

Picturing the dark side

By **Glenn McNatt**
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After seeing *Violence and Tranquility*, Tony Shore's unexpectedly dark vision of his hometown at C. Grimaldis Gallery, I couldn't help thinking the prize-winning Baltimore painter has been watching *The Wire*, HBO's award-winning dark drama about crime and corruption in Baltimore.

The Wire is classic American film noir for the small screen. Shore's unsparing images of gang warfare and violent crime bring the same moral ambivalence, alienation and gratuitous cruelty to the gallery scene.

There's something shocking about this subject matter, though perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that Shore has begun using such imagery recently.

His subjects, after all, are his own large, extended family in a distressed Southwest Baltimore neighborhood, and violent crime does happen there, especially when the economy is ailing, as it is now, and people begin to lose hope.

Yet when Shore, who last year won the coveted \$25,000 Sondheim Artscape Prize, first started showing his acrylic-on-black-velvet paintings nearly a decade ago, the novelty of his medium, which he had magically detached from its origins in kitsch, seemed almost as much the subject of his art as the people he depicted.

The people were his uncles and aunts, cousins and neighborhood chums, and though one recognized right away that many of them were struggling, Shore managed to leaven honesty with compassion for them as individuals when he painted them in luminous bubbles of illusionary space against the velvet's inky background.

In the new work, however, it's the group dynamic of the gang and the mob that rules. In one image, a man is dragged from his house by thugs who clearly intend him no good. In others, we see victims being stomped or pounded by assailants in the sickly glare of overhead street lights and automobile headlamps.

ANNA ZORINA GALLERY

These are the kinds of images you're more likely to see on *The Wire* - or in Goya's horrific etchings of Napoleon's war in Spain - than in the Dutch Old Master paintings of domestic interiors and still lifes that Shore took as pictorial inspiration for his earlier work.

As his mastery of the medium has matured, Shore's realism seems to have become more preoccupied with the pathology of deviant violence than with recording the quotidian details of working-class existence.

His most recent pictures don't even tell us whether his relatives are the victims or the perpetrators of the crimes he depicts and, in a sense, it doesn't matter because the images are really about the collective state of mind that licenses such brutality.

That state of mind is born of the same institutional failures - of public education, municipal governance, law enforcement and the media - that *The Wire* addresses with such shocking frankness.

It's an approach to social realism entirely appropriate to our times, one that doesn't mind making us feel uncomfortable with our prejudices and that, in fact, becomes more realistic precisely to the extent that it forces us to recognize how deeply we ourselves are implicated in those failures.

I think there was a tendency to play down this aspect of Shore's work when it first appeared. It was easier to talk about how he had rescued black velvet painting from kitsch or feel uplifted by his Pigtown-to-Yale career trajectory than grapple with the massive social crises of poverty, substance abuse and unemployment that lay just below the sleek surface of his art.

In a review of Shore's first Baltimore show, in 2000, I observed rather glibly that the people in Shore's paintings were "Roseanne types, except more dysfunctional and without health insurance."

I meant it as a joke, but that year there were 35 million Americans without access to decent health care. Today there are 47 million. There's nothing funny about those statistics.

Roseanne is off the air and soon *The Wire* will be, too. No wonder Shore now seems compelled to uncover raw truths he only hinted at earlier. He may feel like the last voice of conscience in a city of shattered dreams.

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