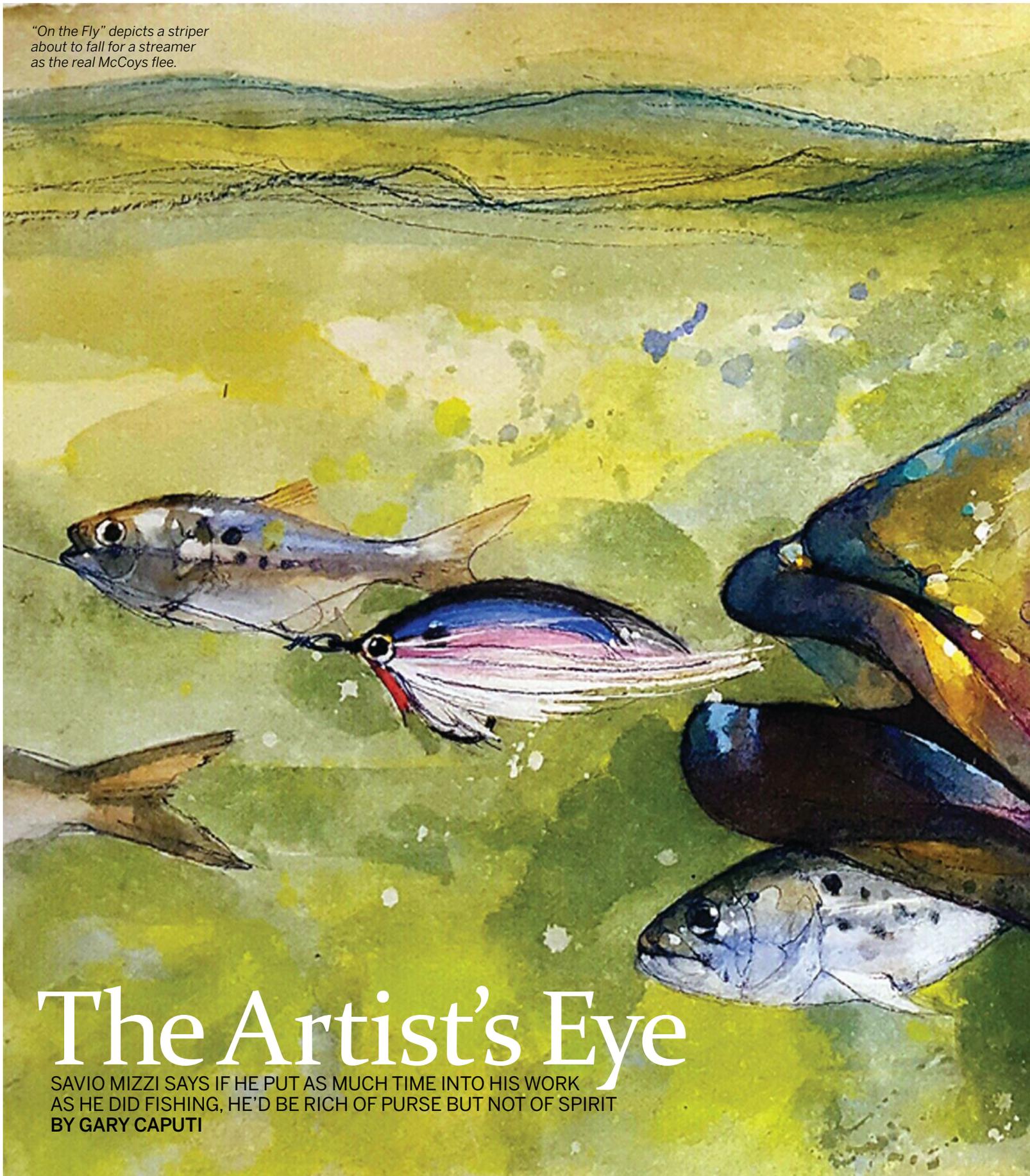


"On the Fly" depicts a striper about to fall for a streamer as the real McCoys flee.



The Artist's Eye

SAVIO MIZZI SAYS IF HE PUT AS MUCH TIME INTO HIS WORK AS HE DID FISHING, HE'D BE RICH OF PURSE BUT NOT OF SPIRIT
BY GARY CAPUTI



*Bluefin, squid and a lucky
someone about to connect.*





Savio Mizzi might be considered a newcomer in the world of marine artists, but he has been a creative force in fine arts for more than 40 years. He is passionate about his art, but like everything else in his life, it takes a back seat to fishing.

When Mizzi and his wife, Gigi, were house hunting in the Hamptons in the late 1980s, they drove past a group of anglers catching fish from the beach. “That was all it took,” Mizzi says. “We bought a house near Three Mile Harbor, and I set up my studio. I was still doing freelance graphics work for ad agencies in Manhattan, and commission work, including book covers for New York publishing houses.” This was in addition to his endless musings on sketch pads that are the basis for many of his marine and fine art compositions.

Mizzi quickly fell into a routine, balancing his work with fishing close to home until one of his new neighbors asked if he had experienced the fall run at Montauk, a 20-minute drive. It was mid-September 1990, and the day after their conversation Mizzi drove to Camp Hero State Park, a stone’s throw from historic Montauk Lighthouse. He parked his car and descended the steep path to the rocky shoreline, found a place to perch and began casting into the darkness. As the sun peeked over the horizon, he thought he saw shapes in the combers but didn’t give it much thought. He caught a striped bass and a couple of big bluefish as the sky continued to lighten and he was able to see through the waves with the sun behind the curl.

“I thought I was seeing things,” he says in his accented English. “There was striped bass everywhere, some right at my feet. I couldn’t believe my eyes. I’d never seen anything like it, even as a kid growing up on an island. I fished through the tide almost in a trance until it was dead low water and the fish had moved off. Then I ran back up the path to the parking lot where there was a pay phone and called Gigi. I could hardly talk, I was so excited. I told her I was sure I had died and gone to fish heaven.”

That was the beginning of two-plus months of fishing night and day. Mizzi

could not get Montauk out of his head. His life began to revolve around tides, tackle shops and driving to the Point.

“I had a tight deadline for two book covers,” Mizzi says. “They were for Western novels by a famous writer, Louis L’Amour, and they paid \$5,000 each. I had them sketched out and waiting to paint before that day, but every time I tried to sit down and finish them all I could see was the rocks, the waves and the stripers. I kept putting it off and making excuses to the publishing house, then driving back to Montauk. I never did finish those covers, fishing every day until the end of the run instead.

“If it wasn’t for fishing,” he adds, “I’d be a multimillionaire today.”

On an Island Far, Far Away

Savio grew up on Gozo in the Mediterranean, one of the islands that comprise the Republic of Malta. It’s a magical place where history stretches back 10 millennia to encompass some of the oldest Neolithic temples on Earth. Art and architecture spanning the ancient Phoenicians, Romans, Greeks and Arabs can be found around every corner, and the Catholic Church has been dominant since St. Paul the Apostle was shipwrecked there around A.D. 60.

The church brought with it the art of the Roman Empire and, later, the Renaissance. This is the environment that inspired Mizzi, and his father and uncle before him, to become artists and painters. His father was also an actor, a stage and movie makeup artist, and a producer of theater.

His family lived near the center of the 40-square-mile island in Victoria, but they also had a small house on Marsalforn Bay on the northern coast, where Savio’s father, Toni, introduced him to his other passions: fishing and the sea. They had a small wooden boat with an old 5-hp Albin inboard and an ancient British Seagull outboard that was pressed into service whenever the Albin stopped running. They had no instruments, save for a pocket compass, no coolers or ice — just some wet burlap to keep the fish they caught from spoiling.



Mizzi draws inspiration from the Renaissance period for his art and from Montauk for fishing.

“I grew up fishing all the time using squid we caught at night to bait the hooks on our handlines,” Mizzi says. “We fed our family and many of our friends on the dolphin and tuna we caught.”

As a boy, Mizzi loved hanging out with the old fishermen on the docks, rather than the other boys, listening to their stories, helping mend nets and the short longlines they used from boats, which were mostly sail-powered or rowed. In late August, when he was 12, the day before the family was to return to Victoria to start the new school year, he found the docks alive with boats coming in loaded down with mahi and tuna. The excitement in the air was palpable, and the youngster could not contain himself.

“My parents were very strict about school, and I had a difficult time in my classes because I am severely dyslexic, but I went to my father and begged him to take me out fishing the next day,” Mizzi says. “To my surprise, he relented, and we went fishing on what should have been the first day of school. We caught so many fish that we returned to shore with the gunwales barely above the water. It is one of my most vivid and joyous memories of fishing on the island and the many days spent on the water with my father.”

Long and Winding Road

For Mizzi, salvation from schoolwork was in his sketch pads. He had a horrible time with the written word, but his natural ability for drawing and painting became his ticket to a new life when his mother took him to New York City. “I was 18 when I arrived in the United States in 1974 with just a few dollars in my pocket,” he says. “I moved in with my aunt temporarily and started looking for work, eventually getting two full-time and two part-time jobs. I did any menial job I could to make a buck. Remember, these were the Carter years, and the country was in a deep recession, yet I managed to earn \$150 a week, enough to get a one-bedroom apartment in Astoria, Queens, for \$50 a month.”

Mizzi’s desire to use his artistic talent was stronger than ever. He was fascinated by graphic arts and advertising. He was accepted to the Albert Pels School of Art in Manhattan and was taken under the wing of a teacher who would nurture his talent into a salable commodity. He started cold-calling ad agencies and companies in the fashion industry and was given opportunities to showcase his portfolio. Work started coming in, and soon he was under contract with Nino Cerruti, Men’s Only and Burlington Industries, among others.

*Nowhere to hide in
“Bluefish Chasing Bait.”*







"Fly-Fishing Montauk."

He worked for several Madison Avenue ad agencies and eventually opened his own studio in 1983. Mizzi's reputation in graphic arts grew, but he also continued his pursuit of painting, and his fine art was generating critical acclaim. His fame in Malta exploded after a one-man show at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, which at the time was housed in a 16th century palace. Fishing had taken a back seat to his career and growing family, but that was soon to change.

"While I was living in New York City, I fished a few times with Gigi's relatives," Mizzi says, "but to them fishing was trolling wire line and umbrella rigs, and I hated it. There was no knowledge or skill required, and you could hardly feel the fish, the tackle was so heavy. That just wasn't fishing, as far as I'm concerned."

But when he made the move to the East End on Long Island, his rekindled passion for fishing was overpowering. Montauk was his field of dreams, and fishing became the driving force in his life. To be able to fish whenever the seasons and tides dictated, he started designing houses for wealthy celebrities who were flocking to the Hamptons in the 1990s. As with most of what he has accomplished, Mizzi is a self-taught architect, and success soon followed. He started his own construction company to build the homes he designed, and he lives in a house that he designed and built himself, including all of the furniture — a significant artistic achievement. Throughout it all, he retreated regularly to his sketch pads

and easel when he couldn't sleep or the tides were unfavorable.

Art and the Bucktail

Mizzi's Montauk addiction began when he would fish from the beach, then aboard local headboats. His favorite, the *Lazy Bones*, sailed for stripers part of the season, and many of the patrons were experts at using diamond jigs. Mizzi started experimenting with bucktails, and the advent of super-thin braided line proved the perfect match for the light-tackle techniques he was developing.

"I was reading fishing magazines when I saw the first ads for Spiderwire, and I couldn't order it fast enough" Mizzi says. "I like using bucktails on light conventional tackle, and thinner, stronger line made all the difference. I started catching more fish than all the sharpies with their diamond jigs."

To Mizzi, bucktails are the perfect lure, requiring skill and the right touch to bring them to life to garner a strike. Most hits come from inciting an aggressive response, a reaction strike, whether or not the fish are feeding. To watch him work the lure with his trademark trigger rod and baitcasting reel is like watching a virtuoso make a violin cry and sing.

Fishing with Mizzi is a lesson in finesse and perseverance, although I never had to wait long before we were on fish and catching. During one trip to Montauk, most boats in the area were chasing schoolie stripers, but we stayed out front in deeper water by ourselves with

hardly a mark on the finder, successfully tempting much larger fish out of the rocks 50 feet below by snapping bucktails at a frantic pace.

Last year, Mizzi became Capt. Savio when he earned his six-pack license at the age of 62. His reputation as a light-tackle savant has some of Montauk's best-known fly and light-tackle guides recommending him to their clients when they are unavailable, and his website (fishhooker.com) and Facebook page have earned him an explosion of followers and clients.

However, Mizzi's love of the sketch pad and easel hasn't faded. As a certified insomniac, he spends countless hours sketching local fishing scenes, but he loves nothing more than incorporating the sea creatures he sees or imagines into surrealistic flights of fancy that both engage and intrigue. He still exhibits at art shows in the Hamptons, illustrates for fishing magazines, and provides his services to angler groups fighting to protect the gamefish he cherishes. His art evokes emotional responses from anglers and non-anglers alike, especially those who have tired of the flat representations of gamefish that have been passed along as fine art for too long.

Savio Mizzi is as close to a Renaissance man as you will likely ever meet, but deep in his heart he is driven by an unrelenting passion for Montauk and the striped bass he cherishes. 🐟

To see more of Savio Mizzi's work, visit savioartstudio.com.

Bass, birds and bait create
a ruckus in "Off the Beach."

