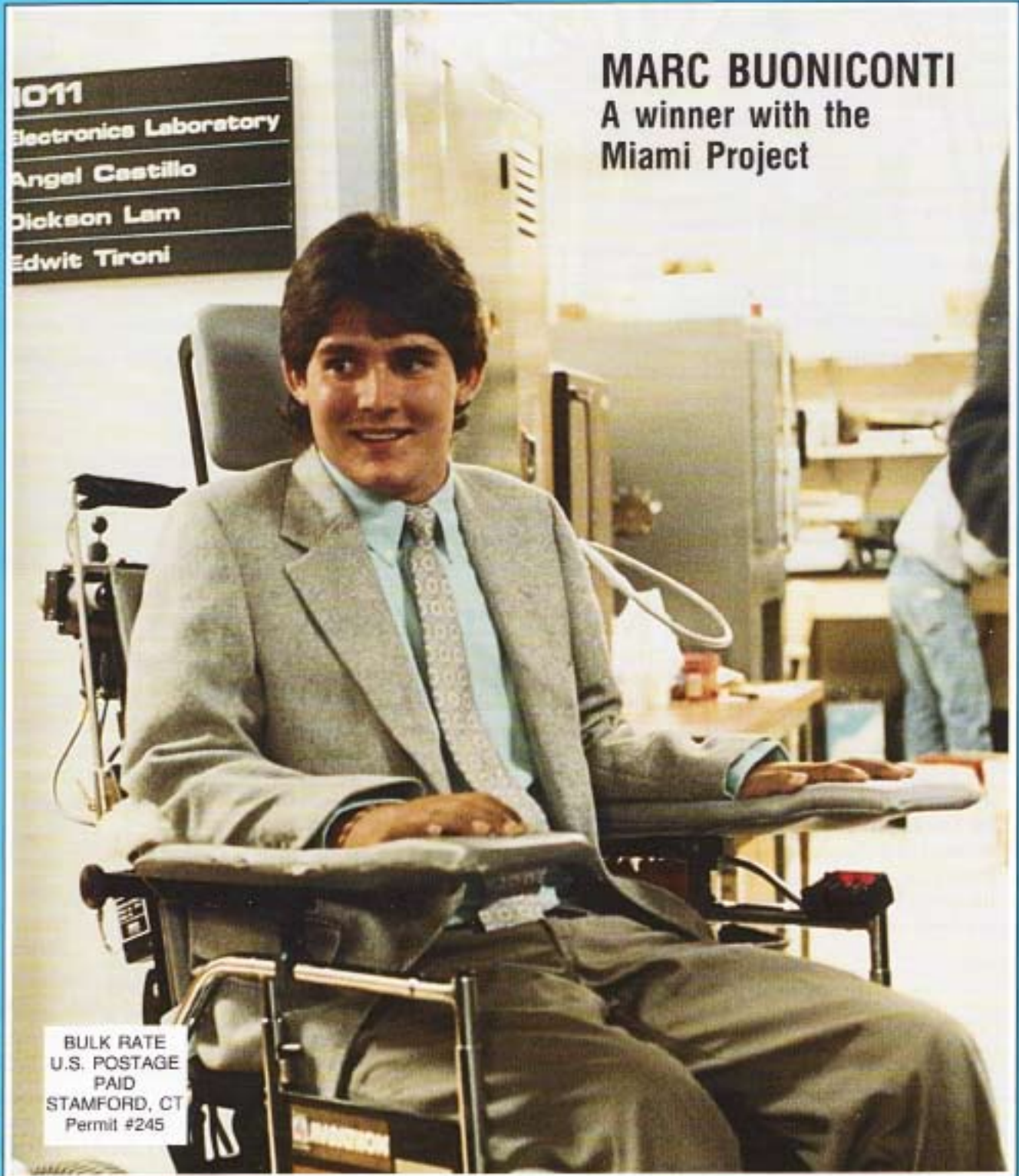


# PROFILES

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# The Art of Richard Byrnes:



*Byrnes's method of working is to take a 35mm slide of his subject matter, project the slide onto the canvas, sketch the lines onto the canvas and then paint. He also works with smaller photographs, using an ancient method of drawing called "grid."*

*For this method, he uses either a plastic grid, or a square cut out of a piece of cardboard. He places the grid over the photograph or picture and then draws what he sees in the square onto the larger canvas in exact proportion. "We think of photographs as being realistic," Byrnes says, "but what you see when you look through the cut-out is totally abstract. That's the fascinating thing, how it focuses your concentration on that square."*

## Reality or Illusion?

by Barbara Stretton



Viewing the art of Richard Byrnes is like entering a hall of mirrors: You aren't sure what's real and what's illusion.

At first you are dazzled by brightly colored, larger-than-life paintings of human bodies—not the traditional nudes, but bikini-clad skiers, body builders, windsurfers. You are looking at sports magazine covers magnified many times and painted in realistic detail.

Then notice a sheet of paper stuck onto one painting with masking tape and a photograph held on with a paper clip. Did the artist forget to remove his source material? No. It's not a real paper clip, but a painted one. "That's what I call the *gotcha*," Byrnes says.

The *gotcha* is that witty form, *trompe l'oeil*, that's been around since early Roman times and became popular during the Renaissance. The artist paints an exact replica of a real object to fool the viewer into thinking the object is real—not painted.

Leaving the source material on the painting adds space and dimension. "The tape is on the surface

of the canvas and yet the space behind it has depth. It is real in a sense. The tape, the paper clip, and the tracing paper are flat and yet you get a sense of the depth behind them," Byrnes explains.

Of course, he could do collages and accomplish the same effect as *trompe l'oeil* with a lot less effort, but "the worst thing about collages is their lack of permanence," he says. "Photographs fade almost while you work on them because the technology isn't there... I know how long an oil painting will last so I would rather do that."

A photographer, Byrnes finds it fascinating to work with photographs because they're abstract. "We happen to think they're realistic, but they

aren't." Even letters in the titles of the magazines are abstract to Byrnes. "They're paintings of print, not letters."

Byrnes admits to feeling a bit guilty when he paints from projections or photographs. "When I was in college... you had to develop your skills as a draftsman. I still carry this piece of baggage from the past and when I'm not drawing I always feel like I'm

about going to Greece and Italy was the sculpture all over the place lying on the ground, the discards of antiquity," he says.

Byrnes began painting when he was in the fifth grade. He graduated from the University of Notre Dame in 1954 with a bachelor of fine arts degree and received his masters of fine arts from Columbia University in 1958. He began exhibiting in galleries in New York City, Miami, and Washington, D.C. At the same time, he became an art teacher in a junior high school on Long Island.

"I taught so I could have the summers off to paint," he recalls. But after eight years of teaching, he realized he would have to take another job to support his family, so he quit teaching and joined an educational filmstrip company, Guidance Associates, where he eventually became managing editor of social studies.

But his true love was art, so when he realized Guidance Associates wasn't interested in

producing art filmstrips, he formed his own company, Educational Dimensions Corporation in Stamford, now the largest producer of art filmstrips in the country. The company also produces filmstrips on a variety of other subjects, including language arts, science, social studies, and vocational guidance.

But ironically, when he started EDC, Byrnes found he no longer had time to devote to his art. It was 15 years before he returned to sculpting and painting.

When he did, one of his *trompe l'oeil* paintings, *Studio Sources*, won the Judges' Choice award in the 68th Annual Greenwich Arts Society's Exhibit in the fall of 1986; that gave him the impetus to return to his art in earnest.

His paintings of sports figures reflect



Tom Richardson

*An apparent collage, Studio Sources (Oil, 3×4', 1986) is an award-winning example of Byrnes's trompe l'oeil finesse.*

cheating just a touch." Then he shrugs and grins, "But what the hell!"

Using this method not only saves time, but allows him to concentrate on the really important things, he says, like image and composition.

In his sculpting of the human body Byrnes saves time and energy for composition by using body casting, which involves greasing a model and applying eggshell-thin coats of plaster over selected portions of the body, letting the plaster dry, and casting each piece.

When he reassembles the pieces, Byrnes leaves them slightly detached. His sculptures resemble the sculpture of ancient Greece and Rome, devastated by time and weather.

"One of the things that impressed me



Susan Byrnes

*Byrnes, doing some research on Long Island Sound, says that windsurfing, skiing and art all demand the same kind of commitment.*

two facets of Byrnes's personality—his fascination with the human form as a subject for art and his interest in vigorous individual sports like skiing, windsurfing and body building.

Skiing and windsurfing are relatively new for him. He took up skiing four years ago and added windsurfing to his repertoire last year when he bought a board for his 53rd birthday.

Skiing and windsurfing and art "have an awful lot in common because it's your commitment," he says. "You're totally responsible for everything you do. You start down a hill or out into the Sound and your survival depends on what you do." He feels the same sense of commitment when he begins a painting.

Sports help Byrnes's art in another way too. They give him a chance to get away from the canvas and come back with a fresh perspective.

After Byrnes's show, visitors may not look at reality quite the same way. Like the philosopher who dreamed he was a butterfly and ever after wondered if he was a philosopher dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was a philosopher, you come away asking yourself, what is real and what is illusion? ■