

The Boston Globe

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October 24, 2002, Thursday ,THIRD EDITION

SECTION: GLOBE NORTHWEST; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 1081 words

HEADLINE: GLOBE NORTHWEST 1 / ARLINGTON;

HIS HOME IS HIS GALLERY

BRAKES SQUEAL FOR MURALIST WHO COVERS FRONT PORCH WITH HIS WORK

By **Cara Feinberg**, Globe correspondent

It's hard to miss the 14-foot steamship on Shunsuke Yamaguchi's front porch.

Painted in a vivid, almost cartoon-like style, the vessel looks as if it were lifted from the pages of a children's book and transplanted onto this stucco porch in the middle of Arlington, where it has been for the last several weeks - the latest addition to Yamaguchi's landlocked fleet.

Located diagonally across the street from the Capitol Theater on a busy stretch of Massachusetts Avenue, Yamaguchi's house has become something of a local landmark, his front porch doubling as his personal art gallery.

"I love to paint on a grand scale," he explained, pointing to the canvas of the steamship hanging from his front porch. "I can't think of anyplace that's bigger or more visible than the front of my house. I'm just hoping not to cause car accidents."

By now, Yamaguchi and his family have

become used to the squeal of brakes as drivers slow down to catch a glimpse of his artwork. "I am certainly flattered by the attention," he said. "Even more flattered if people stop to buy [my work]. My house is an open studio. I just have to clean it up before people come in."

Through the front windows of his first-floor apartment, an interior filled from floor to ceiling with his brightly colored paintings is visible. But it's not just ships that adorn his walls. Over the years, he's painted everything from baseball players, to speeding trains, to delicious-looking pastries.

"I used to paint erotic art when I lived in New York City," he said with a sheepish smile. "They sold like cupcakes. Truth is, though, they got boring. Really, I just paint what's on my mind. If it's in my head, then I have to get it out onto a canvas before it gets clogged and stuck. Now, it's mostly my family that I think about."

Nearly every wall in Yamaguchi's house

tells that same story. Though he has a whole shelf full of photo albums of his older works, most of Yamaguchi's current paintings are either about, or for, his own family. His wife, Eileen de Rosas, a ceramics artist, and their children (son Taiyo, 5, and daughter Nami, 2) appear in several of his most recent works, hanging both inside his home and outside on his enormous mural-like canvases.

Even Yamaguchi's outdoor showroom began with his children. "It all started a few years ago with my son and a trip to Home Depot," said Yamaguchi. "Taiyo became fascinated with trains, and I wanted to paint one for him. I went out to buy some supplies, and I found these wonderful large canvases. It was the perfect thing for a speeding train."

Now rolled up in his basement, Yamaguchi's first large-scale painting depicted a Japanese bullet train hurtling past Mount Fuji toward a gleaming yellow sun, with him, his wife, and his son - toy train in hand - leaning out the windows.

Since hanging the painting outside his front porch two years ago, he has displayed several different canvases of the same size, each one remaining outdoors for months, no matter what the weather.

"People sometimes ask me what my agenda is, but I have to tell you, I don't really have one. I tend not to use this as a forum for political or social messages," said Yamaguchi. "There are a lot of people already doing that - they don't need me for that. I'm most interested in making people smile."

By all accounts, Yamaguchi has achieved that goal.

Since placing his work outside, he has caught the attention of several interested passersby, as well as a few local businesses. Quebrada bakery, across the street on Massachusetts Avenue, has displayed several of his pieces, including a series of gigantic muffins and pastries and a mural he painted of the entire staff standing outside the bakery.

Several of his works have also found homes, first in local restaurants, where they were sold, and then in private residences.

Yamaguchi's own walls tell a tale of a lifelong artistic career that spans two continents. Born in Tokyo, Yamaguchi spent his high-school years in an international school in Tokyo and then came to the United States in 1982 to attend the Museum of Fine Arts School in Boston.

"It seemed only natural for me to come to America," he said. "I didn't think I would survive in Tokyo. Everything there was so stiff and rigid. I come from a family of artists, dancers, florists - all creative professions. None of us have ever been able to hold down 9-to-5 jobs, even the ones who've stayed in Tokyo."

Since his arrival in America, Yamaguchi has lived in Massachusetts and New York, where he met his wife. Over the years, he has made his living as a painter, a freelance book illustrator, a cartoon animator for MTV, and a sports photographer for a Japanese sports magazine.

"I feel very American, and I feel

privileged to be able to make a living expressing my ideas" he said with only a trace of a Japanese accent. "I've lived here for so long, our kids were born here; my wife is from Massachusetts. At this point, I think my written Japanese would only be at a sixth-grade level."

Yamaguchi's artwork is a fluid mix of two cultures. Just as he makes a special effort to speak both Japanese and English to his children, his artwork often intertwines typically American subjects with traditional Japanese elements.

Even in his paintings of Santa Claus, the Titanic, baseball player portraits from the Negro League of the early 1920s and '30s, and a post-September 11th memorial painting of the Twin Towers and the Statue of Liberty, his wide-eyed characters often have the feel of Japanese animation or even more traditional Japanese artistic influences.

Sometimes, he even depicts customary Japanese subjects, such as the bright orange carp he painted to celebrate his son's first Boys' Day (a national Japanese holiday) and the 14-foot-long canvas of a king and queen in kimono that he made to look like a gold-leafed Japanese screen.

In a June 2000, 14-foot-long birth announcement for his daughter, Nami (which means wave in Japanese), he depicted his family of four on a boat placed in the hollow of a wave in front of Mount Fuji - a scene made famous by the traditional 19th-century Japanese woodblock print artist Hokusai.

"Maybe some people will get it, others will not," Yamaguchi said, shrugging his shoulders and adjusting the curled rim of

his New York Rangers hat. "Everything about the scene is traditionally Japanese, except for the people in the picture. Those are the ones I care most about."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, 1. Artist Shunsuke Yamaguchi on his porch on Massachusetts Avenue, where his paintings are displayed for passersby. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JOANNE RATHE 2. Detail of a bullet train mural by Shunsuke Yamaguchi, his first large-scale painting. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JOANNE RATHE

LOAD-DATE: October 26, 2002