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How to buy art

A beginner's guide to expressing yourself in your space

Guy Bérubé

aRT IS NOT PENICILLIN, porn or toilet paper. It is not a necessity. It is a luxury — but one that makes life better.

As the owner of La Petite Mort Gallery, art is the luxury that I get to deliciously drown in on a daily basis. But art is also my job. At closing time I find it hard to leave. Collecting and selling art is all I know, and I know how to do it.

You want to buy art. But how do you begin? To start, ask yourself why you want to buy art. Do you want an investment? Do you love art? Or are you about to open that Loblaws bag in your hand and pull out colour swatches? If it's the Loblaws bag, I'm not sure I can help.

When you walk into a gallery, expect to do some work yourself. Look around. Be aware of not only what you think looks good, but what speaks to you. Art is emotional. Buy something you love looking at, something you can't stop looking at. Don't worry about whether or not anyone else likes it.

If you have no idea where to start, ask the gallery director. A good one will guide you in finding something you love. Art is meant to be reactionary, to cause a reaction, so see what speaks to you, what brings forth a memory, what turns you on: the possibilities are endless. I have a lot of artwork, and I mean a lot, and each and every one of those works moves me, disturbs me, saddens me, makes me horny as hell, makes me wish I could paint, and so forth.

If you're serious about investing in art, make sure you've done your homework and looked at many different galleries, as each gallery has its own feel and offers different kinds of work. If you've crossed the threshold of my gallery, then I know that you're looking for something that is, perhaps, a little different — maybe something strangely beautiful, or classically elegant, or even sinfully erotic. And you may be the kind of buyer who isn't comfortable being blunt about what it is you're wanting to bring home. This is where a gallery director's skills of perception take over.

A while ago a gentleman came to the gallery a few times to have a look around. My staff and me took turns on different occasions trying to help him find something he liked. It was obvious quite quickly that he was attracted to certain thematic artwork, namely those pieces that showed male frontal nudity. Without ever asking or pointing this out, we discreetly pulled out pieces from the collection that all had this in common. This gentleman, happy with our analysis of his unspoken predilection, bought many of the pieces we presented to him. As a dealer, I live for moments like that.

The art you take home from a gallery is an expression of who you are. It is something you want to say about yourself. It's important that you say it. And that that is why art is made, why art is bought — and why I sell it to you.

Guy Bérubé is the owner of La Petite Mort Gallery, which is celebrating its second year of shaking up the art scene in Ottawa.