THE BALTIMORE SUN

Velvet Touch

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THE BALTIMORE SUN

AUGUST 6, 2000

On South Stricker Street, where outsiders are unwelcome unless they have drugs or money to share, Tony Shore has neither.

He pulls up in his teal Ford Escort and, like a traveling street vendor, pulls a few unframed paintings from the trunk and props them against the car.

His casually hip clothes and Yale sticker in the car window go little noticed by the people who spend every sweltering afternoon on these streets like it's their l iving room. They have known him all 28 years of his life, since before his clothes were cool, before he could hold a paint brush.

Swirling around him is the familiar Southwest Baltimore neighborhood where huffing glue is no more uncommon than playing ball, where many know what the inside of a jail cell looks like and where -- in a pinch -- certain bartenders double as dentists.

In this insular enclave right next to Pigtown, dubbed Lumberyard by residents, Tony Shore has it all down -- every deep wrinkle in their brows, every bulging belly, every shoeless foot.

All on black velvet.

Tony leans against his Escort, knowing the family will come by, fussing over him and his dark, moody paintings. Wendell Shore is first.

"It looks just like me!" Wendell, Tony's uncle and toughest critic, beams. He studies the painting of him in his garden. "You got more detail. They're really coming along."

Then he pulls Tony aside and whispers: "How much does something like this go for?"

"About two grand."

Wendell gasps.

"Well, if he wants me to help make him a millionaire, I'll help make him a millionaire!" he bellows with a huge, gap-toothed smile.

Tony Shore is not a millionaire -- far from it -- but he has caught the eye of the New York art crowd with paintings that raise the kitsch of acrylic on velvet to high art. His most recent showopened last week at the Gomez Gallery on Clipper Mill Road and runs through Aug. 27.

There are no rhinestone-on-velvet Elvises. No bullfights. No panthers. Just careful interpretations of urban realities, most done on a huge scale -- some the size of storefront windows -- true to the representational style he fine-tuned at Yale.

There's Wendell in his garden. Nellie on her stoop. The boys blowing reefer. A long-haired prostitute in sweats walking Washington Boulevard.

Tony grew up among them, the hell-raisers who have defined the corner for 60 years. He drank 40-ounce beers with them, played neighborhood pranks with them, hustled for a buck with them.

He was the only one of the clan who escaped, who made it to the Ivy League, who apprenticed in Manhattan.

"I've always known I'd be back."

Picture of community

A few miles away, in a Highlandtown studio in the former Crown Cork and Seal factory, enormous swaths of back velvet cover the walls. Walking into Tony Shore's studio is l ike cruising down South Stricker.

There's Uncle Wendell and Cousin Deakan. Dad in a folding chair. A neighborhood kid huffing glue.

"Right now, if we jumped in the car and went to Stricker and McHenry, I can guarantee one or all of these pictures would be happening," Tony says, pointing around the room. "It never changes."

Wearing a fisherman's hat, a Budweiser T-shirt and a pair of baggy green shorts, he sits in front of a blank piece of velvet thumb-tacked to the wall.

His shoulders are slouched, there's a paintbrush in his right hand; in his left, a photograph of Aunt Linda sitting on the stoop with a younger woman and two kids.

In his mind, he's back on the street: Barefoot children in dirty T-shirts stream in and out of narrow rowhouses, oversized women with fleshy arms perch on the front stoops, men stand idly on corners.

"I'd like to get that foot in," he says, pointing to the bottom of the snapshot.
"It's a nice foot."

As he talks about Bruce Springsteen and God, and tells Shore family stories, he dabs the brush at the velvet and an outline of Aunt Linda's large frame appears.

Still talking, he steps back to assess his work, then scoots closer and continues. The painting will become "Stoop Sitters," his newest one on display at the Gomez Gallery.

When he applied to Yale's School of Art, the admissions board told him he'd have to stop painting on velvet.

He just looked at them and nodded.

"I figured it would be harder for me to get in than for them to kick me out."

Shots of home

Tony paints from photographs he shoots when he hangs out "in town," the family term for Stricker and McHenry streets.

When he's there, he blends in; you'd never guess he has so much skill, that his head is filled with all that Ivy League knowledge. But you might get a clue when he pulls out his old Nikon and starts shooting, methodically documenting his people.

Aunt Nellie Everly, 65, sitting on her front stoop with Douglas, the mostly mute homeless man. Click. Aunt Nellie wears a blue nightgown and sits in her usual pose, arms and legs crossed in front of her. Douglas wears his signature yellow raincoat and a captain's hat. Click.

That scene is one of Tony's new paintings called "1422 McHenry" -- the house where Tony's father and his seven brothers and sisters grew up.

Tony's grandfather, Paul Steber Shore, was a welder who moved to Baltimore in 1939 from the hills of Mount Union, Pa. His wife, Eba Mary Florence Price Shore, saved $200 worth of nickels in a cigar box for a down payment on the McHenry Street rowhouse, which the family bought for $1,650 in 1945.

Paul and Eba were the first of five generations of Baltimore Shores, now numbering about 200. The majority still live in the Lumberyard (newer folk call the area New Southwest).

Most of the Shores are self-employed welders, house rehabilitators or produce sellers. Some find daily work in the neighborhood at nearby Kaufman Funeral Home. Few hold steady jobs. Many are on disability.

"They'll do anything to keep themselves survivin'," Wendell says.

There are a few hundred more Shores in the city if you count distant relatives. Tony would need mountains of velvet to paint them all.

"When I was little I always felt safe because if I got into any trouble I could run around the corner, and a cousin would be there," Tony says. "The family is self-contained in our own little biosphere."

Harry and Sue Shore, Tony's parents, moved a short distance from Stricker Street before Tony was born. Morrell Park is a nicer, safer neighborhood, Tony says, but still a "suburb" of Pigtown, one of Baltimore's poorest areas.

There wasn't as much action in Morrell Park, so his mother bought a police scanner to keep up with the old neighborhood. His father, a shipping clerk for Calvert Distillery for 31 years, would bring him in town a few times a week to hang out with the family.

Tony didn't always fit in. He dyed his hair white and grew a rat tail. (His father wouldn't let him get an earring, though. Too feminine.) And when he opened his school books he wanted to draw pictures instead of read the words.

No one in the family was surprised when he went away. And no one was surprised when he came back in town -- where many of the homes are decorated with velvet paintings, some of them his.

Opening a door

Tony painted Uncle Wendell's portrait for his 50th birthday. It's on a wall of Wendell's home, covered with plastic for safekeeping.

Wendell, sharp-tongued and hot-tempered, is one of Tony's favorite people to paint. He's the only openly gay Shore. Some nieces and nephews call him Aunt Wendell. A few call him Aunt Wendy.

You can usually find him hanging out in front of his Stricker Street rowhouse. He keeps track of Shore history and will tell you anything you want to know. Just ask him.

"Some guy used to run around here saying he was the mayor of the block," says Wendell, agitated just retelling the story. "I told him, you may be mayor, but I'm the queen of this block, and ain't nobody going to chase me off my throne."

Tony always knew Wendell was gay and has visions of him dancing in drag at New Year's Eve parties. But Wendell was always accepted by the family, and Tony believes that helped open the door for his art.

"Wendell kind of made it possible for people like me to be the way I am, to show my emotion around my family," Tony says. "He's sensitive, but he can be as brash as anyone."

While Wendell's sensitivity may have made him more vulnerable to teasing as a kid, school was never easy for any of the Shores. Other kids would make fun of them because they sometimes had holes in their clothes.

But not Tony. His parents made sure he had fresh clothes and art supplies. To earn extra money for Christmas pres-ents, his mother crocheted pillows and sent Tony to local bars to sell her work.

When it was time for their son to attend middle school, Harry and Sue spent what they had to send him to a Roman Catholic parochial school, St. Clement in Lansdowne, because a lot of the local kids were dropping out of the neighborhood middle school.

He went to high school at Baltimore School for the Arts, then got a scholarship to the Maryland Institute College of Art. It was there, in the late 1980s and early '90s, that he began to understand how his art intertwined with his family.

Then he spent two years at Yale refining his skills.

"Not many people from that situation end up in college," he admits. "Some of my family doesn't realize what Yale is. They think I went to Harvard."

Before he left for New Haven, he painted scenes on the screens on his mother's house.

"I keep the Yale sticker on my car so the family knows I was away at college, not in jail."

Sticking to his principles

As a student at the Maryland Institute, he painted on black paper, mostly doing cartoon images of serious issues like violence and race. One painting was of a scene he saw on the street: two white kids beating a black kid with a baseball bat. Encouraged by a professor, he started painting more realistically. Then he started painting what he knew best: family.

"I told him, draw and paint what you know," says Rex Stevens, an 18-year veteran professor at the Maryland Institute. "And he found it, he really did."

Then they came up with the velvet idea.

"We thought the white surface was too formal," Stevens says. "We wondered whether he could really make the paintings go beyond the surface of black velvet. Tony can, but I don't know if many people can pull it off."

At Yale, his style was put to the test. David Pease, the art school's retired dean, says Tony wasn't exactly "Old Blue," but he was too good to turn away.

"We were all in a state of shock when we realized the Yale School of Art admitted a student who paints on black velvet. ... It's so unusual in the context of what you might call a serious institution," says Pease. "The interesting thing is that he kept doing it. He didn't become gentrified by the academic process at Yale."

During critiques of his work at Yale, professors couldn't give him technical pointers because they'd never studied velvet or painted on it. They would ask when he was going to stop.

"But then they'd see my next one and say it was my best one yet," says Tony.

He experimented with other surfaces, painting on screens, fake fur and Astroturf. (One self-portrait on Astroturf sold for $800.) But it wasn't the same.

"I thought, 'Am I just doing this for kitsch value?' " he says. "I realized I needed a reason to continue painting on velvet."

He finally came up with an answer: It felt right.

"The material is low-brow, and I wanted to bring it to a higher art form," Tony says. "I use it as a way to jump into class issues."

After graduating from Yale with a master's degree in painting, he moved to New York to work for the well-known abstract painter David Reed. Reed had never seen an artist quite like Tony.

"One of the things I admire about him is his large and aggressive paintings," Reed says. "They're not an easy painting to put over the sofa."

He also admires Tony's dedication to his home turf.

"Baltimore is really lucky to have him," Reed says. "It isn't often an American city gets a painter that's painting about that place and doing it as well as Tony is."

Changing times

Tony came back to the neighborhood in February after being away for about five years. He had grown quite a bit; the neighborhood hadn't.

"I am able to go back in the community with the eye of an anthropologist," he says. "My cousins possess street smarts I'll probably never have. They have qualities that are often more valuable than those I got at Yale."

In one of Tony's paintings, Uncle Wendell is in the midst of his favorite pastime: tending his street-side garden. The garden overflows with flowers, tomatoes, cucumbers, old tires and pink plastic flamingoes. Wendell started cultivating the land after the two rowhouses next to his were torn down by the city.

However, Tony says he never eats Wendell's veggies. "I'm a little worried about syringes and things that might fall in there," he says.

Like the rest of the family, Tony doesn't hesitate to speak his mind. If you're offended, that's your problem. And if you want to fight about it, you'd better know what you're getting yourself into.

"You say the name Shore and people think, 'They're rough characters,' " Wendell says. "A lot of us are like that because then people don't mess with us."

Tony's cousin, Deakan Koethe, says his five boys, ages 7 to 15, have seen bloody street fights between family members, prostitutes on the boulevard, people getting shot and junkies shooting up.

That, as well as changes in the neighborhood's racial makeup, prompted Koethe to move a few miles south of Stricker to Brooklyn about five years ago, he says.

"I just couldn't continue living on Stricker, being a racist," Koethe says.

The neighborhood was predominantly white until the 1970s, when black families started moving in. Now, racial tension is thick. Police say they regularly get calls from neighbors complaining that the Shores are using racial slurs.

"Some of them don't understand they're not living in the countryside in the 1950s," says a former beat cop, who is black and doesn't want to be identified. "They haven't figured out this is the year 2000. Even some of the little kids use racial slurs."

The officer says he got along with them just fine, but the Shores have had a strained relationship with law enforcement.

Harry Shore taught Tony never to trust police.

"We don't trust a police, a judge or a lawyer," Harry said. "Police lies to keep his job. Lawyer lies to get you off. And the judge has never been in the neighborhood, but still makes decisions about you."

"And," he continues, "anyone who makes over $500,000 a year did something illegal along the line."

Harry made sure his three boys stayed away from cops as much as possible. Tony remembers hearing this fatherly advice: "If you're going to steal something, make it good. Don't steal no stupid candy bars. Steal something you're willing to go to jail for."

A couple of Tony's cousins have gone to prison. One did three years after he was involved in a family brawl in which a neighborhood kid was beaten to death. Another cousin is locked up for violating his probation.

"Yes, the Shores have tempers," says Wendell. "We have a hot-tempered background: Italian, Native American, German, Dutch, Irish. That's why we have tempers, all them hot nationalities. "

Though more than 60 years have passed since the first Shore stepped foot in Baltimore, Harry says they still find themselves trying to adjust.

"We came out of the hills of ... Pennsylvania. We're country hicks who came here and took jobs," he says. "We kept the country, even though we live in the city.

"I've been called a hillbilly," he says.

A hillbilly right in the middle of one of the most violent, drug-infested cities in the nation? An artist's dream.

Tony sold one 8-foot-square painting of his father, mother and younger brother Rocky to a stockbroker in New York for $4,000 about a year ago.

"My family is going to be hanging out in the Hamptons."

Tony and a group of students just finished a Chesapeake Bay-themed mural across 14 walls at his former school, Morrell Park Elementary. And in September, he will teach an introduction to painting class at the Maryland Institute.

He's also just won a grant to establish a nonprofit youth art center in Southwest Baltimore. It's something he wishes had been available when he was growing up.

Some of Tony's work hangs in the Joppatowne home he shares with his new wife, Andrea. The two got married in Las Vegas in June when they were there for one of Tony's exhibits.

Andrea, a red-headed, green-eyed librarian for Baltimore County, knows she didn't marry into the Cleaver family.

"Indeed, they are colorful," she says. "Urban legends all unto themselves."

Tony says he won't stop painting his family anytime soon. If the scene on Stricker Street gets old, he'll go to Mount Union, where there's another batch of relatives to meet and photograph, and help him figure out why the fear of outsiders has kept the Shore family so isolated.

"I've been doing it for eight years, and I feel like I'm just tapping into it," he says. "There are so many subtle aspects to the culture."

The family embraces his work, especially because he does things like paint portraits of family members who pass away to sit next to the caskets.

His mother, Sue, is so proud of him she gets choked up when she talks about it. "When I see the paintings I'm so proud I want to cry. It's that sentimental to me."

When you're a Shore, you're proud of who you are and don't want to be anything else.

Even if you venture so far away from Stricker Street that you find yourself among ivy and tweed, and "ain't" isn't part of the vernacular.

"Being an artist is a greedy thing," Tony says. "So much is about promotion and selling yourself. My work is about the people I paint."

In the Lumberyard, Tony can take what he needs and leave the rest on the street. He can treat the lives of his subjects with dignity. He can tell them to trust him and mean it.

They're family.

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