



Worth The Gamble

Duy Huynh takes us to new worlds

BY SCOTT LUCAS

Duy Huynh has a gift. He's long had this gift, but has, in the past, perhaps shared it too abundantly, spread it too thinly over Charlotte. His murals and paintings, on walls and on canvas, have graced bars, cafes, lounges, friends' houses and hole-in-the-wall galleries. But Duy has consolidated and moved uptown. Kind of.

Duy Huynh (pronounced YEE WEN) is now showing his exceptional paintings at Center of the Earth Gallery in NoDa through April 24. Center of the Earth is center of the universe in the North Davidson area, NoDa, this city's oldest fringe art community and newest real estate spike. NoDa has only recently been stricken with the pox of civility, and is blessed with a newfound acceptance by Charlotte's button-down boys. The developers and real estate agents have descended in force. This can either breathe new life, or a slow gentrified death, into a once ragged community, just as a legitimate gallery affiliation can be the ginseng, or the hemlock, for a homegrown, bona fide talent like Huynh.

Duy Huynh is special. His paintings are internal and emotive, which is not unusual, but he's also a genuinely talented painter, which *is* unusual. His paintings are imbued with a seldom seen charismatic quality, a quality that can't be gained through good reviews, a great gallery, or boatloads of hype. It's the appeal that is expressed by the many who come to see the show and ask about the artist and buy the work. Except for a few paintings, the show was sold out on opening night. That's extremely rare in Charlotte.

All artists create new worlds, alternate worlds, attached, in varying degrees, to our shared reality. The artists' worlds are literal, symbolic, allegorical, historical, fantastical and occasionally hysterical. They are shallow or deep, riveting or revolting, lame, tame and wild. Some create new worlds we enjoy staring into, but there are precious few who can lure us in to stay. Very good artists create a world that pricks deep enough to draw us inside the door and keep us for an extended visit. This artist does that. Duy makes strange, forbidding and forlorn places seductive; he paints haunted houses homey enough make our own.

"Origamic Dreams" is a low luster green sky pushing down on a dark blue/green river. Floating on the low waterline is a torpedo gondola with a silhouetted figure standing astern, a push pole in hand. Ahead of him, a dimly glowing lantern dangles suspended on the bow. Behind and around the man is a faint pulse of light that accentuates the lonesomeness of the man and the river. Above the lone boater, the dark sky is pierced by eight origami seagulls. The gulls fly with wings spread wide or pushing down, in random formation, apparently directionless. The birds are folded paper, constructs from a gentle hand, apparitions. The white birds interrupt a dark and silent world, offering illumination but no identifiable direction for the gondolier.

Huynh employs old-fashioned "painterliness," a mastery of material use crucial -- and often ignored -- to the practice of canvas painting. The artist's message, whatever it is, is best received when the artist's use of the paint media is good enough to avoid drawing attention to itself. Like any good artist -- musician, storyteller, poet -- Huynh wraps you into his world seamlessly. His techniques -- his use of color, texture, light and dark, and perspective -- are invisibly masterful. He reels us in; he uses paint like Cormac McCarthy uses words.

Duh Huynh likes women. One woman rides on a jester's back, another stands alone in a red forest lit by fireflies, another plays violin perched on a branch in a yellow sky. Winged women float across the twilight sleeping, and one woman walks on water. Many of these paintings of women are portraits of willing aloneness, contemplative and attentive states of mind borne from an untold story. Looking at these paintings is like waiting for a fable to be told.

"Home" is a two-panel painting of a flaccid faced, expressionless man, eyes shadowed by the brim of his bowler, his face pocked, pale and unreadable. A woman sits in a high-backed chair on the man's hat, staring into a fishbowl she holds in one hand. A dog shares the hat with the woman and bays at the crescent moon overhead. The assembly of characters offers little hope for translation. It is as surreal as Duy Huynh gets. Like Rene Magritte's assemblages, which imply reasonableness but deliver vertigo, the painting at worst is only inoffensively inscrutable. At best, like Magritte, Duchamp and sometimes Dali, Huynh's painting explores man's curious existential state of being, simultaneously hapless, comic, tragic and profound.

This artist risks falling into the trap of the self-consciously forlorn artist, the image best illustrated by the famous painting of a man holding a human skull in his hand, peering into the black sockets, contemplating his own death, or death generally. Mortality is a bitch, but dwelling on mortality, and her sober sisters -- abandonment, directionlessness and isolation from God -- is a nasty trap for any potentially self-absorbed artist. I trust Huynh's themes will grow and expand and encompass alternative states of mind. God forbid he tarry long in a Blue Period.

Huynh's single best painting here is less alluring and comforting than the others; it's also the most expensive and one of the few yet to be sold. "Blanket" strays from the artist's usual exploration of the isolated figure plugged into a strange -- either hospitable or forbidding -- environment. He doesn't have the moody/misty/melancholy thing going on here. "Blanket" is divided into about 25 low luster squares, mostly dirt brown, earth red and pale lime green, all with the dull glow of a firefly in fog. Painted in typeset font across the canvas is: "the world is kind of cold and the rhythm's my blanket." The words ride above the neck of the sound horn on an old Victrola record player. Other images dot the surface of the canvas: clocks, a crown, an hourglass, a rocket and a hummingbird. Old still photographs display in sequence a naked woman climbing under a blanket. A primary lesson from an old text explaining three-dimensional perspective is pasted to the canvas. Playing card symbols -- club, spade and heart -- are painted in the luminous squares.

This is Huynh's only painting in which the content keeps up with the surface treatment and moody atmospherics. "Blanket" delivers more clues, a literalness more viable and interesting than what we get from the lone figures elsewhere on the walls. This painting is less romantically appealing, more troublesome and challenging. Where his other paintings woo, this one taunts.

It will take a leap of faith to take this painting home, as it would appear to take a leap of faith to gamble on this graffiti and cartoon-inspired artist three years ago. A buyer will have to be as bold as the artist is talented, and must gamble Huynh will himself keep the faith and grow, willing and wide-eyed, into the future. There are worse bets.

Duy Huynh's paintings are on exhibit through April 24 at Center of the Earth Gallery, 3204 North Davidson Street. For more information, call 704-375-5756 or visit www.centeroftheearth.com