

Man vs. measures of masculinity

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | May 19, 2010

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Celebrating the mundane

In the 1980s, Richard Sheehan was a thoughtful, exuberant painter of Boston, but the artist, who died at 52 in 2006, hasn't had a show here since 1991. He married, moved to Rhode Island, and became an involved dad. Most of the works in his solo show at Alpha Gallery date back to the 1980s; some stretch into this past decade.

Sheehan had an attraction to unnoticed places, such as highway overpasses. He painted them on the pivot point between representation and abstraction, carving out space with long, lush horizontal swipes of paint. "Grey Day, Neponset, '88" is made with terrific vigor, in broad strokes and with a sense of unstoppable motion. Sky, overpass, and what lies below are described in juicy stripes of blue, brown, black, and more. The center band is almost robin's egg blue, and there Sheehan dabbed a small window, a door, a gas tank, and a skeletal flight of stairs in the distance, delicately anchoring the scene with detail.

He was a high-keyed colorist. One untitled street scene from 2006 follows a plum-toned road up a hill under an aqua sky. A yellow house glows, as does a utility pole across the street. Little touches such as a bag of trash on the sidewalk and the chicken-scratch shadow of another pole at the bottom of the painting turn a scene that could be too idyllic into something more mundane that the sun, and this painter, have smiled upon.