Richard Sheehan, his paintings captured beauty of Boston's landscapes; 52

By Bryan Marquard

With the temperature in the single digits, Richard Sheehan stood on Winthrop Road in Dorchester next to his easel and canvas, capturing the beauty of Christmas trees and decorations.

On that freezing February afternoon in 1953 he wore unmatched gloves—a thick, one thin, for greater movement with his painting hand.

"It's not the quiet or pretty that interests me; it's the dramatic intensity of light and the change of scale from something huge to something tiny," Mr. Sheehan said that day. He added, "I've tried more conventionally picturesque, pastoral settings, but I never felt at home in them."

In the urban landscape of his boyhood neighborhood, he found inspiration. The original Boston Gas tank, the Southeast Expressway, and the three-decker houses all found their way into Mr. Sheehan's paintings, which infused with such light and energy that many thought he had filled his art near San Francisco Bay, rather than Dorchester Bay.

Mr. Sheehan died of a cerebral hemorrhage Aug. 8 in Bartlett, N.H., while on vacation with his family. He was 82 and had lived for many years in Cambridge, Mass., where he was as renowned for his pizza, which he had made from scratch as he was for his paintings that were on par with the collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum.

"He took really mundane, ordinary scenes and made them exciting," said Jenny Stone, an art consultant who exhibited his work in her San Francisco gallery. "He captured information about light and bridges and the world we live in through. The most commonplace sight became really magical for him."

"They had an inner-city warmth," his elder brother, Lester, said of the paintings. "He didn't paint the ocean, he painted the city. He lived the city, he loved Boston. It really became his trademark."

"I just saw things—he saw them," said Mr. Sheehan's wife, Laura Vietmann. "He was very honest, and that's in all areas."

Mr. Sheehan spent part of his childhood in Dorchester, then moved with his family to Hyde Park. His artistic talent emerged almost as soon as he could manage a pencil.

"I learned drawing spontaneously when I was 4. By the time he was 7, he could draw from memory a perfect picture of any cartoon character he had seen," said his brother, who lives in Milton. "He was known for his paintings, but Richard himself said that when he was teaching, he would tell his students, 'If you can't draw, you can't paint.' His charcoal drawings are just fabulous."

While attending high school at Boston Latin, Mr. Sheehan began taking a drawing course Saturday mornings at the Museum of Fine Arts.

"One day the teacher said, 'Who would want to go into this professionally?' We'd never thought of art as a job," he said in the 1983 interview with the Globe. "But I missed my hand, and I decided you should."

As gifted a guitarist as he was with art, many at the time thought he might pursue music. Mr. Sheehan had been lead guitarist for Manchild, a rock band formed in high school and studied on weekends at Berklee College of Music while he attended the Massachusetts College of Art.

"Music was his second passion, and his huge passion was the Beaux," his brother said. "From the day they arrived in the United States until the day Richard died, it was the Beatles. That's all you heard at his house."

The other member of Mr. Sheehan's band, Boston Latin classmate with whom he had remained close, served as pallbearers.

"We joked at his funeral that when he got to heaven, the first thing he would do is go look for John and George," his brother said.

After graduating from the Massachusetts College of Art with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, Mr. Sheehan went to Yale University, from which he received a master's in fine arts.

"He worked day and night, believing. He had a vision of what he wanted, and he was a very gentle person, with grace, humor," said Bernard Chaet, professor emeritus of art at Yale and, like Mr. Sheehan, a Dorchester native. "All of his classmates became teachers, but he didn't. He just wanted to paint. He was very happy to be home to take care of his family."

"He went to Yale and got his MFA, and then he couldn't wait to come right back to Dorchester," Stone said. "He rented an apartment and started painting."

A few years later, the Alpha Gallery in Boston discovered Mr. Sheehan and mounted his first solo show.

His work was part of the second show at the Jerome Staley Gallery after it opened in San Francisco in 1967. Patrons started buying his paintings before they made it onto the walls.

"The show sold out before it opened," she said. "We had people seeing or unwrapping these paintings by Richard and would say, 'What's this?'"

The appeal was Mr. Sheehan's approach. In his early years, he painted almost exclusively outdoors, capturing the same scene at different times of day, from different sides of a street, and in different seasons.

"The paintings that were done in winter were cold and gray, and the paintings that were done in summer — you could get a tan from the canvas," Stone said.

"In Richard Sheehan's hands, the reconstruction of the South End Expressway is an occasion for visual poetry," began one review by Christine Tenenbaum in the Globe. Mr. Sheehan had solo shows at galleries in Boston, Chicago, Houston, New York, and San Francisco.

His group shows included a 1998 exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts. And he taught and lectured across the country, from Harvard and the Rhode Island School of Design to the San Francisco Art Institute.

He was teaching at the Vitamin Studio School when his wife Vietmann worked at an artists' hand-making company. "I'm looking around and I see this guy with the silvery hair and he's tall and he's wearing blue jeans," she said. "I've got to meet him, I've just got to meet him, I just have to meet him, I just have to meet him."

They married and moved to Rhode Island. Vietmann worked as a pediatrician while Mr. Sheehan painted and stayed home with their two young sons.

"He really dedicated himself to them," she said.

Added to the community, Mr. Sheehan was the go-to pizza maker for pupils at Community School in Cumberland, the artist who painted a mural and who handled face-painting and makeup duties at school events.

He also was the moderator at First Baptist Church in Attleboro. "He was a very religious man," his wife said. "He wasn't preaching about it, he just lived it."

Two days before he died, Mr. Sheehan was in a car with his family in North Conway, N.H. "At a stop sign, he was looking up and there was a railroad trestle," Vietmann said.

She encouraged him to photograph the scene. He took several pictures, returned to the car, and said, "Ah, the last one—that's the one," she said. "It was a bright blue sky, sunlight on it. It wasn't the dark under the bridge, it was the brightness, the light. He was ready to do another bridge."

In addition to his wife and brother, Mr. Sheehan leaves a son, Patrick, and two granddaughters, Mary Louise Sheehan of Randolph, A service has been held.