

CIGARETTES AND PAINT

Layers of the timeless Steve Hodges

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PHOTOS SUBMITTED

A thin, spectacled man with a graying beard sits amidst a messy room. The bright orange glow of a cigarette stands out from behind the lingering smoke and assorted canvases. He lets out another puff of smoke as he dips his brush and begins to paint.

A select few can say they've lived a life as intriguing as that of Steve Hodges. Even fewer can say they reached his level of mastery in their craft. His works are timeless, instantly recognizable and capture the most detailed layers of the human condition.

Born October 9, 1940, in Port Arthur, Stephen Lofton Hodges grew up in the city's prime. The lifeblood of the town's economic development and nearly 60,000 residents was, of course, its namesake port. Businessmen bustled about the streets while seafarers found dockside refuge for their ships and cargo. Port Arthur was a vibrant jewel amidst Southeast Texas.

It was a bit of a wild place, too. As with most busy port cities, the influx of boat traffic and raucous nature of seafaring workers brought a dash of debauchery to the town. Popular pastimes included drinking and gambling, while numerous whorehouses provided lonely sailors a place to seek temporary companionship.

Hodges was undoubtedly shaped by his hometown. Despite barely weighing 100 pounds, he played junior varsity football at Thomas Jefferson High School. He drank alcohol and

frequented one of the city's whorehouses with friends – not to engage with the women, but to shoot pool on what he believed was the best billiards table in town.

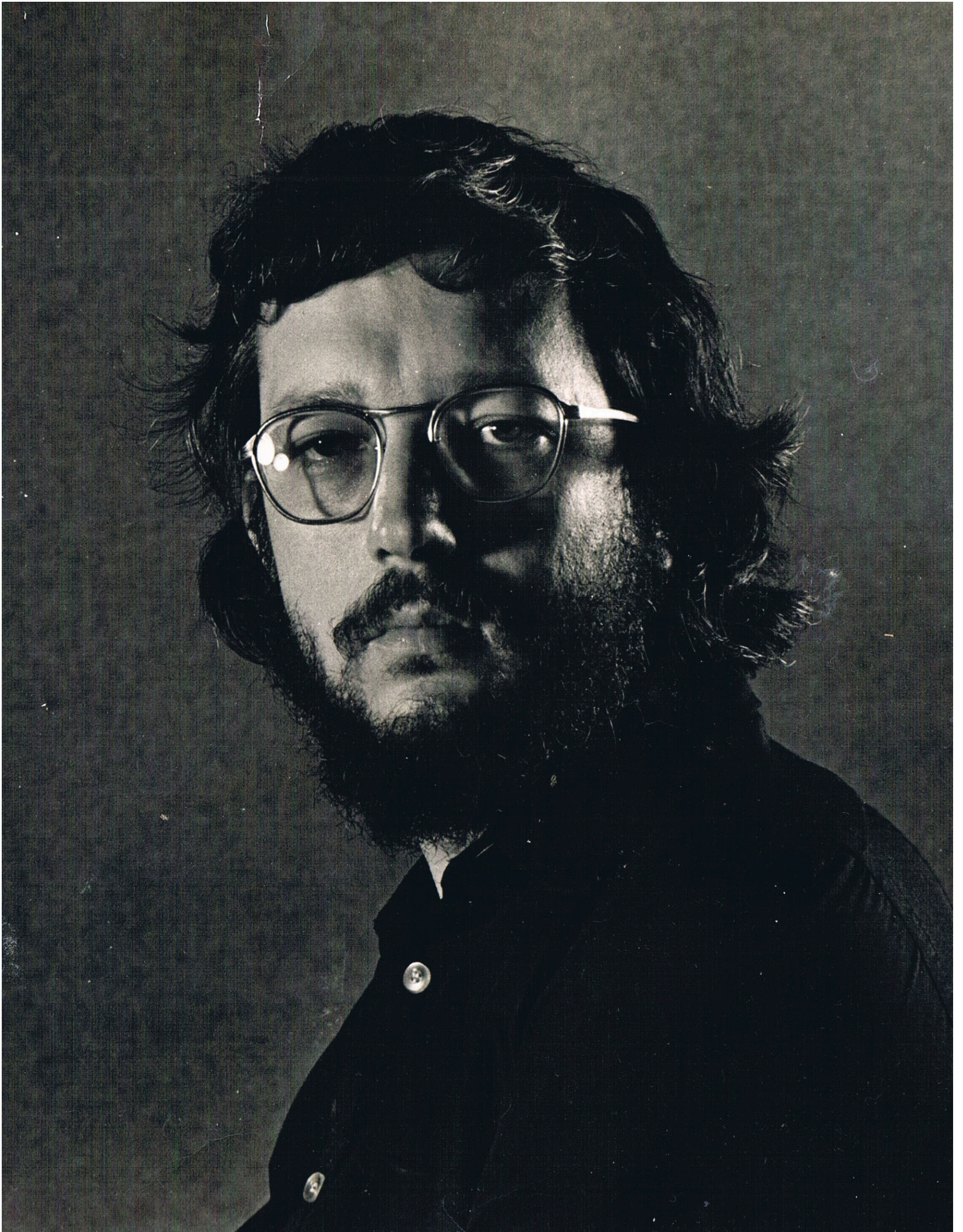
His widow, Lisette Hodges Clanahan, jokes that Steve grew up a “tough Port Arthur boy” due to the rough-around-the-edges quality of the environment. Circumstances of the time period meant he kept his emotions controlled, with a tinge of deep south bravado in his personality. The latter could be attributed to his mother, a staunch Antebellum lady with whom Hodges had a close relationship.

Beneath the hardened exterior which Hodges put up, there existed an entirely different layer to his personality. Those who knew him well were lucky enough to see a deeply emotional man who longed to form fruitful interpersonal connections, held steadfast to a strong moral compass and believed foremost in the power of kindness. Above all else, he wanted to create.

Hodges' introduction to the world of art came as a small child. His mother could have never anticipated that handing her son a drawing pad would spark the career of one of Southeast Texas' most talented artists. From the time a young Hodges first put pencil and paint to paper, he was hooked.

His creative endeavors emphasized his softer side and presented a stark contrast to a Port Arthur which produced blue-collar laborers and







rowdy sailors. However, the busy city became a subject for Hodges as he developed his talents. Occasionally, he also painted with a school classmate named Janis. The pair were simply acquaintances, though they both shared a passion for music – Janis Joplin went on to become an iconic musical artist and Rock and Roll Hall of Famer.

Upon graduating high school in 1958, Hodges briefly enrolled in the art program at the University of Texas in Austin. He eventually returned home to Southeast Texas and earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Lamar University in 1963, followed by a Master of Fine Arts in painting from the University of Arkansas in 1966.

Hodges married his first wife, Linda, and lived in New York and Florida for a time with her. While in the sunshine state, he worked as an art curator and instructor at a small Florida college. He also spent time as an art teacher at a hospital for the criminally insane, an experience which deeply affected him and left a lifelong impact, especially in his artwork.

At his creative core, Hodges was a figurative artist — whether the term applies to the literal stylings of his work or to the larger themes his paintings convey is open to interpretation. Much of his signature collection depicts a strong anatomical aspect, such as the intricate details of a person's hand or the various curves and folds of one's body.

As such, the beauty of the figure became a central idea exhibited in Hodges' portfolio. In many ways, it reflected his desire for human connection and the way Hodges himself was shaped by humanity.

An avid lifelong learner, he took a particular interest in philosophy. Hodges kept stacks of books and was driven by a desire to know the human condition and connect with others, particularly the vulnerable. His widow tells a story of how Steve was essentially pen pals with a developmentally disabled woman with whom he traded letters and artwork. As Lisette put it, Steve wasn't a crowd-pleaser. It didn't matter who you were, he just wanted to find out how you saw the world and work it into his



artwork.

While he didn't care for organized religion, he practiced principles of Buddhism and spent countless hours at the temple in Port Arthur, where some of his works are still displayed today. Above all, he adhered to a just moral code and believed that people should live with kindness, thoughtfulness and self-responsibility. Not many people saw this peaceful side of him behind the tough exterior walls he put up, but it was there nonetheless.

Those walls existed for a reason. Having previously worked with the criminally insane, Hodges heard stories of horrible crimes such as murder and child abuse. He saw one such instance firsthand — when a patient killed a nurse and hid her body underneath a bunk, Hodges was asked to photograph the deceased for evidence. He quit the job shortly thereafter, as these atrocious acts offended his righteous sensibilities. As such, these stories of real-world events became the subject of much of Hodges' artwork.

Depicting these terrible tragedies served as a form of activism. Hodges believed that painting mirrored the world, and in his way of doing it, showing these dark scenes would raise awareness of issues such as child abuse and corporal punishment while causing viewers to ask, "Is this who we really are?" Whether caused by great beauty of the figure or great ugliness of the circumstance, Hodges' pieces inspired introspection.

Of course, not all of Hodges' artwork carried a larger message. Some of it was simply centered around his indulgences such as cigarette boxes and baseball games. He occasionally painted scenes inspired by Port Arthur — he and Linda eventually moved back to his hometown, where he briefly worked as a courtroom sketch artist before quitting to paint full-time.

Around 1990, Hodges found himself in the midst of two major life changes which would come to define him. He returned to a career in higher education as Associate Professor of Art at his alma mater, Lamar University. Hodges taught there for 16 years and instructed a generation of students, several of whom went on to teach at Lamar themselves. He also led art therapy classes at local mental health treatment facilities as he immersed himself in the human condition.

Hodges also met his second wife, Lisette, circa 1990 at the Beaumont Art Studio when she modeled for a life drawing class. The two were cordial at first, but a bond quickly grew between the pair. As Hodges' widow put it, she and Steve left their previous marriages for each other with nearly nothing to their names.





The two moved into a large house off Proctor Street in Port Arthur, where they lived for the entirety of their 20-year relationship. After ten years together, a then-60-year-old Steve decided they needed to get married so Lisette would be taken care of if he passed away. They were wed in a ceremony at the Buddhist temple on April Fools Day.

Hodges didn't go out much aside from work, thus, his studio became a place of refuge. He painted constantly and found himself most at home amidst the orderly chaos of brushes, paints, coffee cups and cigarettes.

When he'd run out of canvases or wood to paint on, he'd grab a finished work and lay down a fresh coat over the old — just like their creator, even his paintings contained layers of multitudes.

Around 2005, Hodges fell seriously ill and received a lung cancer diagnosis. He underwent a brutal treatment regimen and seemed to be recovering afterwards, though he retired

from his position at Lamar in 2006. Lisette said that for a time, they believed the cancer had mostly receded.

However, Hodges' condition worsened again in 2010. This time around, he requested to forgo treatment and let it be.

Despite rapidly deteriorating health, he continued his craft until the very end. The day he died, Hodges requested a notebook and pencil to sketch with. His final creation was only a single mark on paper, but it was a drawing nonetheless.

Hodges passed away peacefully in his Proctor Street home at the age of 70 shortly thereafter.

In a letter opened following his death, the late artist wished for his artwork to be shared with the world in hope that it would be appreciated rather than collect dust in an old studio. While Hodges may be gone, his legacy lives on through the many lives he touched, students he taught and scores of paintings hanging on walls across the region — each bearing the signature of Port Arthur's most creative son.