

## Future Star

*A young local artist with a tragic past has the local art world buzzing.*

By Jay Ahuja

ON A GORGEOUS THURSDAY EVENING IN MARCH,



NoDa's Center of the Earth Gallery is abuzz with a handsome crowd of GenXers and middle-age suburbanites. It's opening night of the lauded contemporary art gallery's newest show, and patrons have come out in force to sip wine, nosh on a savory seafood spread in the north gallery, and marvel at a dozen poster-size acrylic paintings and three smaller painted ceramic tiles adorning the main gallery's brightly lit walls.

By the end of the night, nearly half the paintings by Duy Huynh (pronounced Yee Wun) have sold, a good number for any local gallery opening, an excellent figure for a new artist in his first gallery show, and an astounding among for a local artist. By the following Thursday, all but two of the pieces which ranged from \$1,200 to \$3,600, had been purchased. "It's not uncommon for an artist to sell out a show here in the first month," gallery co-owner Ruth Ava Lyons says, "but to practically sell out within a week is extraordinary."

It's 11:30 a.m., and the lunchtime rush at Lola's is just beginning. Located at the corner of Tryon and Eighth in Transamerica Square, Lola's is popular for its cafeteria-style Southern food. As a diverse crowd of office workers lines up for fried chicken, green beans, and cornbread, few

notice the large, dreamy paintings on the wall. Those who do, pause, take a moment out of their too-short lunch break to reflect on Duy Huynh's art. "People ask me about Duy's work every day," says Lola's co-owner Bruce Stewart. "We give out more of his business cards than our own. His work provokes thought and transforms our place into something nicer."

Respected art gallery. Downtown restaurant. Stage of a rap concert (more on that later). Duy Huynh's art is likely to show up just about anywhere. His subtly hued paintings possess dreamlike qualities that seem to appeal to a broad array of people. Some of his works are overtly narrative, with a sense of humor. Others are more oblique and open to interpretation. "I've been told that my work appeals to people not just visually, but on an emotional level," Huynh says. What I really want people to see in my work is not necessarily what I'm trying to say, but to look at it and question themselves. "What do I see and why do I like it?"

Huynh acknowledges influences of graffiti, comics, hip-hop music, and Asian culture. There is one common thread throughout Huynh's work: talent. That's what sets him apart. That's what gives him promise.

The most famous artist with Charlotte ties is Romare Bearden. Beyond that, the Queen City doesn't offer much of a legacy. Only twenty-six, the Vietnamese-born and Charlotte-educated Duy Huynh could change that, and soon.

Duy Huynh was six years old when his family left Vietnam. The war had finally ground to a halt, the country was a mess. Huynh's parents were determined to give him a future, and they wanted that future to be in America. "They just wanted to get out of the country any way they could," he remembers. "It took several attempts. We finally made it on the third try."

Well they made it if you can call being stuck in a boat in the South China Sea with two dozen fellow refugees making it. Stranded at sea, they even encountered pirates. Fishermen taking advantage of all the refugees leaving Vietnam, the men boarded their boat and offered to tow them to safety in exchange for their possessions. Desperate, Huynh's family gave up their things. The pirates fed them but left them adrift at the mercy of the elements. Some time later, the navy rescued them. At least Huynh thinks it was the U.S. Navy; he just remembers it being a big boat. After a grueling month in a Philippine refuge camp, Huynh and his family were finally brought to the United States through the sponsorship of a Buddhist temple in Pomona, California.

In Pomona in the second grade, Huynh was having a hard time fitting in. He didn't speak English very well, and there were no other Vietnamese kids in his class. Eager for acceptance, he reached out the only way he could, by putting pencil to paper. He started bringing his drawings of G.I. Joe and Superman into class. "My classmates really loved them, so I was able to make friends that way," he says, "Kids would ask me to draw stuff for them and I loved the attention."

Instead of the class clown, Huynh became the class artist. "What they didn't know," he says, "was that I actually traced them from coloring books. I didn't really know how to draw, but was kind of forced to learn from that point on."

Huynh and his family moved to Charlotte just before his senior year of high school.

After graduating from West Charlotte, he enrolled at UNC-Charlotte in pursuit of a degree in painting and illustration. His favorite college instructor, Frances Hawthorne, remembers him well and is following his career. "He was an incredible student. Classes were always better with him in them," she says. "Painting can be intimidating. Having seen so many kids try, it was obvious that he had a real affinity for it."

"I hope Duy becomes the most important artist in the nation because he deserves it. He's the kind of person I would hope every successfully artist would be. Not only is he very talented, he has an incredible spirit."

During his senior year, with the help of radio promotions man Daniel Thomas, Huynh went hip-hop, hooking up with an outfit called the SoBe Adrenaline Tour. On the twenty-five city tour, Huynh painted live on stage while a hip-hop band, called the X-ecutioners, performed around him. For Huynh, art is not a solitary pursuit. It is how he lives.

"It was an experience that I wanted to have," he says of painting with The X-ecutioners. "It was just amazing to be on stage in some of those places like the Fillmore in San Francisco, where you see all the posters of the people who played there."

Shortly after college, Huynh found himself back on stage. A local contemporary performance art company called Moving Poets was doing a dance piece called Contact, based on a text by Oscar Wilde. The performance required Huynh to create a work in about twenty minutes, in front of an audience and surrounded by dancers in motion. My Loan

Dinh, the creative design director of Moving Poets, recruited Huynh for the piece. "He did incredibly well under pressure, creating some terrific paintings," Dinh says. Audience members were very moved and some actually wanted to buy the paintings. He's been a part of the Poets ever since."

Her name was Sara Gaffney, and she was his muse. She was also his girlfriend, and he was there when she was killed.

On October 13, 2000, Huynh was behind the wheel of his Honda. Gaffney was in the passenger seat. As he turned on to Central Avenue, just blocks from Gaffney's home, a Charlotte-Mecklenburg police cruiser, reported to be traveling at sixty-eight miles per hour without its siren or blue lights, struck Gaffney's side of the car, killing her. Huynh suffered minor injuries. Officer Scott Darby later pleaded guilty to misdemeanor death by vehicle.

Somewhat soft-spoken by nature, Huynh is still uncomfortable speaking about Gaffney, who worked for Moving Poets. Instead, he expresses himself on canvas.

"The first pieces I did on tile were for her. Those will never be sold. She was definitely a muse. A lot of the work I do even today is inspired by her... She helped me take my work more seriously without taking myself too seriously."



After the accident, Huynh was despondent. Another local artist named T.J. Reddy helped him remember who he was.

"He told me to keep doing my work no matter what," Huynh says. "He made me rethink things."

Reddy explains. "He had just lost his girlfriend to an accident, so he needed something positive in his life to put him on track. Duy will be one of the great ones. I believe he's someone who had a life spared so that he can show how talented he is to a much broader audience."

When you meet Duy Huynh, you can't help but notice his intelligence and his modesty, but spend some time with him and certain eagerness will emerge. He is by no means a self-promoter, but he wants people to see his work. He has received some criticism for showing his art in such pedestrian venues as coffee shops and lunch joints, but for Huynh, inspired by graffiti, it feels natural.

"There are certain pieces I wish I could still have," he says, "but the fact that somebody connects with it somehow makes it easier to part with. If it wasn't up in a coffee shop or restaurant it would be collecting dust in my house and nobody else would see it."

Of course, that's how an artist can get discovered. It's happening to Huynh. A friend of his was working in an Atlanta restaurant that shows artwork and suggested he display his paintings there. Somebody saw his work and recommended it to a local gallery owner, who liked it, tracked him down, and offered him a contract. Huynh's show at the gallery Aliya in Atlanta starts on May 15.

Huynh's considerable talent is what will make him a star, but he's had help getting to this point. And he's quick to acknowledge it. "Everything that's happened is because of somebody else," he says. One of those people is Ruth Ava Lyons, of Center of the Earth Gallery.

She lights up when asked about Huynh's potential. "He has all the signs of a rising star. Duy is young, he has enthusiasm, he's likeable, he's just starting to pursue his objectives of being represented by dealers outside of Charlotte, he has a business acumen that artists often lack, and a wide variety of admiration from the public. The interest in his work is nearly universal. It seems to appeal to everyone from young people to patrons whose tastes in art are generally more conservative, and I can't tell you how many other artists are buying his work."

As Huynh was preparing to graduate from UNC-Charlotte, Frances Hawthorne told Huynh he might have to move to a bigger city to achieve his goals as an artist. Huynh was certain he could succeed right here in Charlotte. Since then, Hawthorne admits, "I had to tell him that I was pleased to be so wrong."



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