriage of colors. And above all by their strong compositions that arise from Daly's dividing the picture space into light-imbued "positive-and-negative-valued" expanses of land, water and sky. He anchors these with a sportsman or craft, which provide scale to the scenery or a refreshing vertical line amongst the mostly horizontal ones that naturally dominate landscapes.

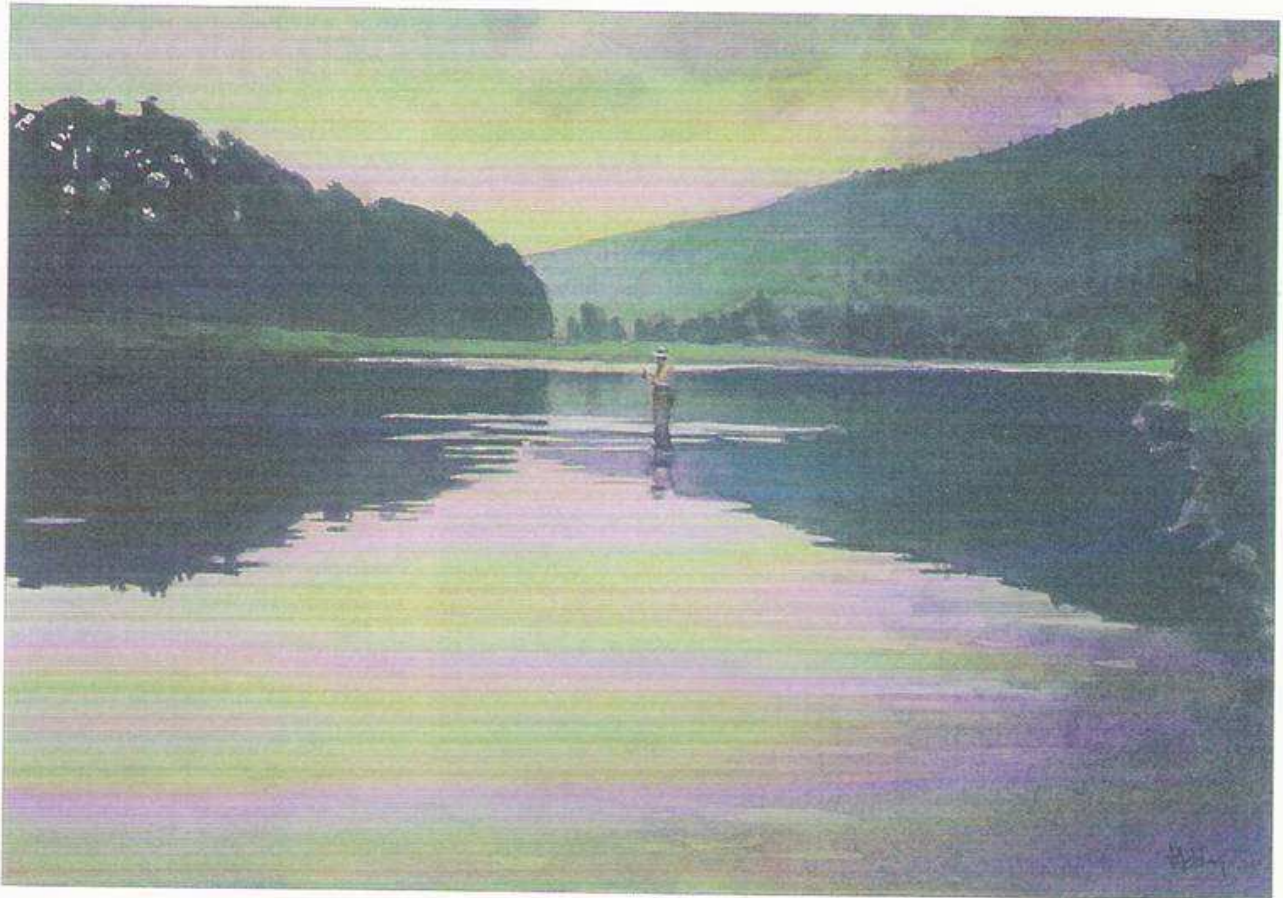
In *A Rise on the West Branch* (2005), Daly organizes the rich green vegetation on the shore into a triangle and a pleasant clump; their shapes, "lightened and cooled," are mirrored in the water. These darker values are balanced against the light-tinged V of the sky and its inverted reflection in the water. Holding together all these diagonals is the fisherman.

In *Spring Peepers* (1985), he divides the landscape into Mark Rothko-like zones of color: one-quarter creamy sky, three-quarters visually heavy deep blue-green marsh. Daly relieves the viewer's eye by drawing it to other points of interest: the bold transverse stream turned silver in the sunset and the glowing orb of a disappearing sun, which also creates both "ethereal radiance" and depth as the eye tunnels in on it.

It seemed odd that this chatty

crowd of Manhattan gentry were really Daly lovers. But gallery director Gerold Wunderlich explained that many of them were sportsmen whose own hunting and fishing experiences, in the unique landscapes of the farmlands, Finger Lakes, duck marshes, trout streams and rivers of the Adirondacks, are expressed in Daly's work. These collectors naturally gravitate to the special mood and atmosphere Daly evokes of one of our nation's most remote and untouched wild places east of the Mississippi. They respect that in today's art world, where too many artists cave into commercialism to survive the economic pressures of big-city living, Daly has stayed the course of his vision: the sportsman surrounded by, and gaining sustenance from, nature. "His works are definitely not mere objects of investment to be rolled over!" said Wunderlich, adding that all Dalys are originals; there are *no* Daly limited-edition prints!

Daly, himself, is an original. At almost 70 years old, his seasonal occupations—stalking deer with a recurve bow among autumn-tinged leaves, laying out his hand-carved decoys of canvasbacks and broad-bills for sneakshooting (an obscure method of waterfowling, where Daly waits a hundred yards upstream



"A RISE ON THE WEST BRANCH" BY THOMAS AQUINAS DALY

hidden behind a wooden screen on the bow of his homemade skiff to slip in amongst the settled ducks and flush them), and doing chores on his 250-acre farm with its horses, a trout stream and ponds full of bass—have filled his mind with an encyclopedia of images of place and time-of-day to draw from.

Daly has minimal contact with other painters and doesn't even subscribe to art-related publications. He prefers hunting, fishing and trapping to introspection. And where most sportsmen *buy* prints, decoys, bullets, arrows, boats and bunches of flowers, Daly etches, carves, reloads, fletches, builds and gathers his own.

I see Daly's art as a visual autobiography in which he celebrates the daily cycles of nature and the small tasks and gestures of the sportsman. They are self-portraits seen not

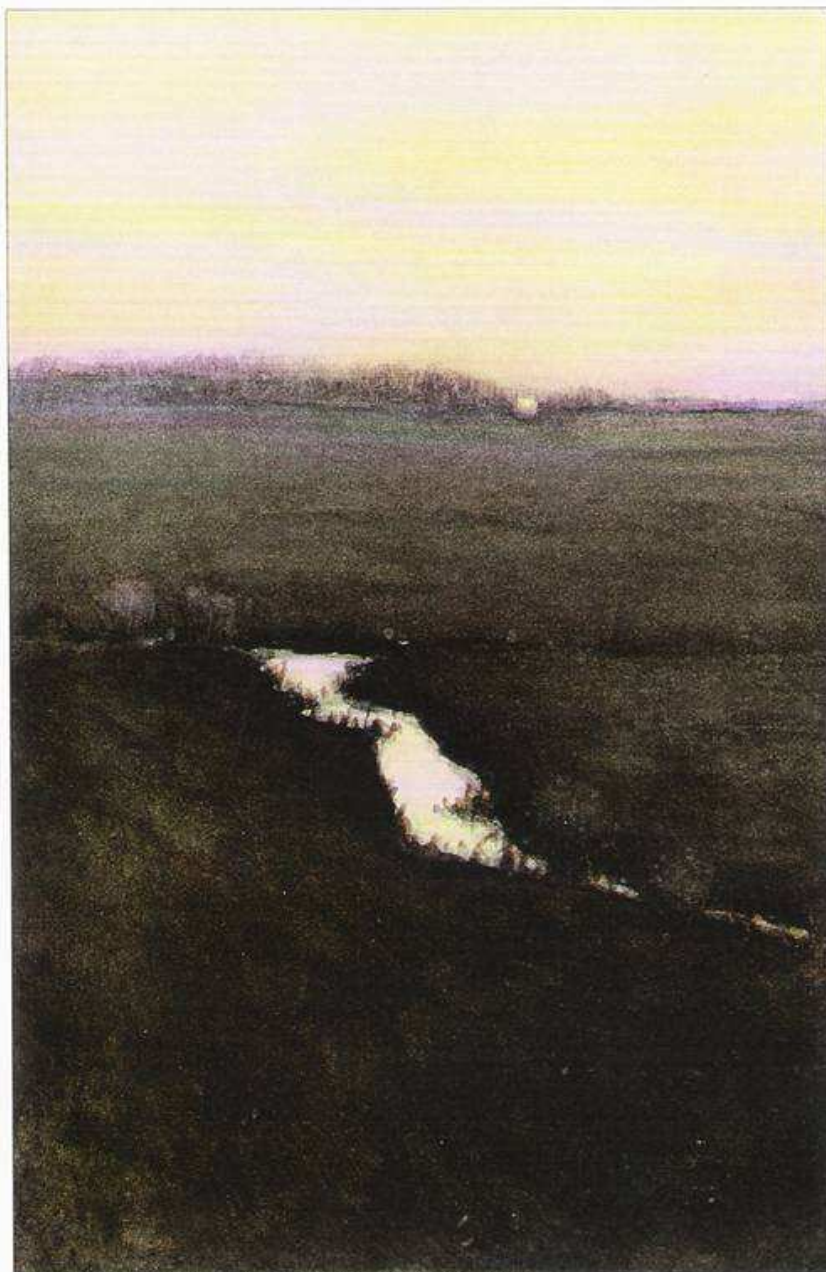
through the eyes of the artist but of a bird as it hovers over the fisherman at Wiscoy Creek or perches in a spring-leaved maple along a freestone stream. It's Daly jigging through an ice hole, trapping muskrats and skimming his craft between ducks.

Unlike photorealism, where an eye-level elk occupies the entire canvas, Daly paints quarry as the hunter sees it—more like at 50 yards than one. He suggests rather than details flying waterfowl with a masterly calligraphic stroke of the brush. And it is enough.

Daly didn't reach this level of fine art via traditional institutes and academies. He won his high school's art prize and majored in graphic design at the University of Buffalo, then worked for 23 years as a lithographer and art director for the Greater Buffalo Press. Although his 1969 meeting

with still-life artist Bruce Kurland profoundly influenced his life, it wasn't until 1981, at age 45 with a large and still-growing family to support, that he quit his job to become a full-time artist. Following the advice to paint one thousand pictures because "if you have any natural talent whatsoever, you'd *have* to know how to paint by the time you finished," he defines technique as "a compilation of everything an artist's ever learned and experienced in all the paintings he's ever done."

We'd be wrong to assume that sporting art came naturally to Daly. In fact, for years he was unsure of which subject "to major in" until he decided to paint what he liked most: his favorite pursuits within the scenery of his native western New York. To this he brought his background in advertising, which had developed



"SPRING PEEPERS" BY THOMAS AQUINAS DALY

his ability to organize value (light/dark), chroma (weak/strong) and hue (warm/cool) within a confined space to achieve maximum visual impact. "A keen sensitivity to the relative warmth or coolness of color is a fundamental necessity to the representational painter," he writes in his carefully thought-out 1985 book, *Painting Nature's Quiet Places*. So is "value selection" for each pictorial

element, because receding objects become cooler and lighter, and those at close range show a greater contrast between light and shade.

Daly was originally reputed for his watercolors that don't always look like, well, watercolors. By carefully preparing the surface to receive the pigments, he takes advantage of their special "internal dynamics" to achieve depth and resonance. He

works a patina into the paper with a gradual buildup of washes, usually letting one layer dry before applying another. Or he might finely sandpaper over a dry area, which deepens the darker values of the color by making its surface shine, thus making the paint appear denser.

Although he establishes a work's "middle-value colors" early in the creative process and builds a scale of colors from there, he rarely premixes pigments, preferring to allow them to occasionally overlap to create their own "optical mixtures."

About 20 years ago Daly started exploring the more opaque richness of oils that allowed him to reach the darker sides of dark, the point at which watercolors can, even in expert hands, simply turn muddy. Oils also gave him *time* to play around and explore a piece, as the artist can apply, almost endlessly, one layer of paint on top of the other. "Mistakes" can be corrected by smearing, rubbing, painting over, rubbing with turpentine, even sandpapering until the artist gets it just right. Watercolors can be "corrected," but only to a certain extent, by removing the existing paint with sandpaper.

If at first it seemed as though Daly stuck to watercolors for his outdoor pictures and changed to oils for his indoor still lifes, today he switches effortlessly between the two, which helps keep the creative juices flowing.

I doubt whether Daly is concerned about what his works express about himself to his viewers. But each one contributes to our portrait of him as an American artist and sportsman. ■

---

*Inspired by Gray's to take rod and reel in hand while on safari in Africa, Brooke convinced the cook and skinner to take her fishing. After snaring bushes, losing fishhooks and rousing a hippo, she caught her first tigerfish. By the tail.*

