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## Howie Wowie

### McMurtrey Gallery scores with "Venti Americano"

By [Keith Plocek](#)

Published on August 03, 2006

Howard Sherman's work is all over the place. Happy, violent, dark, bright, expressive, figurative, abstract, narrative -- these are the contradictions that run throughout his latest round of paintings, on view at McMurtrey Gallery in "Venti Americano."

Howard Sherman/Courtesy of McMurtrey Gallery



Downsizing at the call center might make you rethink your feelings about telemarketers.

**Where:**  
McMurtrey Gallery, 3508 Lake, 713-523-8238.

**Details:**  
Through August 5.

**Subject(s):**  
["Howard Sherman: Venti Americano"](#)

*Bad call center employee* (all works 2006) is full of red and rage. We all know the frustration of calling up customer service and getting none, and Sherman expresses this modern peccadillo with swift, expressive strokes and fractured imagery. A fiery eye centers the painting (and tips us off that there's actually a person somewhere in all the mess). We see a hand slamming down a cordless phone, the action accentuated by cartoonish motion lines. The dude is pissed, and Sherman adds anger lines around his head just to make sure we know what's up.

Sherman got his start as a cartoonist -- his comic strip *Frolicking Pebble* ran in 18 newspapers in the '90s -- and he hasn't strayed far from his hand-drawn roots. In the corner of the painting, up past a computer monitor and a Web cam, up into another realm, we see what appears to be the titular employee, wearing a head wrapping. It could be a turban, a cheeky nod to the burgeoning trend of outsourcing to India, or it could be a bandage, a dry joke about how dealing with dumb-ass customers will make anyone insane. The lines are too simple to tell which option wins. Perhaps Sherman had crazy Sikhs on the mind.

Another head-wrapped character appears in *DMO*, although this time we can see over half the fellow's grim face, his stringy, Shaggy-like goatee and downward clenched jaw.

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There's an expressive streak of prescription pills strewn from him to the center character, who's tough to make out save for the pink tongue, the straight teeth and the hand slamming down on his face in pain or disgust. He too has his head wrapped, but this time the string of pills and a little Rx bottle in the corner make it seem like we're definitely dealing with bandages. The whole piece is composed of bright, unmixed colors, somehow both violent and cheerful at the same time.

Sherman's use of cartoonish imagery puts him in the camp of Gary Baseman, Camille Rose Garcia and Gary Panter, but what's on view at McMurtrey Gallery is far more abstracted, more expressive than the work typical of those lowbrow painters. It almost seems like Sherman originally envisioned simple cartoon landscapes in his mind, but before transferring those images to canvas he blew them away with an imaginary shotgun and painted the splattered results.

*Headset revolt* is his most explosive work. The bottom three-fourths of the painting are overwhelmed by outward lines and messy smudges, bringing to mind the cloud of violence that appears whenever characters in *Popeye* or *Beetle Bailey* wrestle each other in a thriving morass of limbs and curses. But Sherman's work is abstracted to such a degree that all you can make out is, well, this thing, it's tough to tell what it is, but it's blue and organic and pocked, and it looks slightly handlike over here and a little tentaclelike over there. The titular headset flops into the air at the top of the painting, flying off into what appears to be negative space until you take a closer look.

A lot of the works in the show make use of a palimpsest technique: Images and swathes of paint overlap one another, but the layers are so thin, you can often make out traces of what lies below. What could be construed as white space at the top of *Headset revolt* is actually a multifaceted mZlange of colors, which adds depth to the background. Sherman's work is similar to what's being produced by free-painting collectives such as I Love You Baby and the Clayton Brothers, but here we have the sparring moods and ideas of just one artist.

As of last week, *Downsizing at the call center* was the only painting that hadn't sold, which is a shame, because it's a doozy. A pair of lopsided breasts droop down, complete with pointy teats that would look more in place on a baby bottle than on a person. A couple of hands and heads spring forth from the torso, and it looks like there's a whole set of fingers instead of teeth hanging out of a mouth -- talk about multitasking. At the top the artist has dipped a can repeatedly in paint and dabbed circles on the canvas, framing the work in a manner almost like stage curtains. It's a nice formal touch.

Sherman offers up a couple of works on paper -- perhaps a concession to the thrifty collector -- and these two are simpler, less overlapped than his canvases. The imagery in *Zipper tongue and his lost grenade pin* is barely recognizable. We can see an eyeball in the top corner, a tongue (zippered, of course) and a mess below. In *Next*, we see a trace of the wrapped head once again and an explosive array of orange and red. Scribbled on the paper are the words "Big and bloated in Bombay," putting us back in turban country. Bumblebees buzz about in both paintings, perhaps a nod to your typical insect metaphors for modern life: unflinchingly frenetic, completely noisy, but ordered and beautiful all the same -- just like the artist's work.

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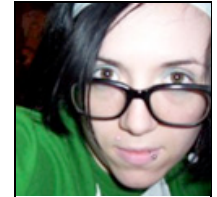
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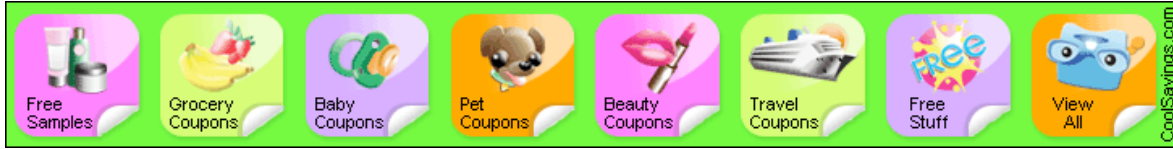
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