

# Mike Stidham: Interpretation of Light and Color



*Waiting for Stragglers, oil on canvas mounted on panel (36" x 48"). Image provided by Fred Polhemus.*

**A**T HIS STUDIO in the foothills of Utah's Wasatch Mountains, Mike Stidham is standing before a large canvas on his easel, wearing flips-flops and listening to reggae music on a cold winter day. He immerses himself in a sense of being out on a vast Bahamian flats, the thin water and mangroves brightly washed in sunlight and afternoon warmth. It is this feeling he effectively conveys and translates to the canvas. The image is so lit up the viewer almost needs sunglasses to look at it!

Born in 1954, Stidham was raised in the Coachella Valley in southern California and stalked trout in a variety of watershed systems extending from the Sierra to the desert southwest. Early on, he was a self-taught wildlife artist who distanced himself from tight renderings of his subjects, rather choosing to create a more interpretive, suggestive approach through broad brushstrokes and painterly expressions.

What sets Stidham most apart from other practitioners is his innate ability to paint his subjects from two completely different perspectives with such strong execution and conviction: what the sportsperson might see above water and from the prey's perspective, its world beneath the surface. There are sporting artists today, and in years past, who are true masters at one or the other, but not both.

No armchair angler is Stidham. He is as much at home on the water as he is in front of an easel. He guided for several years on the Henry's Fork of the Snake River in Idaho and, until recently, held the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) world record for a hammerhead shark taken on a fly rod. He knows the subjects he paints—in fresh or salt water—better than most, based on decades of pursuit of game fish in just about every imaginable setting.

When Stidham paints an above-water setting into which any angler could place him- or herself, he draws on decades of firsthand experience and knowledge. He imagines how the scene needs to be rendered and designed to convey the mood and feeling he seeks before ever laying brush to canvas. Stidham tells me, "The hardest part of creating any painting is coming up with a good idea in my mind, visualizing how the image will come together to be interesting and appealing, and then being able to translate that onto a blank canvas. Once I have the idea well planned out in my head, the execution of conveying this to canvas is the relatively easy part and should flow effortlessly."

When Stidham creates a scene of fish in their natural setting, that which lies beneath the surface, out of sight from the angler, he takes a quite different approach. Stidham imagines

that he is underwater, back flat against the floor of a Colorado stream, the cold current passing overhead. Or that he is lying in the shallows of a sun-drenched flats in the Keys or Bahamas, the gentle tide slowly carrying fish in and out of the shallows. In these settings, the approach is different, as is the execution, but the results equally compelling.

Stidham has a scholar's explanation: "There is magnificence and mystery in the environs where fish dwell, but we're on the other side of the surface plane. I don't think of myself as painting fish, rocks, and sand. I'm always searching to find better ways to see and create light, water refraction, how that refraction plays off the subject and enhances it, and to achieve color combinations that work together to properly illuminate this subsurface world. Every stroke of paint represents a hit of refracted light bouncing off rocks, sandy bottoms, and fish scales. My goal is to bring viewers to another realm that's right in front of them."

Stidham's interpretation of light and color—the artistic foundations of his oil painting—is what draws the viewer into his art. Upon close inspection of any of his paintings, we find a seemingly disorganized array of brushstrokes and colors that, as individual components, seem to create little context. But when viewed as a whole, the magic reveals itself to the viewer: his firm grasp of light and color combinations that create lively, evocative renderings of the subject. As Stidham offers in his own words, "I don't become a slave to the narrative. I paint perception and keep reality out of it."

Although Stidham works almost exclusively in oil paint these days, he is one of few artists who has also worked in other media, such as watercolor, hand-colored etchings, and original stone lithographs. Stidham's artwork has been the feature of T-shirts

sold through L.L. Bean, Nordstrom, and Simms, among others. His paintings have been featured in publications such as *Fly Fisherman*, *Rod & Reel*, *Outdoor Life*, *Western Art & Architecture*, and *Trout*, and he designed the 1992 Texas saltwater game fish stamp. His original paintings are included in many prestigious art collections throughout the world, including the American Museum of Fly Fishing.

Stidham has been influenced by many painters over the years—some from days gone by and some his contemporaries. Among two for whom Stidham has particular admiration are western landscape masters Clyde Aspevig and Scott Christensen. "I have studied the works of both landscape painters and learned much about composition and design. Though I paint settings where one finds fish, both above and below water, they are landscapes just the same and many of the same rules apply," Stidham says. "A trout stream or flats environment is the best mirror of natural beauty. To me, it is so intriguing to see the effect of light bars in water bouncing off rocks, sand, and fish, absorbing color and reflecting it back. Sometimes, you can't begin to understand the simplicity of things until you ponder their profound architecture."

Mike Stidham really gets the spirit and feeling of a rocky river or flats setting that cannot be explained in words, and the mesmerizing allure of Stidham's oil paintings lies in his ability to transcend his subject. He uses shapes, colors, and carefully calculated brushstrokes that result in paintings that light up any setting. The world where fish live and anglers pursue them is a magical place to be.

—FRED POLHEMUS  
TRUSTEE



Watching the Sink-Permit, oil on panel (30" x 24").  
From the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.



Mike Stidham with a nice tiger trout.  
Photo courtesy of the artist.