

Two shows demonstrate the power of figurative painting

By BAYNARD WOODS
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Surreal Selves

At the BMA through June 9

Harry

by Tony Shore

at MICA's Pinkard Gallery through March 17

Harry

is on display at the Pinkard Gallery in the Bunting Center at MICA through March 17.

The show brings together dozens of portraits of Shore's father (Harry), done over a period of decades, almost all on black velvet. When we think about velvet paintings, we immediately think "kitsch," and Kerr Houston succumbs to this word in the show's program, writing "kitschy, no doubt, they are also self-consciously kitschy: they abstract kitsch, even as they embrace it."

Visually, however, there is nothing at all kitschy in these paintings. Instead, the velvet seems to provide Shore with the perfect vehicle to play with poorly lit bodies engulfed by overwhelming darkness. Harry stands with a friend between two cars—one with the hood up, the other's headlamps providing illumination—as he lights a cigarette in "Alternator"; he hovers with a group out in a yard under a floodlight in "Booper's Yard."

The depth of darkness conveys something of the quality of Velazquez, El Greco, and Caravaggio (whom Houston also cites). There is also a depth of humanity that we see in these painters—the details of his father's life become literally iconic when set against this darkness, showing us the infinite power, and strangeness, in the mundane.