

Unraveling an Urban Legend: Gallerist Guy Berubé



The National Capital native and owner of La Petite Mort Gallery, is renowned for his bold – at times raunchy – and always unapologetic approach to contemporary art. Since opening the gallery at 306 Cumberland Street in 2005, Berubé has attracted more than his fair share of raised-eyebrow guffaws, fiery debates, and visits from local law enforcement officers. This is due to his willingness to support the work of amateur, homeless, or incarcerated artists, and his readiness to allow erotica, contortionists, and local strippers to take over his front window. “People do sometimes get angry with what I am showing here,” he admits. “I have regulars who like to spit in my window. But you know what? I see that as a strange sign of success – if nothing else, it means someone is noticing me.” Drawing this kind of untoward attention seems to be one of Berubé’s fortes. I asked him if this hullabaloo is actually a result of pushing up against some sort of avant-garde or x-rated boundary, or, if it might simply be attributed to the oft-too-restrained sensibilities of our town. “I do, sometimes, feel like a loner, or a fish out of water here,” he admits from behind his teak desk.

"But I'm not going to complain about being here. There are some real treasures in this town," he says,

referring to the multitude of artists, including the over 100 he represents, who have, at one time or another, called Ottawa home. "I base what I show, and who I represent, on my own reactions; it is more instinctual than anything. And if I get bored, I'll do something to shake things up." It is this readiness to be deliberately provocative that has garnered the gallerist a reputation for being nothing less than a "shit disturber" (his words, not mine). And yet, Berubé's notoriety – and the illustriousness of his stature as a gallery owner – has come to eclipse the genuineness with which he has approached the field of contemporary art. "I feel like I'm one of these stuffed animals on display," he says pointing to the veritable menagerie of taxidermic specimens that adorn his office space in the back of the gallery. "I feel like I am being watched – in a positive way – but also in a way that people are waiting for me to fuck up –

The story of gallerist Guy Berubé has become somewhat of an urban legend within the close-knit Ottawa art community.

Berubé's education in the world of contemporary art has included a plethora of formal and informal training experiences. His induction began as a photography student at Algonquin College. In the mid-eighties, he hopped a plane to the U.S. and worked at commercial galleries in San Francisco and New York, performing a variety of menial and unpleasant tasks. "I did it all: kiss ass, clean up puke, and calm down nervous, tweaking artists during their big openings." He also had a stint working at Au P'tit Bouchon in Paris, a bar-cum-gallery, where he featured new work by Canadian artists every two months. "I loved the small personal gallery owners there, especially the ones who had stories for every piece of work they sold." Berubé's sojourn abroad also afforded him the opportunity to hone his skills as a dealer. Drawing inspiration from Parisian vendors at the turn of the 20th century – eccentric yet discerning men who collected and sold their friends' and lovers' work from their cramped apartments – Berubé set up shop in his rented quarters in each of these cities and was able to make a living selling the work of artists he met along the way. "I was, and still am, interested in working with artists who have a real hunger."

When he was called back to Ottawa for family obligations – "by now, everyone knows I came back to look after my mom" – Berubé hoped his collection of varied experiences and artist contacts would translate into a similar calling. So,

like most people with 20 years expertise in the arts, he began working in construction. "No one would hire me, despite my experience. I applied to work in a tanning salon on Cumberland, and when that job fell through, I took a job pouring cement." Eight months later, when that very tanning salon went out of business, Berubé seized the opportunity – all too aware of the irony of the situation – to rent the space himself. "I was given a real break by the landlord, who happened to be my best friend's brother. It was a gift of circumstance," he reminisces. ull him from our pastoral landscape and plunk him down in a larger rodeo show, and its easy to see



He continues to promote work by artists whose practices span the gamut of contemporary production – from graffiti to Art Brut, culture jammers, and gender benders. And yet, his interest is not necessarily curating exhibitions within the gallery, but rather in forging relationships with artists and giving them a much needed venue for exposure. "I curate out of circumstance," he says. "I love to have other people come in and organize exhibitions," citing occasions when he encouraged his own patrons, Sheila Casey and Tom Lawson, to put together an exhibition of graffiti by Hollywood in Cambodia, or when intern Daniel Delisle was given the chance to curate the fabulously quirky, yet incredibly relevant *Ride Me: The Art of Urban Transport*.

Since opening La Petite Mort, Berubé's reputation as a gallerist has also grown, both nationally and internationally, to supersede – in fact surpass – the aforementioned controversies he has instigated. "I've been approached by Merge Gallery in New York to take on one of my artists, and I am also dealing with Paul Petro Gallery and Yvon Laroche Gallery to share other artists." Berubé

has also recently taken on New York-based artist Faiyaz Jafri, whose work exists somewhere between Pixaresque animations and soft-core porn. "I'm currently negotiating with Holala! Plaza in Barcelona, with the help of Juan Carlos Noria – an artist who has been with me for more than 20 years – for my artists to have an exhibit there under my gallery's name."

Noria is just one example of many of the artists who Berubé has shuffled around with him throughout his career. "I am incredibly proud of the artists, like painter Peter Shmelzer, who has been with me since the beginning," he says. "I don't believe in a hierarchy between gallery owner and the artists, nor do I believe in exclusivity. What I do believe in is honesty; I'm very up honest with my artists and I expect them to be honest with me." This candour extends to every aspect of his relationship with them. "If I can't afford to pay their commission at the time, I will show them my bank account online," he says matter-of-factly. "There is a myth that seems to surround gallery owners; because we know lots of people, host parties, and attract a certain amount of curiosity, our social success is sometimes also interpreted as financial success, which isn't always the case. Like any business, I need a certain level of sales in order to keep the place open and to pay my artists. I'll admit, I have had to borrow money to pay the rent here."

So then, is it all really worth it? "When someone buys something from the gallery, I still react with a sense of mild shock mixed with joy. It's validating for the artist, and it is certainly validating for me! That's why I'm here." Digesting this humble statement, he looks around the space, then back at me: "Listen, I want nothing more than to support my artists... and no, I haven't slept with any of them!"

Written by Rhiannon Vogl
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