

# Tim Okamura, artist to the stars

Liz Nicholls

The Edmonton Journal

*Saturday, October 29, 2005*

EDMONTON -- You know you're making inroads in the movie industry when they take the shirt off your back because they actually want that shirt.

Ex-Edmontonian Tim Okamura, an "urban-style portrait artist" who is amused by many things in his New York life, is particularly amused by this. In a couple of scenes in Prime -- the Ben Younger romantic comedy that opened Friday -- David (Bryan Greenberg), the young "urban-style portrait artist" who falls in love with a gorgeous older woman (Uma Thurman), wears "an old plaid shirt, dark blue, my mom bought me in high school, in the Zellers in Sherwood Park."



As a nation specializing in low self-esteem in matters stylistic, we should instantly reassess. "Wardrobe asked me for stuff," says the good-natured Okamura, "because they didn't want to just make fake painters' clothes." He provided jeans and T-shirts, and a hairstyle. He also provided an easel, a paintbox, sketchbooks and painting lessons for Greenberg. And then he provided all the paintings seen in the movie. And since it's actually a movie about a painter who does portraits with tumultuous graffiti backgrounds ... well, let's just say that as an Okamura exhibition, it's prime plus 100.

"I told myself I wouldn't be disappointed if scenes got cut," he says, with the cheerful voice of experience and the memory of the now-lost scene in Unfaithful that featured his portrait of Richard Gere's dad. He needn't have worried.

Canadianistas, who can spot a Colm Feore or Michael Hogan cameo at 100 paces, will want to note that Okamura has a fleeting appearance in the bakery scene. And it's Okamura's own dab hand that is featured in close-up scenes of David painting in Prime. "Bryan is thinner, with light blond hair, so they had to shave my hand and half-way up my arm." Which makes Okamura almost certainly the first hip-hop painter to be a stunt double.

The man, on the phone from his Brooklyn loft, is a little worse for wear. Who would blame him? It's his first day off in a month. And it's the afternoon after the night before, the red-carpet opening of Prime at the Ziegfield. "A star-studded event, yeah," reports Okamura, who hung out with his new friend Greenberg and his Brooklyn neighbour Younger. "The work was featured, it was in the credits, I even got a 'technical adviser' credit. And then, at the Four Seasons after-party, I was able to display six paintings from the movie and they were actually well lit!"

Compliments from Meryl Streep, a painting (Cousins) sold to director Younger for his actor girlfriend Vanessa Marcil, "Grey Goose non-stop, with a lot of self-mixing and poor judgment" -- it

doesn't get much better. Okamura laughs. "I stumbled out at 4:30 or 5 a.m., and my limo driver was there -- he'd waited for three hours."

When Okamura arrived in New York 13 years ago, fresh from the Alberta College of Art in Calgary to go to grad school, he was 21 and had a portfolio that included illustrations, album and magazine covers. "Then you go to the Met and see your first Rembrandt. And it starts to affect your thinking."

It doesn't however affect your income, not at first anyhow. The "poverty-stricken" Okamura, who now teaches painting and drawing at Parsons and the City University of New York, worked the oddest of odd jobs to come up with the rent. You can't support your painting habit on rock music, but Okamura tried. His band Set On Stun "opened for Sugar Ray once," and they played the legendary CBGB "the night after the Tragically Hip. ... I got to use the same mic as Gord Downie; he's one of my heroes!" And there was the gig with a catering company specializing in black-tie events. "Yup, I served hors d'oeuvres to Tony Randall and Tina Louise (Ginger on Gilligan's Island)."

Gradually, a career started to take shape. "I storyboarded the Super Bowl halftime show a couple of years ago" (no, Janet Jackson's boob was not in the original design, he laughs), and the Coke polar-bear ads. And his paintings, which combine classical portraiture with a swirling graffiti vigour, started to attract a showbiz client list that includes Tony Bennett, Katie Holmes, Sandra Bullock -- and such movies as Pieces of April, School Of Rock and Jersey Girl.

Prime was not without its heart-stopping moments for Okamura. Ten days before shooting started in July 2004, Sandra Bullock pulled out of the role of the alluring older woman ("mysterious reasons, unhappiness with parts of the script, I think"). Okamura had painted a portrait of her for a key scene in the movie, and found her "really personable, lots of laughs."

Then suddenly, after a year and a half lead time, Sandra was Uma and Okamura had to scramble. Thurman he found "pleasant enough, but there was more of a wall. She's straightforward, professional, a different vibe."

The sudden turnaround is part of New York, figures Okamura, who opens an exhibit of 20 paintings Dec. 8 at the Delgad-Tomei Gallery (owned by Marisa Tomei's cousin) in the building where he lives in the bohemian but increasingly hipified Williamsburg district.

What he loves about his adoptive hometown is "the immediacy, the energy, the availability of life-changing possibilities on a dime. Your life can do 180 in 10 days. A phone call could change everything."

David, the painter character of Prime, lives that too, trying to find his way. Okamura says his friends are struck by the similarities: "his sarcastic sense of humour, the too-eager way he tries to fill in silences with stuff, the jokes that fall flat." When Okamura's brother saw Prime, though, he couldn't stop looking at the paintings.

"That's the first time he ever got misty-eyed at a movie."

Inicholls@thejournal.canwest.com