

The Art



The Artist and his Tools: Eric Hopkins at work in the studio space of his new Rockland gallery located across from the Farnsworth Museum, and the arsenal of brushes and palettes (opposite) he uses to create his bold aerial landscapes.

of the Earth

An artist enraptured by the beauty of the universe and his place in it

PROFILE Eric Hopkins

By Joshua Bodwell

Photography Darren Setlow

When the fish flew over the gunwale with a hook set firmly in its jaw, the sea was a sharp, rippling blue. In the distance, the late-afternoon sky glowed with purple hues. The brightly speckled fish flipped and flopped on the boat's deck, and a young Eric Hopkins watched, horrified, as its once-vivid colors faded. Hopkins brought the fish home and painted its scales with clumsy fingers, childishly wishing that a layer of new color could bring it back to life.

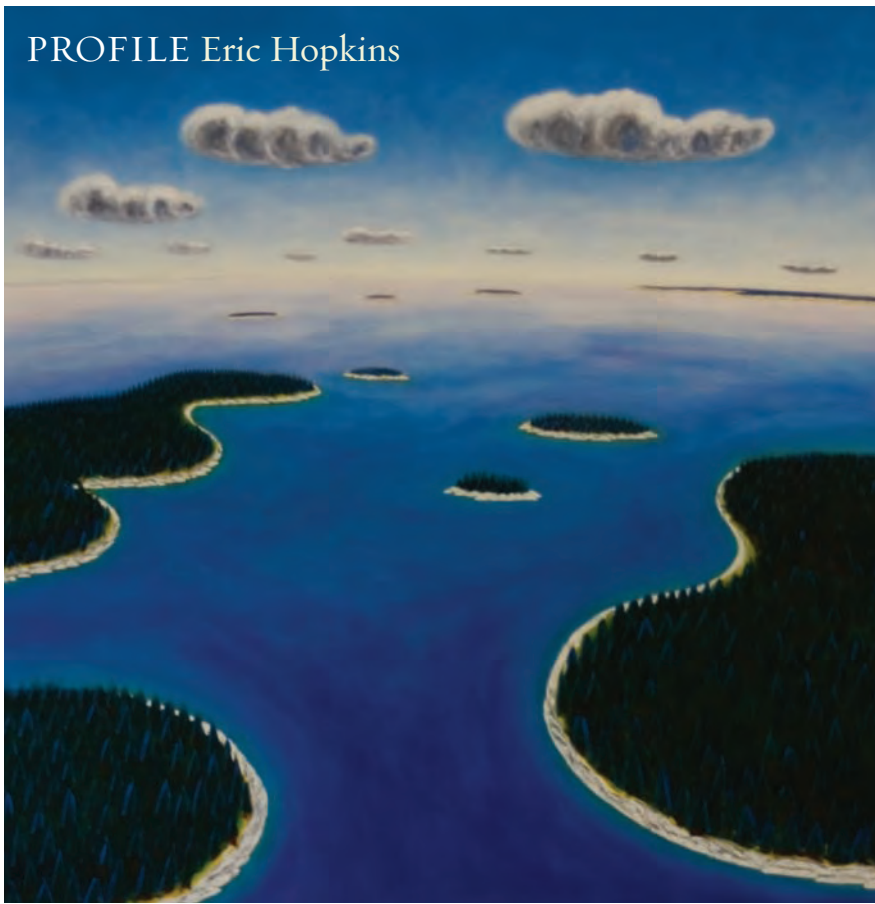
A few years after that fishing expedition, when Hopkins was just ten years old, his younger brother Stephen slipped off the family's North Haven dock and drowned. Driven by the same impulse that led him to coat a dead fish with cheap paint, Hopkins flew kites as high as the ocean winds would take them, and climbed the island's tallest trees, all in hopes that he might find his little brother in the clouds above.

"Death begs us to ask questions about what life really is," says the now 56-year-old artist. In fact, Hopkins seems to have built his life—and his art—around his unrelenting desire to discover the answers to life's unanswerable questions. "I've always been reaching toward finding the core of Eric Hopkins," he says, "who I am, who I was, and who I'll be." But if it's true that some of our greatest art—be it music, writing, or painting—is born of exceptional pain, then maybe it's also true that those who've known such pain can also experience the purest joy. When it comes to describing both Hopkins's art and the man himself, "exuberant" is not too strong a word.

From an early age, Hopkins was attuned to how Maine artists, such as sculptor Louise Nevelson and painter Andrew Wyeth, elevated



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“Waypoints I” work in progress, oil on linen, 6’ by 6’

surrounding sea—all fit together. “A lot of how we look at the world from its surface is fragmented,” Hopkins says, “but when you look from above, you see how truly interconnected everything is.” The photographs and short films Hopkins shot during his flying lessons inspired him to paint the fantastical aerial landscapes he is so renowned for today. The islands in Hopkins’s paintings often appear to be floating in a field of swirling, oceanic blues as they curve along the Earth’s horizon. Tall, stylized spruce trees, painted with layer upon layer of green, bend and sway, and every inch of the landscape glows with an inner light. Hopkins’s paintings are not so much reproduced from the photos he takes as they are products of the emotions those images stir in him as he remembers the experience of flight.

Unlike some naturalist painters who spurn the world’s technological advances, Hopkins’s near obsession with the natural world and its minutiae is counterbalanced by his equally passionate fascination with technology—after all, it was the miracle of mechanized flight that provided the inspiration for his soaring landscapes. Hopkins’s childhood interest in the history of flight, the Space

Race, and the moon landing, as well as his lifelong dedication to nature, eventually led him to accept the presidency of the Earth Shine Institute. An offshoot of the Charles A. and Anne Morrow Lindbergh Foundation, Earth Shine’s mission is to foster a harmonious balance between nature and technology.

common objects—weathered shingles, broken lobster traps—into art. Always brimming with a kinetic energy that keeps him in perpetual motion, the young Hopkins reached out beyond Maine in order to pursue his artistic ambitions and what he calls “the nature of creativity and the creativity of nature.”

In recent years, Hopkins has been nagged by the feeling that his paper and canvas paintings might become too “static,” a thought that returned him for the first time in decades to the art of glassmaking. “Light has always been so important to me,” Hopkins says, “and glass could be the medium I need to bring in the light I’m looking for.”

After studying briefly at the University of Southern Maine and Deer Isle’s Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Hopkins continued his education outside Maine with stints at the Montserrat School of Visual Arts in Massachusetts and Marlboro College in Vermont. Eventually, these experiences led Hopkins to the Rhode Island School of Design, where he earned his BFA in 1976. His encounters during those early years with artists such as the renowned glassmaker Dale Chihuly, as well as sculptor and painter Italo Scanga, had a profound and lasting affect on Hopkins and his art.

Though he once made all his glass sculptures himself, the spheres and domes that Hopkins has designed so far have been executed with the help of artisans in Seattle and local glass artist Ben Coombs of Portland Glassblowing Studio. While Hopkins says that he’s not yet realized his ambitions for what the glass pieces can ultimately become, the challenge has excited his artistic energies and bolstered his dedication to the interplay of light and color. And so he plugs away, experimenting with different glassmaking techniques and setting the stage for that spark of transcendent creativity to ignite.

Soon after college, Hopkins quickly earned a national reputation for his glass sculpture, particularly the intricate glass seashells he crafted to a life-like perfection. But feeling the need to evolve as both an artist and a person, Hopkins returned in the early 1980s to his native North Haven, where the paternal side of the family had lived since pre-Revolutionary times, to reevaluate his life and professional goals. Soon after his return, Hopkins took his first flying lesson, an event that not would not only fulfill a lifelong dream, but would also mark the beginning of the most inspirational chapter in his career thus far.

Over the years, Eric Hopkins has happened upon a line by Albert Einstein so many times that he believes it simply can’t be a coincidence. “Look deep into nature,” the physicist once said, “and then you will understand everything better.” For his part, Hopkins has scrutinized life as closely as he can, during every hour of the day and throughout the changing of the seasons. He is a man amazed by the beauty of not only his native state, but also the limitless universe beyond.

All his life, Hopkins had envied the gulls, osprey, and other sea birds soaring above his little island home in the middle of Penobscot Bay. Finally getting to fly, he says, allowed him to see how each piece of North Haven—its points, coves, beaches, and the

“All you’ve got to do is open your eyes,” Hopkins says in his typically understated manner. “There’s just so *much* to see.”

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