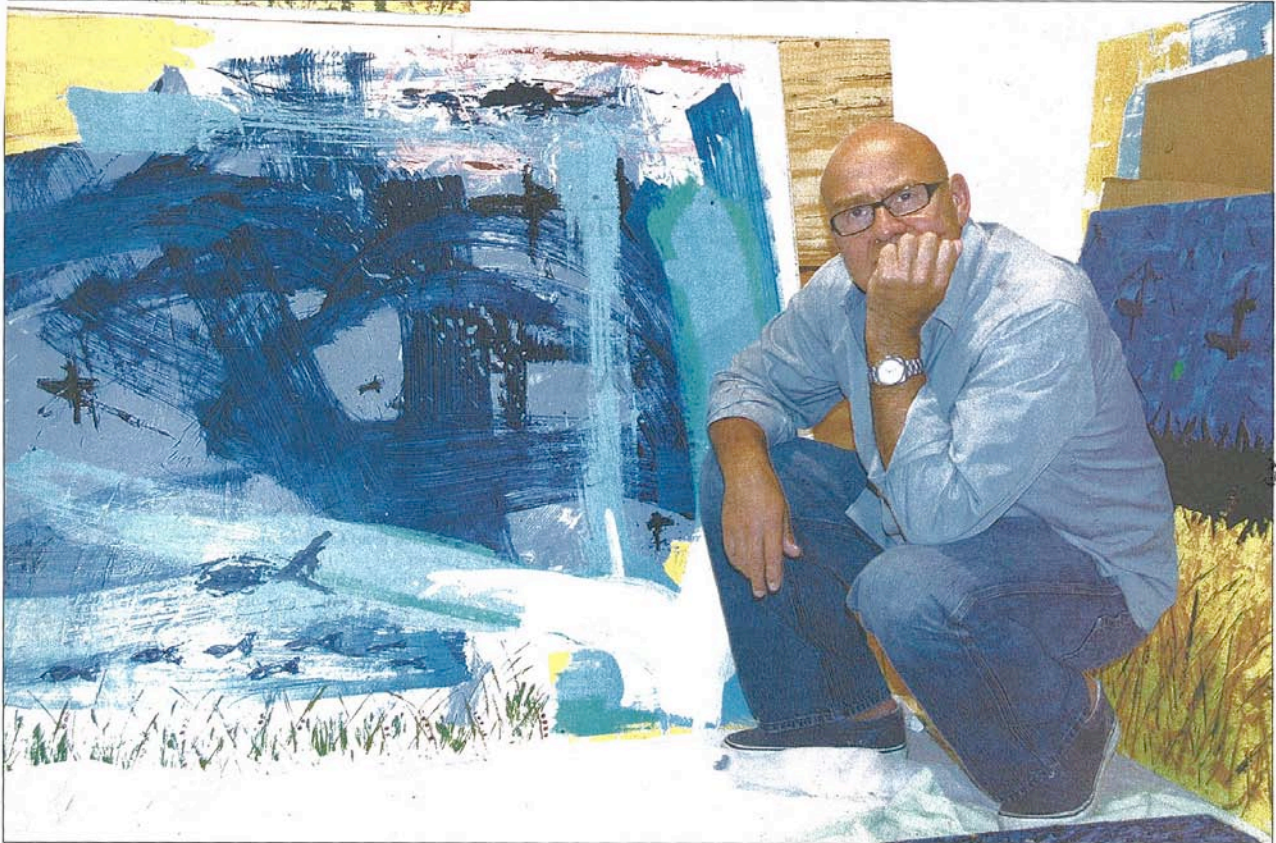


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Steve Haweeli might be known to some people primarily for his public relations work with restaurants, but he may soon be known as much for his paintings. *Jennifer Landes*

The Art of the Publicist

BY JENNIFER LANDES

By every indication, it would appear that Steve Haweeli always had a fulfilling life and career. Those who follow his comings and goings on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and foursquare envy even his table-hopping and ocean-plunging posts. He's somewhat tightly wound, but his easy smile is evidence of a busy man who is obviously having a very good time.

Yet every once in a while, in a quieter moment, he hears voices. It's not often, but when it happens it typically means a life-changing development is afoot. Relaxing for the moment in what was once his basement and is now his studio, Mr. Haweeli acknowledges it is unusual, but his success speaks for its prescience.

In its latest manifestation, responding to the voice has meant painting, an odd métier for someone who never picked up a brush before 2007, he recalled last month. "I said, 'You're kidding me, I can't paint. I can't even draw.'" But the voice was resolute and persistent. It told him to buy art supplies, so he did. He wasn't even sure of what to purchase, but he walked out

of the store with \$100 in paint, brushes, tools, and canvases, and two days later he had his first painting. It hangs above his office desk.

A huge admirer of Willem de Kooning, he was actually crying in front of one of his paintings in Madrid two weeks before he himself was inspired to paint. He often uses the same palette as his hero, in abstracted landscapes based on his experience of the South Fork. Other times, he goes more symbolic, finding crosses and their history as a vessel for meaning, a recurrent motif. Those paintings tend to be more muted or flatter even as he builds up the layers of paint with a palette knife or other blunt object.

Seeing that he lives on the South Fork, and in Springs no less, where every other house has probably seen its share of artist residents, pursuing art might not be all that unusual. Except Mr. Haweeli not only paints, he sells what he has painted — a rarer bird indeed. He has participated in some group shows and has been given solo shows at Outcast Gallery in Montauk and his alma mater, Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y. "I've had a lot of success selling art."

Perhaps it is because he really enjoys it. "I liked how it felt, putting paint on canvas. I liked moving around, expressing myself." Maybe it is all the time he spends outside, swimming in the bay and fishing, that gives him a unique vantage point on what is compelling about these surroundings on a visceral level. Nonetheless, he credits Karyn Mannix for "discovering" him last year when he decided to participate in the "Love and Passion" show she presents at Ashawagh Hall every February. She has included him in her shows ever since. The next one will be at Ashawagh Hall on Nov. 5.

The first time Mr. Haweeli heard the voice, in 1992, it inspired him to start WordHampton, his public relations firm. But that "weird, clear, and, frankly, audible" voice made sense to him, he said, even if he had not come to the industry from a predictable route.

He started in New York City in the late 1980s, when he was a bartender looking for a way to have his patrons follow him to a new job. He developed what proved to be his first piece of direct mail, notifying his friends and clients of his new employer's address. The

Continued on C3

Art of the Publicist

Continued from C1

new boss saw the leaflet and asked him to send out a few more for him.

Before he knew it, Mr. Haweeli had a mailing list that included major SoHo art galleries and the New York City Chamber of Commerce. He soon found himself offering his services to other establishments "below 14th, above Canal, west of Broadway. I told them, I have a letter and a mailing list, and I can put fannies in your seats."

"I never studied communications. I never worked at an agency," he said. "Someone asked me how to write a press release and I said, 'What's that?' That I got attention from that first release was cool. I was getting paid for writing!"

In 1991, he was hired for Nick and Toni's expanded restaurant space here. The new site had a wood-burning oven and a bar. "I came with the bar," he said with a chuckle. He spent six years as bar manager at the restaurant, but he also launched WordHampton, with Nick and Toni's as his first account.

Since then, the agency has expanded to include clients all over the East End as well as UpIsland, and broadened its base to real estate and lifestyle companies. Mr. Haweeli's key to success is a relatively simple but often overlooked approach: "Present solid information in a timely manner. If a member of the media needs something, get it to them complete and well prepared, and be nice."

He is now using social media to reach out both to WordHampton clients and fans of his art. An invitation to join him on Facebook is on his artist Web site. He called himself an "early adopter," having enlisted clients to try the new platforms as early as January 2008, just about when Facebook was hitting the mainstream.

Now, the whole business model has changed. "More and more people are accessed through handheld devices than a desktop computer," let alone the old pa-



"Looking to Orient from Maidstone IV" is part of a series of abstracted landscapes Mr. Haweeli painted of one of his favorite views.

per press release. "The message has changed. Technology and economics are the drivers." Rather than shouting, those who wish to communicate need "to share, have conversations" with potential purchasers of their services. Mr. Haweeli is a consultant on about 50 to 60 Facebook pages.

"It's more power of suggestion: Did you know? What's your favorite menu item? Or a video of a chef preparing dishes."

His schedule is a bit hectic. His tall

and solid frame is kept trim by daily swims and morning green shakes before he tucks into richer fare in the afternoon and evenings for work or pleasure. Then, after he gets home and he's done watching sports on television, he can often be found downstairs

painting. It's become a daily ritual. "At around 9, 9:30, when I start winding down, I begin to think I should go down there, something is bugging me about a painting. Then a couple of hours later, I have to tear myself away, force myself to stop."