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PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBIT RAISES MEN UP FROM THE STREET

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COVER STORY ()

A NEW LOW

PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBIT RAISES MEN UP FROM THE STREETS AND PLACES THEM ON A PEDESTAL

by MATT HARRISON

These are men we fear – we see them as bums, thugs and crackheads. To some, they are embarrassing reminders of the failure of our society. To others, they are simply garbage. Some are adorned in jailhouse tats. The scars and

tography event, Festival X. "These are men that we are typically afraid of, and yet, in Burke's photos, these guys are scared shitless. They all have it in their eyes."

Low is a collaboration between Bérubé and Burke and was inspired by the traffic –

jects to shed that and pull vulnerability out of them, were some of the reasons why Bérubé chose Burke to photograph the men in his neighbourhood.

As for the process, once word got around about the shoot, men were lining

guage really speaks for itself. The way they held themselves indicated that they are protective of their bodies. I feel that what I got from them were these hardened souls that became soft because there was nothing there protecting them," Burke notes.

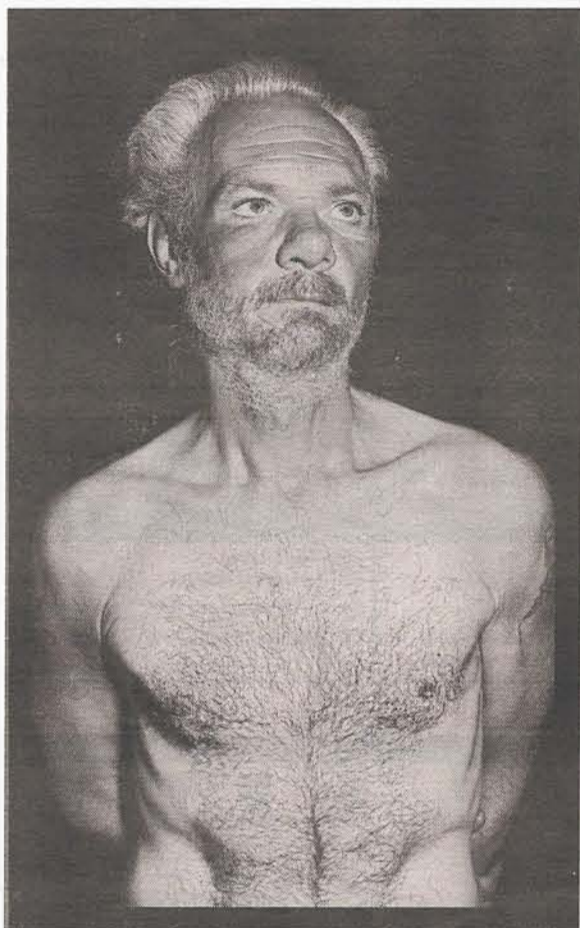
The title of the series – Low – was chosen to emphasize the mood of the pieces and their status in society. "I feel that the overall mood of the photographs is a quiet, sombre one, which stands in contrast to some of the men's realities: Many live a very hyper, tense life because they are on guard 24/7," explains Burke.

"And in terms of society, these people are considered 'low society' while the fine art world is considered 'high society.' So the work takes 'low-end' and smashes it in the face of 'high-end,'" he adds.

Serendipity also factors into the name, since, unbeknownst to Burke at the time, the area that these men live in was once called Lower Town. "Very strange cosmic alignments frequently happen in my work," Burke tells me, laughing.

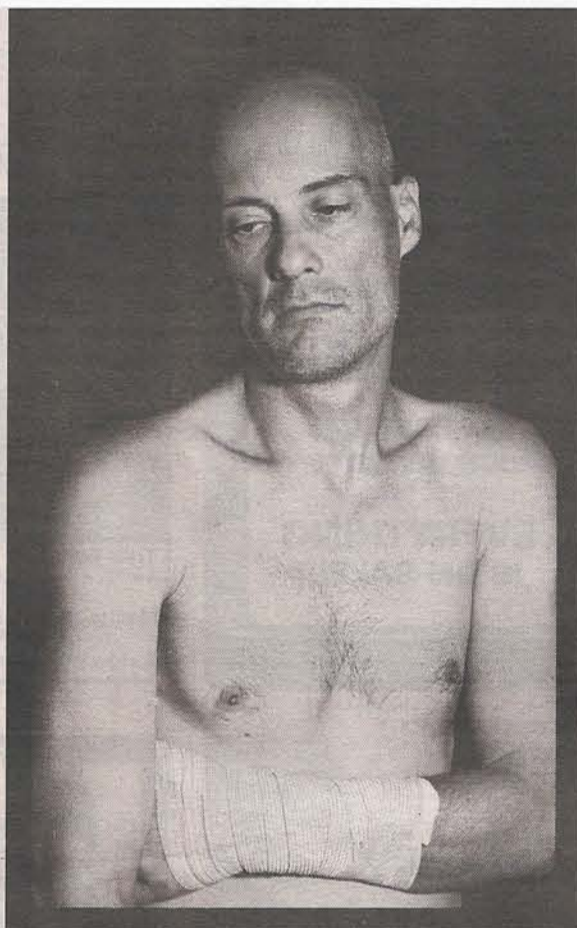
No doubt the reactions to Low will be varied, both from the viewing public itself and also from the men who were photographed. But the hope that this exhibit could change the lives of at least one of these men for the better has already happened.

"This guy came in with his sponsor – one of the men from Low who had a drug problem – and thanked us for the experience and told us that he's been clean ever since. Can you fucking believe that?!" Bérubé exclaims. "That alone makes it all worth while."



DAVE DESSLER

photo: Jesse Burke



SEAN PATERSON

photo: Jesse Burke

wounds that adorn almost all of their bodies are vicious tears – chinks in their tanned and tempered armour, which they wear with pride. Some of these men are unclean. Some look straight at you while others look straight through you, and you can't be certain whether it's because they are high or because their gaze is one that is solely inward. Maybe you're just not all that important to them. What is certain is that we avoid them. We quickly walk past them, sometimes crossing the street to avoid a close-up look. Some of us do this because we're repulsed by them, others, because we are genuinely scared. In this equation – them and us – we typically think that we are the ones who own the fear, but not this time. This time, it's they who are afraid because, through the lens of American photographer Jesse Burke, we see them removed from their context; they are naked, almost glowing under his soft luminescent lighting. With their vulnerability exposed, Burke's photos transform them into beings that are strikingly beautiful, and, most importantly, human.

"The look of fear in some of their eyes," Guy Bérubé notes as he sifts through a series of arresting photographs of men, some of them who are homeless and some who are drug addicts. The 12 photos are part of a series Burke recently shot specifically for an exhibition called Low. Low is part of Men, a group show that is being exhibited during Ottawa's new pho-

specifically the men – that Bérubé sees walk past the windows of his Cumberland Street art gallery, La Petite Mort.

"My concern is my view," Bérubé explains about the impetus for Low. "Politically I am uninvolved. I understand completely what is happening in Ottawa, that there's a need for people to have crack pipes and syringes supplied to them. But that is just not a part of my life. I am a gallery owner, one whose gallery happens to be at the very corner of the city's problem."

The problem Bérubé is referring to is the city's explosion in the use of crack and other cheap street drugs – this has directly led to a rise in the number of the homeless and prostitutes. Making matters worse is the recent cancellation of the city's Safer Inhalation Program – a program that made kits available to crack users, which, according to Lynne Leonard of the department of epidemiology and community medicine at the University of Ottawa, was having a successful impact in reducing the risk of infection of hepatitis C and HIV, the latter a major concern since Ottawa has the highest rates of any city in the province.

"I had this specific idea in my mind for an exhibit: to identify this problem in my neighbourhood that is getting worse every day," Bérubé continues.

Burke's previous work with men, and his style of photography that deals with masculinity, and his ability to force his sub-

up outside the door. And even though the men were being modestly paid for their time, Bérubé explains that he felt that, for most of the models, it was more than just about money.

"Someone was paying attention to them, making them feel like human beings. Most of them have only had mug shots taken before. One guy said to me that he hadn't been photographed in 20 years and that if he went missing, at least now his family would have a record. That really nailed me," Bérubé says.

"The one thing that really surprised me was how 'normal' these people really were. They were clean, freshly shaven, articulate – they were just people who got trapped into a bad place and can't get out of it. One guy said he goes running every day for about two miles. I got into a conversation with him about how you can be addicted to crack and still have the mental capacity to go running every day. That blew me away," Burke says about his surprise.

The results are similarly revealing. "Right off the bat, in order to strip down any preconceived notions I decided to make the background black, remove their clothes, and have the lighting be ethereal. That way it forces the viewer to look at them in an almost religious sense, iconic in some sort of way. I also really wanted to show their vulnerability, but at the same time their beauty. So I didn't pose them, I let them pose themselves. Their body lan-



Low is part of Men, a group exhibition featuring the works of Tony Fouhse, Peter Sramek, Mathieu Laverdière, Eve Fowler and, of course, Burke. The show runs until September 30 at La Petite Mort, 306 Cumberland.