

## Obituaries

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

By Bryan Marquard  
GLOBE STAFF

With the temperature in the single digits, Richard Sheehan stood on Victory Road in Dorchester next to his easel and canvas, capturing the beauty of bungalows and a highway overpass.

On that freezing February afternoon in 1983 he wore unmatched gloves — one thick, one thin, for greater movement with his painting hand.

"It's not the quaint or pretty that interests me; it's the dramatic interplay of masses, the change of scale from something huge to something tiny," Mr. Sheehan said that day. He added, "I've tried more conventionally attractive, 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 tanks, the Southeast Expressway, and the threadbare three-deckers all found their way into Mr. Sheehan's paintings, which he infused with such light and energy that many thought he plied his art near San Francisco Bay, rather than Dorchester Bay.

Mr. Sheehan died of a cerebral hemorrhage Aug. 9 in Bartlett, N.H., while on vacation with his family. He was 52 and had lived for many years in Cumberland, R.I., where he was as renowned for the pizzas he made from scratch as he was for the paintings that hang in collections from coast to coast.

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

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

"He just saw things — he saw them," said Mr. Sheehan's wife, Laura Viehmann. "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



RICHARD SHEEHAN

almost as soon as he could manage a pencil.

"He started drawing spontaneously when he 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?' Well, I'd never thought of art as a job," he said in the 1983 interview with the Globe. "But I raised my hand, and the decision stuck."

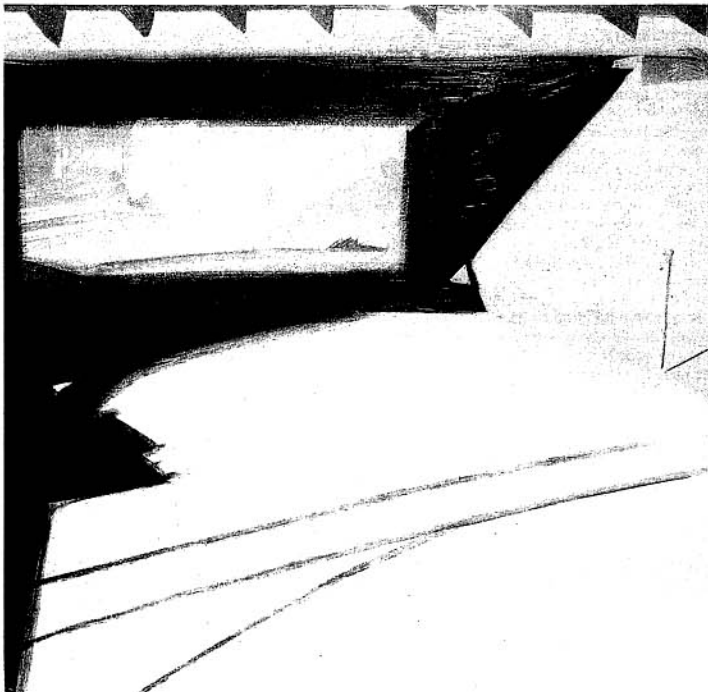
As gifted with a guitar as he was with art, many at the time thought he might pursue music. Mr. Sheehan was lead guitarist for Manchild, a rock band formed in high school, and studied on weekends at Berklee College of Music while he attended the Massachusetts College of Art.

"Music was his second passion, and his huge passion was the Beatles," 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 members of Mr. Sheehan's band, Boston Latin classmates 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.



Richard Sheehan re-created the texture of shadows and light in "Yellow Bridge, Blackstone."

"He worked day and night, believe me. 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 Jeremy Stone Gallery after it opened in San Francisco in 1982.

Patrons started buying his paintings before they made it onto the walls.

"The show sold out before it opened," she said. "People were seeing us unwrapping these paintings by Richard and would say, 'What's this?'"

Part of 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 Southeast Expressway is an occasion for visual poetry," began one review by Christine Temin in the Globe.

Mr. Sheehan had solo shows at galleries in Boston, Chicago, Houston, New York, and San Francisco.

His group shows included a 1996 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 Vermont Studio School when he met Viehmann at an artist's fund-raising party.

"So I'm looking around and I see this guy with the silvery hair and he's tall and he's wearing boots and I thought, 'I've got to meet him, I've just got to meet him,'" she said.

They married and moved to Rhode Island. Viehmann worked as a pediatrician while Mr. Shee-

han painted and stayed home with their two young sons.

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

And 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 make-up 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 light, he was looking up and there was a railroad trestle," Viehmann 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 two sons, Patrick and Andrew; and a sister, Mary Louise Sheehan of Randolph.

A service has been held.