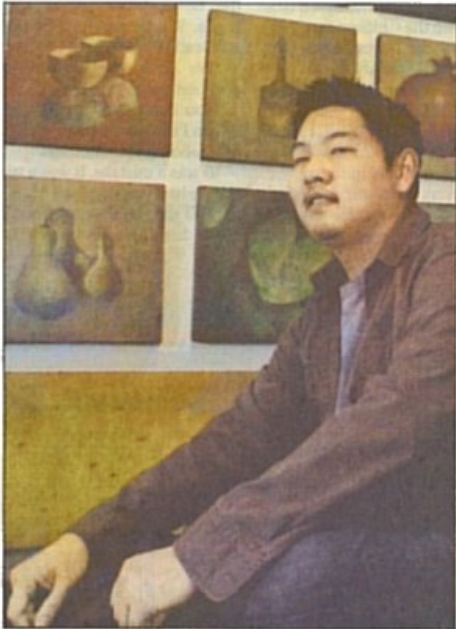


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Duy Huynh's Solo Exhibit

From ghetto to gallery



T. ORTEGA GARNES - STAFF PHOTO

Painter who's seen much wants others to see, too

By Richard Marschall – Staff Writer

Duy Huynh's feeling older. Not old, mind you. That would be too much for a 29-year-old, although he's had experiences that could pile on the years – an encounter with high-seas pirates when his family fled Vietnam, for one.

No, this feeling has less to do with the calendar and more with a transition in his life as an artist. Duy Huynh (pronounced Yee Win) once felt drawn to clubs and bars and was happy to put his art there. Last year, he went on tour with the rock group Linkin Park, and felt the rush of painting in a kind of sonic cocoon.

Now, he feels the pull of his studio, relishes time in the solitary embrace of the painter's familiar partner: the easel.

"The more time I spend in the studio, the more time I have to focus on myself and grow as a person," he says.

From that exploration comes the paintings filled with dreamlike imagery gaining Huynh a growing reputation. Several will be at the Center of the Earth Gallery Friday. It's the opening of his second solo exhibit at the NoDa space, helping realize a dream he never thought would become reality: making it on his art alone. "I wake up every morning so grateful to be able to do this," he says.

Searching

Flying birds, floating figures and soft-edged landscapes fill his pictures, a magic realism that implies a narrative without disclosing the whole story.

"He has this kind of dreamy poetic kind of quality," says gallery owner Paul Sires. "It bridges a lot of territory."

That territory includes a big chunk of geography and psychological distance as well. "Displacement", says Huynh, describes the feeling in much of his work, "the search for a home, a feeling of something within".

Cookies and milk

The first and biggest change came in 1981 when Huynh was 6 years old. His family left their village in what had been South Vietnam. Like other boat people, they encountered pirates on the sea.

Giving them food but taking their valuables, the pirates left them stranded. Rescue came from the U.S. Navy.

At a refugee camp in Thailand, Duy got up at 4 a.m. for cookies and milk – or he didn't get any.

A Buddhist temple in Pomona brought him, his brother and sister and parents to that California city and another rude shock. He lived in the ghetto, found himself in fights after school. Comics and hip-hop music provided a refuge. "I was a poor kid so I could relate to a lot of the lyrics."

Huynh also loved to draw and that pull toward art provided another rescue for a high-school student who liked to skip school: Mrs. Prince.

In her art class, she encouraged his first painting project, pictures of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

What do you see?

The art impulse truly flowered after the next big jump, one he made reluctantly. Wanting to leave California, his family sent him ahead in 1993 to a city where they had relatives: Charlotte. An art class at West Charlotte High made his eyes pop.

The art class in Pomona was overcrowded, the students not serious. In Charlotte, kids were working on their portfolios, getting ready for college. "It set my head straight," he says.

After graduating from UNC Charlotte, Huynh had one more transition to make – and a tragedy to survive.

He knew he did not want to be in the 9-to-5 world but felt he had to try. After a few years with a graphics firm, he struck out on his own three years ago.

He's represented by a gallery in Atlanta as well as Charlotte, unusual for a young artist.

Tragedy came in October 2000 when a speeding police car struck Huynh's Honda, killing girlfriend Sarah Gaffney.

Huynh says she's still part of his work.

"She was my muse, my inspiration," he says, "Even after her passing, she's still with us."

All of this – the hip-hop, the comics, the moves, the culture shock, the pain of losing one you love – feed Huynh's paintings, but not in any direct, literal way. He's too good an artist for that.

He doesn't want to impose meaning or even interpretations on viewers. He hates the idea that someone might spend five seconds before a canvas and move on. He wants to draw them in, let them add their own stories.

"I don't want them to ask, 'What is he trying to say?' but 'What do I feel? What do I see?'"



▲ "Invitation to Optimism"

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