

# Art Pimp

## Razor Blades and Candy

**R**on Wharton, creator of the two big murals on the walls of Seth's Chop Shop, likes to portray himself as an economic minimalist. ("I don't want any more than I need.") But there is a bit of the entrepreneur about him.

"Seth wanted some art work done," said Wharton, speaking of Seth Yates, owner of the hair salon in Ocean Beach. It was early, 7:00 a.m., shortly before Wharton had to leave for his part-time job at a deli in a Mission Bay fish-and-tackle shop. "I told him, 'I'll do these two large murals if you give me the rest of your walls for paintings.'"

### LOCAL EVENTS

In one mural, Elvis drives a hot rod right through a

3-D movie screen. In the other, a voluptuous woman bends over a hot rod parked at a gas pump.

Sex, popular culture, and "all the vices," as Wharton put it, are his themes, and he acknowledged many artistic influences, from Peter Max and Picasso to graffiti and underground comics.

The cubists, for example, are apparent in his *King Lipitor*, a portrait of a crowned and cockeyed royal who holds a hand of cards with skull-and-crossbones motif.

The Warhol-induced *4 Delvis* is a repeating pattern of four horned portraits of Presley that drives the hot rod in the mural.

*Wave Woman* pays homage to M.C. Escher, the optical illusionist.

Of paintings with waves in them, Wharton said, "They sell immediately." Even so, he isn't one to go for the easy buck if it means boredom. "I grew up surfing, so I painted a lot of waves. I paint them quite naturally. I did waves for ten years, then got tired of it. Now I



Ron Wharton's Fame

hardly ever paint them, and what comes naturally is naked women for some reason."

*Fame* shows one of those nudes, but it doesn't seem exploitive. Instead, since she's wearing a price tag and barcode tattoo, it could be construed as feminist satire. "It really is," Wharton said. "And if you get right up on it, that painting has all sorts of little messages and texts. On her arm, there's an expiration date. It says 'Best if used by age 20.'"

Wharton's medium is acrylic on wood. (Canvas proved vulnerable to damage by errant elbows and flying bottle caps in the various "hellholes" in which Wharton has lived.) And they're "priced to move" — from \$200 for a small one (32 inches square) to \$3000 for the largest (48 by 36 inches).

You won't get a pitch from Wharton, but you might get one from his alter ego, the Art Pimp — "a separate fictional character who's a big salesman," in

Wharton's words. "He was created for the website [[www.rwharton.illeguipped.com](http://www.rwharton.illeguipped.com)], but he's gotten a life almost bigger than my own. I didn't really see that coming."

Wharton, who turns 40 in October, was born on the eastern shore of Maryland, in Ocean City, a tourist town "that goes from 6000 people to a million in the summer." His father, now retired, was an insurance salesman. His mother worked for Frank Perdue, the largest poultry producer on the East Coast — a chicken pimp, if you will. "Anybody who lives around there [Ocean City] probably at some point works for that guy," said Wharton, who moved to Ocean Beach four years ago to escape the cold.

Wharton claimed to have "sold every single painting" he has ever painted, "except the ones in my possession right now." The move from one ocean to another has been a setback. "I knew it was going to be a little tough building up to the state that I was once in on the East Coast." Getting into Seth's Chop Shop within the past year he characterized as "a big step" toward his "master plan."

And now Seth has agreed to let Wharton have an opening there, just like at a gallery, for a 40-painting show called "Razor Blades and Candy."

"I knew Seth just from getting haircuts," said Wharton. "But because of

the way the place was, and the way it was set up, and because of the fact that his clients and my clients are very similar, I knew that it would probably be a good place to establish a base camp. There's a catch phrase: custom culture. I would put his clients and mine into that category. They intersect: it's a hip, Southern Californian, custom-culture clientele."

On his website Wharton lambastes highbrow, high-priced art, quoting Carlton Huffypants, of the School for the Artistically Stagnant, in a blurb: "Every time that guy sells a painting, he's taking filet mignon out of the mouths of starving art grads. My students have paid good money to call themselves artists. They don't deserve this."

"You'd be surprised how many people think he's real," said Wharton. "They think somebody could actually be named 'Huffypants.'"

— Jeanne Schinto

**Art opening:**  
**"Razor Blades and Candy"**  
**Saturday, June 14,**  
**8:00 p.m. to midnight**  
**Seth's Chop Shop**  
**4994-A Newport Avenue**  
**(Corner of Newport and Bacon)**  
**Ocean Beach**  
**Free**  
**Info: 619-221-9254**

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Ron Wharton's Flytrap