



Where Water Meets Sky

Bright Flats

PAINTER **AL BARNES** CAPTURES THE VAST PANORAMAS OF THE FLATS, WHERE FLY FISHERMEN AND THEIR QUARRY ARE BUT TINY FIGURES IN A MAJESTIC WORLD **BY JIM FLANNERY**



Fly fishermen seek out Barnes' paintings because they can easily place themselves in the scene. Meal Ticket (above) and Closing In (below).



Al Barnes scans the flats, his trained eye picking up the flick of a tail, the flash of a bonefish or permit prowling the shallows for a shrimp or a crab. The artist — widely acknowledged as the preeminent master of the fly-fishing canvas — takes in the water's blues and greens, browns and yellows, and fixes in his mind's eye its shimmering reflections, the changing colors and shadows of clouds migrating across the sandy or marled or grassy bottom. Barnes' gaze fixes on the place where this complex tapestry meets the sky. There his artist's eye takes in more colors — blues, reds, grays, purples, oranges — and the clouds. He is a meticulous student of clouds. In this vast panorama of sky and water, Barnes paints the fly fisherman, usually as a tiny figure pursuing his passion in a place far bigger and more majestic than he. This is how Barnes sees himself when he's fly-fishing — as a bit player in a grand production. His art reflects that. "I'm actually painting a seascape," says Barnes, 76, who grew up on the Texas Gulf Coast and lives now in the hill country near Fredericksburg, Texas, with his wife, Nanci, a ceramic artist. "Water, sky, clouds." Those are what draw him into a particular setting. "People are the secondary players in the whole thing," he says. The fish, too. Barnes aims for the seascape to stand on its own as a painting without the action that the



The works of this classically trained Texas painter are rich in possibilities, setting the stage for a story about to unfold. Game On (above).

angler and his quarry bring to it — the angler casting to a fish, the fish set to take a fly, the drama that ensues. "I paint scenes of people fishing," he says, but he paints the sea and sky first. He finds them more challenging to depict. Then come the angler and the fish. In Barnes' paintings — and they tend to be large canvases, 24 by 36 inches, 20 by 30 inches and some of his earlier canvases 3 by 4 feet — you'll seldom see a fish exploding on the surface. Barnes paints scenes pregnant with possibilities, not narrowly focused on the action. An angler puts a streamer in front of a big tarpon's nose. Get ready for mayhem. A fly settles between two bonefish. Which will strike? A ripple on a mirror-calm flat draws a cast. Has the angler reacted quickly enough? Barnes' paintings capture more than a moment's action. They set the stage for a story that's about to unfold, and that story lies in the viewer's imagination. Barnes often depicts the angler above the water, the fish beneath it, the fly, line and rod about to bring the two together in a timeless battle. "In terms of flats subjects, he is considered the best," says Fred Polhemus of Shelburne,

Vermont, who represents Barnes and other sporting artists through his company, Sportsman's Palette, and the J. Russell Jinishian Gallery in Fairfield, Connecticut (jrusselljinishiangallery.com). He says the artist's technical accuracy is very strong, "creating something that is convincing, which is so important in this marketplace. ... Al is not an armchair angler. He has spent a lot of time on the water as a fisherman." Barnes is a master of drawing people and depicting the angler as he stalks a fish, makes a cast or fights his catch. "That comes from his years of experience on the water and his classical training, his formal training as an artist," says Polhemus, an authority on the painter. Barnes spent time in the classroom drawing nudes — the way painters have learned to draw people since the time of the ancient Greeks — but the formal training also broadened his horizons. "The best thing about college was I got a lot of art history," Barnes says. "I studied the painters that came before me and learned from them." Like a lot of older artists today, Barnes spent a dozen years after graduating college in apprenticeship. He did commercial art in Dallas,

sharpening his skills, refining his technique, creating his own style until the seas and skies, the fish and birds and boats drew him back to the Gulf Coast. His market is mainly serious — and affluent — fly fishermen who demand accuracy but also are drawn to Barnes' work for its classical composition, alluring colors and the grand scale that captures the power and grandeur of nature and the emotional release of being there, alone or with a guide. "Fly fishermen tell me, 'I've got to have that because I can place myself in that painting,'" Polhemus says. Barnes' parents were restaurateurs in Port Isabel, Texas, across the Laguna Madre from South Padre Island, which was paradise for a boy such as Barnes, who loved to fish and loved to paint. "There was no TV. You had to entertain yourself," he says. So he spent a lot of time on Padre fishing and walking the beaches, sometimes with his dad but often on his own. He learned to sail. He cadged rides on commercial fishing boats. "I spent a lot of time on boats," he says, but also a lot of time at the easel.



Al Barnes paints what he knows: fly anglers, flats boats, fish in skinny water. Flash Cast (below) and Take A Shot (bottom).



“I’ve been painting all my life,” Barnes says. “I sold my first painting as a kid in the fourth or fifth grade — a painting of a sailboat for \$3.” Today his oils fetch \$8,000 for a 20-by-30-inch painting and \$10,000 for a 24-by-36-inch work. Leaving Dallas to return to his Gulf Coast roots, Barnes bought a small beach house in Ingleside on the bay near Corpus Christi for \$9,000 in the late 1960s and started painting shrimp boats and sailboats, coastal scenes and seascapes. That was until he took up saltwater fishing again, in a serious way — redfish, trout, drum sailfish, marlin — off Texas, the Mexican Yucatan, Hawaii, Belize. Barnes considers the late Stanley Meltzoff, the father of sporting and fishing art, his mentor. Through Meltzoff’s influence, he began painting underwater scenes of fish feeding, cruising and schooling, slicing through the water, roiling it, raising clouds of bubbles. Later he gravitated to the shallows, to the Texas saltwater marshes, the Florida Keys backcountry, the Bahamas and Caribbean locales. And he started painting flats fishing from a perspec-



Barnes usually paints the angler as a small figure pursuing his passion in a place far more majestic than he. Decision Time (above).



tive that shows both the fish under the water and the angler above it. His favorite color is cobalt turquoise, the color of many of the sandy-bottom Bahamian flats, where he often goes to fish and find new material for his paintings. He doesn’t try to paint in situ but takes digital photos of the water, the sky, the beach, fish tailing and anglers on the hunt. Barnes paints from the photos — usually in oils but sometimes in watercolors. He says he has learned that if he tries to paint a scene from memory, it turns out contrived. The artist paints what he knows. He knows the fish and how they swim and feed and take flies. He knows fly tackle. He knows flats boats and how the fisherman works from the boat, how the guide poles it, how they sometimes slip over the side into the water to chase fish. “The people who buy these paintings know what they’re doing,” Barnes says. “You can’t pull the wool over their eyes.” Barnes is a “wonderful painter who depicts flats scenes that make you feel like you’re right there,” says Cary Kresge, owner of a medical devices and veterinary company based in Winter Park, Florida. Kresge

says Meltzoff, the master of masters, once said Barnes was his favorite sporting artist. “That’s praise of the highest order,” he says. A friend of 25 years who met Barnes through the artist’s work for the Coastal Conservation Association, Kresge hangs Barnes’ paintings in his office and den, as do many who buy them, to keep his passion for fishing front and center. He appreciates Barnes’ ability to convey the depth of the waters he paints and his mastery of the shadings of the bottom colors on a sunlit day. “His colors are beautiful, his proportions are exact, and he paints a nifty sky,” Kresge says. Kresge also finds Barnes fun to fish with. He remembers poling a boat off the Everglades’ Highland Beach one day while Barnes sat on the platform eating a sandwich. Barnes lost his balance and tumbled head over heels into the shallows, coming up covered in sand and grass. “We told him, ‘We’re going to give you a 2 for form but a 10 for originality,’” Kresge says. On another outing, it started raining, and Barnes decided to take a rainwater shower on the boat. He stripped down to his birthday suit and soaped up while, unknown to him, one of his buddies snapped a picture

of his backside, which turned up later on a 5-foot poster at his 55th birthday party. “Al and I have had just wonderful times fishing together,” Kresge says. In 1970, Hurricane Celia blew the Barnes’ beach house away, so they moved their home and studio to Rockport, near Aransas Bay, only to take a glancing blow from Hurricane Ike in 2008. This vulnerability to storms, along with the crowding of the Texas coast, have driven them inland to their cabin and 17-acre retreat in the South Texas hill country, where the peace is palpable and the threat of hurricanes gives way to the aggravation of wild hogs rooting through Nanci’s vegetable garden. Barnes still sojourns often to the coast and to the Bahamas to fish and gather material for his work, but he also has found a strong market for paintings of fly-fishing in freshwater rivers and streams, and hunters and their dogs rousting out quail and wild hogs against a backdrop of colorful Texas landscapes with big skies, flat lands and country roads. Kresge admires Barnes for never resting on his laurels. “I just see his art as something that has continued to improve,” he says. “He’s got all the pieces in place.”