

Selling subversive art

Guy Bérubé is out to prove Ottawa art is more than syrupy sunsets. He's made it his mission to find buyers for artistic rebels, writes Paul Gessell.

Guy Bérubé calls his taste in art "subversive." It is a term he might just as well use to describe his activities as an art dealer and curator.

From his modest apartment in central Hull, Bérubé buys and sells art. The wheeling and dealing involves mainly photographs from both the famous and the obscure, everything from the work of Diane Arbus (definitely a role model) to so-called vernacular photographs (wondrous, old anonymous pictures found in junk shops and flea markets).

Many of Bérubé's transactions

are conducted on the Internet via E-bay and through established houses like Sotheby's. But he is also increasingly curating bricks-and-mortar exhibitions at home and abroad, showing and selling art created mainly by a rag-tag gang of young, "subversive" artists from the Ottawa area.

In a coals-to-Newcastle twist, Bérubé is taking art from Ottawa to sell in Paris. He is also trying to prove that the Ottawa art market can be far more adventurous than scenes of syrupy sunsets and autumn leaves. Thus, he is unearthing graffiti

artists, experimental photographers and other artistic rebels shunned by mainstream galleries and introducing them to paying customers.

Artguise, the gutsy little gallery in the Glebe, has already proven there is a healthy number of 30-year-olds ready to buy good quality, but reasonably priced, "subversive" art. This is the kind of art that appeals to the high-tech crowd, skater-punk sensibilities and bohemian-wannabe yuppies. (Artguise exhibitions are often sell-outs or come close to it.) Bérubé, a fan of Artguise, is targeting a similar demographic but without the benefit of his own gallery.

Bérubé, who resembles a "subversive" cherub with his shaved head, plump features

and numerous tattoos, opened two Ottawa exhibitions this week. One is at Helsinki, a hip Byward Market bar. That show, entitled *White Lines*, is of clever, abstract-like images of fluorescent tube lights from the camera of 29-year-old Ottawa photographer James Erdeg. The other exhibition is at the Somerset Italian restaurant Zibibbo. That show is called *Photographs from the Private Collection of Guy Bérubé 2004*.

The photographs at Zibibbo include works from the celebrated, including the famous French photographer Robert Doisneau, to an anonymous 1940s photograph of New York City firemen involved in a dramatic rescue mission that looks eerily like a scene from Sept. 11,



CHRIS MIKULA, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Guy Bérubé buys and sells cutting edge art from his modest Hull apartment, as well as curating shows in Ottawa and abroad.

2001.

Officially the 16 photographs at Zibibbo are not for sale. The purpose of the exhibition, Bérubé says, is to introduce his collection to the public. "This is a showing I can curate," he says.

"It's like an artist showing his paintings." But, being a businessman, Bérubé says he is quite prepared to accept a good offer.

Bérubé: Thinks about artwork all day

Continued from page J1

Collectively, Bérubé calls the photos at Zibibbo, along with his art collection generally, as "dark" and "subversive" images of everyday life. The photos from around the globe and throughout the last century tend to be portraits of misfits and outcasts or manage to reveal the otherwise hidden misfit and outcast in ordinary people. There are genuine circus "freaks," gritty shots of low-life, ladies of easy virtue and a flirtatious Harlem transvestite. There are many more like this lining the walls of Bérubé's apartment.

Many of the photographs have the dark, creepy feel of the work of the late American, Diane Arbus, who had a knack for turning the most respectable society matron into a tawdry eccentric. "Diane Arbus is my No. 1 influence," Bérubé says.

He owns some Arbus works. The National Gallery of Canada, he says, came calling when the federal institution staged an Arbus show a few years ago.

Bérubé is originally from the Ottawa area. A photographer by training, one of his own creations can be found in the Zibibbo show. The legendary photographer Evergon, formerly of Ottawa, now of Montreal, was one of Bérubé's instructors.

After his studies, Bérubé worked for several years in Ottawa and Montreal as a commercial and fashion photographer. He had a brief stint as a researcher with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and then, in 1989, settled in New York City for a decade, working for various galleries and art institutions doing everything from scrubbing floors to curating shows and dealing art on the side. Three years ago, for family reasons, Bérubé returned to the Ottawa area. He was soon intent on shaking up the Ottawa art market.

"Guy thinks about artwork all day," says James Erdeg, one of Bérubé's discoveries.

Bérubé's protégés tend to speak of their dealer-curator with reverence. He has become their pied piper, a messianic magician to lead them to the promised land.

Erdeg, the recipient of a Canada Council emerging artist grant, has studied at the University of Ottawa with such world-renowned artist-photographers as Lynn Cohen, Evergon, Robert Bourdeau and the late Charles Gagnon. One can especially see the influences of Cohen and Gagnon in Erdeg's work. Like those two photographer/professors, Erdeg revels in showing human spaces devoid of humans — rooms without people, the interventions of man but not the faces of man.

Bérubé took some of

Erdeg's work last July to a Paris bar called Au P'tit Bouchon, where Bérubé has also shown other Ottawa artists. The exhibition was not a sellout. But Erdeg made some sales and a great addition to his resumé. Now, Bérubé is showing Erdeg at Helsinki. There is also one of Erdeg's photos at the Zibibbo show.

While interviewing Bérubé a few days ago at Zibibbo, Ottawa artist Juan Carlos Noria burst into the restaurant. Noria was one of three Ottawa graffiti artists Bérubé took to London and Paris last year.

"It was really successful," says Noria. He sold some paintings, made some promising contacts for future sales and, undoubtedly, got a great boost in confidence.

Noria has become a star of Ottawa's underground art scene, regularly creating paintings for live audiences. Such "performing" artists, just like top DJs in dance bars, often develop devoted followings. Noria is scheduled to have an exhibition next month at WURM Gallery in Ottawa.

Bérubé is also taking Ottawa abstract artist Andrew Smith to Paris next month. There have also been discussions with Amy Thompson, a member of the high-profile Enriched Bread Artist collective, about turning some of her innovative collages into prints and heading off to the Paris art market.

Bérubé admits that he loses money on some exhibitions. Shipping a dozen paintings to London or Paris can be expensive, especially if sales are not great. Sometimes, he only asks for one painting as payment for his trouble.

A recent exhibition at Zibibbo of British artist Kavel Rafferty resulted in only one sale. Shipping back artworks to London is expensive. It seems unlikely he will be bringing other European artists to Canada for awhile.

So, how does he do it? How does he stay afloat? Especially if he only charges his artists one painting as commission? (And these are paintings from unknown artists with questionable sales appeal.)

"I don't have a secret family inheritance," he says.

He does have charm and chutzpah. He is organized. ("I can't stand people who are late," he fumed one day recently when a collaborator was a few minutes late for a meeting.) And Bérubé does have a good eye for art.

His success will ultimately be decided by the idiosyncrasies of the Ottawa art market. He has some intriguing products. Now, will the customers arrive?

For further information on Guy Bérubé visit www3.sympatico.ca/guyroshima



JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

One of art dealer Guy Bérubé's discoveries is photographer James Erdeg, above, whose work is part of exhibitions at Helsinki bar and Zibibbo restaurant.