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ART

Velvet Revolution

Tony Shore Overthrows Convention With his Affectionate, Dignified Pigtown Scenes

by J. Bowers

Tony Shore: Hidden Truths | Tony Shore: Hidden Truths



Straight Bid: In "Late Night Ebay," Tony Shore renders a distinctly modern scene with homespun frankness.

It's all too easy to get wrapped up in Tony Shore's choice of material. The Southwest Baltimore-raised, Ivy League-educated painter has received plenty of props for creating realistic, grandly scaled works of art on black velvet, a medium typically reserved for tacky airbrushed declarations of love, prowling jungle cats, and garish, rhinestoned Elvis tributes.

Velvet produces a purer, cleaner black than paper can. Each individual fiber adds its own darkness to the overall effect; making colors pop—especially fluorescent ones. It's a great way to make the King's hair shine like patent leather—and, surprisingly, to create believable shadows, nigh-opaque silhouettes, and gritty, warts-and-all snapshots of humanity.

Tony Shore's acrylic-on-velvet images of life in his Pigtown/Lumberyard neighborhood effortlessly subvert his canvases' kitschy connotations. Black velvet's low-rent reputation is an excellent ironic foil for Shore's painstakingly detailed working-class roomscapes, where empty Pepsi cans and piles of auto parts fade into dark corners, and powerfully rendered, *real* figures drift, sit, and pose amid the gloom. You've seen these people sitting on rowhouse stoops or standing on street corners. Shore can invite you into their living rooms, kitchens, and greasy auto shops because he knows their neighborhood inside out—he left Pigtown to attend the Maryland Institute College of Art on full scholarship and completed his master's of fine arts at Yale University's School of Art. But years of formal art education didn't

dilute his obsession with his childhood stomping grounds, or black velvet, or the friends and family who still live on South Stricker and McHenry streets, more than willing to let Shore capture them in lovingly thorough detail.

Hidden Truths, Shore's first local solo exhibit since 2000, fills the C. Grimaldis Gallery with 22 of his most recent monumental paintings—a new batch of very Baltimorean work that finds him deepening his mastery of velvet's quirks, allowing the medium's rich blackness to augment the eerie, frozen-in-time feel that pervades many of his pieces.

Often, Shore's subjects gather without interacting—"10:30 PM" finds three men slouching in a checkerboard-floored kitchen, communicating only through the similarities in their hunched postures and the large patches of unsullied black that overlap to form their shadows. In this family, everyone is doing his own thing—the shirtless young man seated in the foreground is almost a silhouette, bent over food or homework, the wife-beater-clad teenager behind him focuses on his hands, barely visible against the velvet, and their beer-bellied elder scoops food out of a deli container, the waistband of his jeans taut beneath his swollen stomach. All is still, but only the refrigerator seems at ease, bright white and magnet-spackled in a corner of the room.

"Johnny's World" further explores Shore's passion for still life and personal objects--the assortment of brightly colored jars perched on the table, the rag dolls heaped within the fireplace, and the gray-black square of a silent TV screen (a recurring Shore motif) demand attention immediately, while Johnny himself curls around the right side of the canvas in wheelchair-bound profile, a languid, entreating expression on his shadowed face. Shore's use of black velvet is not limited to its obvious color advantage--"Aunt Nellie's Door" finds him exploiting paint's tendency to crust on the fabric, forming his most solid, deliberate lines. Aunt Nellie herself is painted in iridescent blue, her balled fist pressed against her chin as she gazes pensively through the slats of her front-door blind. Her sandaled toes seem almost three-dimensional, fading beneath the barest suggestion of a wooden chair, while the edge of her arm pops against the canvas, outlined with thin clotted lines of paint.

Many of Shore's works are highly dependent on light sources, for obvious reasons--globe lamps, sunlight, and other bright compositional elements dictate where the deepest shadows should be, and which sections of velvet should be left bare. Two pieces, "Lonestar" and "Sparklers," light their subjects with cheap convenience-store fireworks, to explosive effect. "Lonestar" depicts a boy wearing patchwork pants against an endless field of black, licking his lips as he clutches his sparkler, letting its yellow sparks popcorn toward the ground. Twilight-blue blotches, painted in the uppermost corners of the scene to suggest trees, give the image a subtle setting--however, the absence of any other scenery gives the work a sense of drama and immediacy. "Sparklers" features two lit fireworks, but their light is more subdued, and far less arresting.

Light plays an even more important role in "Late Night Ebay," where a pudgy, sedentary granny squats before a glowing computer screen, her thick glasses and rolls of T-shirted flesh cast in an eerie blue light, punctuated only by the neon orange smolder of her lit cigarette. It's a distinctly modern tableau, but Shore makes the image just as homey and realistic as "Steak and Onions," which shows a potbellied man frying sandwich steaks in an electric skillet, atop a table littered with plastic bread bags, a watering can, and other unassuming items.

In a lesser artist's hands, either of these images could be read as blue-collar parodies, but Shore's genuine appreciation of Southwest Baltimore's unique character always shines through, forcing his audiences to reconsider black velvet's cheese-ball reputation and recognize the iconic potential of barefoot children, trucker-hatted mechanics, and cellophane junk food wrappers. Shore's work is successful largely because it's so gosh-darned familiar, like looking out your screen door, and watching the city wander by.

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