

Guy Bérubé's Petite Mort: more than a Gallery

by Jordan Arseneault

After living in NYC as a barman and DIY art-dealer for 10 years, Guy Bérubé returned to Ottawa in the year 2000 to take care of his ailing mother. In the sleepy bureaucratic town, he tried finding with his 20 years of experience as an art dealer, but it wasn't easy.

"I was doing cement grunt work in construction, which was difficult because I got outed at work. By the time you get to the cement work, most of the guys are rough and tough. The chemicals are toxic and guys are hard to work with when you're gay." In other words, this fag needed a career change, so he did just that.

"I'd always had artists around me whose work I had sold. They were usually the subversive, the underdogs, the rejetés." In those first five years back in Ottawa, he kept in touch with the NYC crowd and also started getting to know the Ottawa and Montreal scenes, as well as Toronto. Bérubé started with a stable of 35 artists and now deals for over one hundred. In spite of his raging success—you get the sense Guy could talk you into a lot of things—he does not do exclusivity: he encourages his artists to be independent, which is how he likes them.

What makes Petite Mort so special is that it has a different formula from other commercial galleries, which rely on cash cow artists that exhibit every year. He wanted to stay subversive in showing the art by marginal and underrepresented artists, (see Peter Schmeltzer for an example) so he stays true to that by hosting his famous One Night Stands, where an emerging artist shows work for a ribald 24 hours. "Because sex and culture changes, there has to be changes. The monthly shows mean nothing—" in that the nights that matter are the opening and the closing, i.e. 24 hours total.

"I do a One Night Stand every fucking weekend!" It means Petite Mort is a hot spot on the commercial landscape. Whether or not the

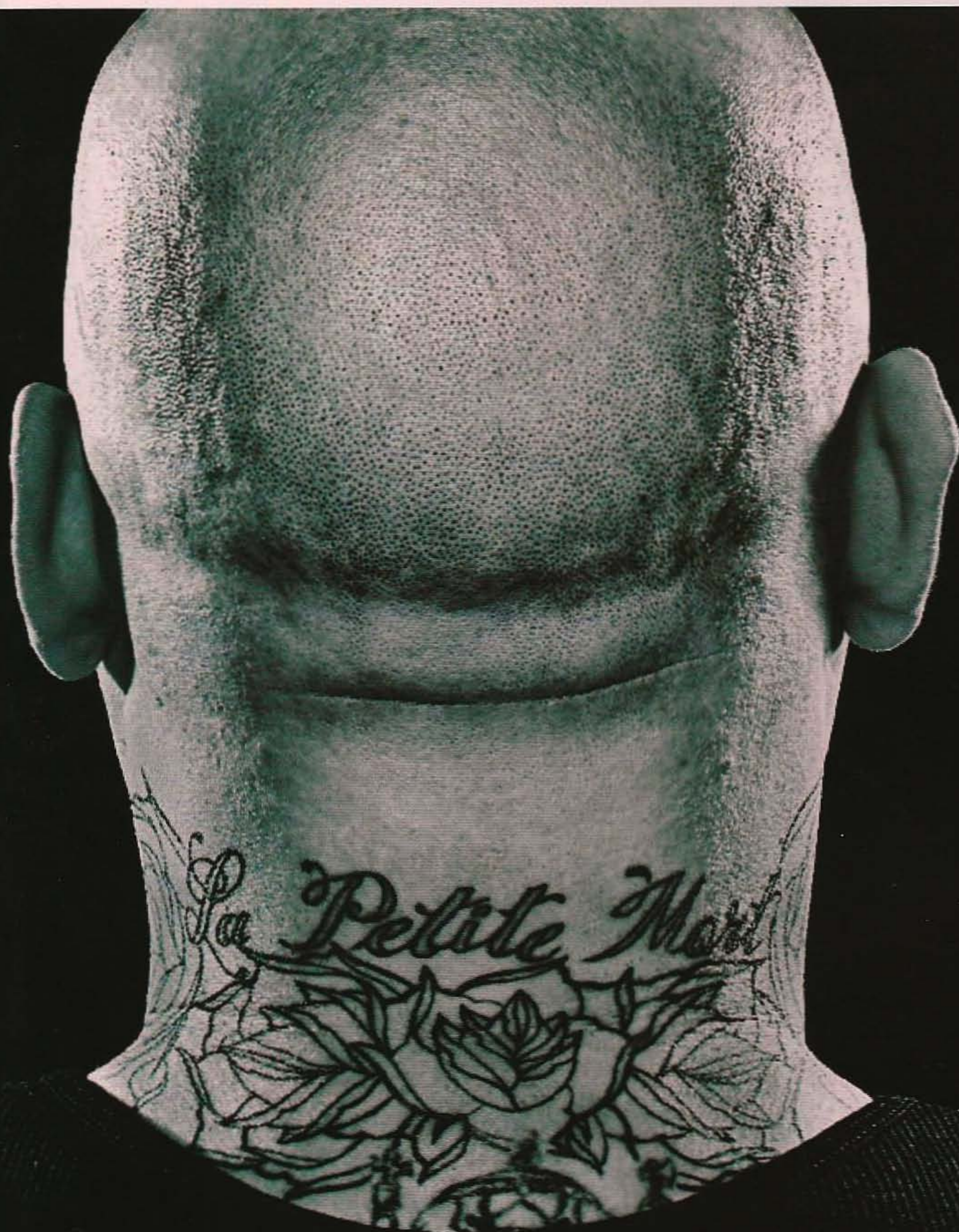


artist is a money-maker, each artist gets to have "their night"—"trust me, I'm getting' high on this, man," he adds with a warm, excited chuckle.

"When someone presents their work to me, I do not want to know about your prior work or where you went to school, Bérubé insists. Petite Mort (deliberately a reference to the French euphemism for an orgasm), is an orgiastic visual art storefront showcase, and he does not care for name-dropping or artspeak. He shoots from the hip, so speak, in interview and in life.

But Petite Mort's success over its first 5 years does not mean Bérubé is forgetting the little people. Not only is he always in touch with emerging artists like Bogdanovitch, but he's working on a programme to get art supplies to incarcerated people and show their work across Canada. You can keep an out in 2B for coverage of that story in a future issue. Meanwhile, back in the major art world he left behind, Bérubé's Petite Mort is a name on everyone's lips: "When I go to New York now, they're all ready to toss my salad." Guy has also been recently invited to curate in Germany and Poland with his own artists.

"Because I followed my heart, and I followed my instincts to leave New York and show my mother the best years of her life. I know that careers are determined by living in major cities, but my lesson is the opposite."



"I wouldn't have made it, I don't think, if I had stayed in New York. I make a point of having conversation with my artists and my staff. There's no bullshit and no ass-kissing allowed. Ironically, I rent my gallery out like mad." Even government officials and diplomats like the thrill of renting out a gallery that is filled with work that they may see as repulsive or radical.

Even though artists like Bogdanovitch get a lot of press, Guy insists that he's "never pushed someone's gay identity." Nonetheless, as we get chatting about some huge names coming up, Guy mentions some who are being featured in a show in December later also be shipped to European galleries. The show is called *The Infidels*, in which one of the artists is having his first solo show in Canada. Don't tell anyone, but stay tuned for major Canadian premières of works by Brian Kenny and Slava Mogutin, both of whom are out gay artists.

"I'm non-academic. No art history, no degree, *nothing* and didn't graduate college. The way I learned was by forcing my way into galleries by bar-tending and picking up puke in bathrooms. This is honest, there is no verbal diarrhoea here. What I find interesting is creating the hype: to talk about someone *honestly* creates hype in way that academic speak doesn't."

Is it easier to make a splash in a puddle than in a lake?

"It's been hell; I have cleaned up a lot of spit from my windows. I have to do a shout-out to a lot of gallerists who have tried and failed. It is an advantage to be a beached whale in a used condom. I still struggle to pay the rent!" November 5 - 28, 2010 Bérubé will be showing the very gay-friendly work of photographer and visual provocateur Matthew Dayler.

La Petite Mort Gallery
306 Cumberland Street
Ottawa, ON
www.lapetitemortgallery.com