

# The passion of Jamie, art world Angell

**LEANNE DELAP** meets the man who took a chance on gallery row — and managed to stay in business

Ten years ago, the strip of Queen West at Crawford was bedraggled and dodgy. The Candy Factory loft conversion was stalled, and there were no families streaming to community centres; in fact, the main traffic came from cracked-out prostitutes and cruising johns.

Jamie Angell took a \$1,300 lease on a storefront, moved himself in and set up a shingle as a dealer for emerging Toronto artists. Both the location and the vocation were rather radical ideas at the time. "I put a cellist in the window and invited my friends down for that first show," says the former hairdresser, now 46. Thus, many of the guests at that pioneering event were in the fashion industry and local nightclub habitués.

Natalie Kovacs, a young multimedia artist, curator and international art gypsy, remembers sitting with Mr. Angell in those early days in '96. "More working girls came by than customers," she says.

Now Ms. Kovacs has a piece in the doorway as part of Angell Gallery's Retro show, a greatest hits of the past 10 years that runs until tomorrow. It is a spaceman rotating in a Plexiglas box; if you lean in closely, it reads: "Aren't you glad you're in Canada?"

The enthusiasm is fitting. Mr. Angell loves the Toronto art scene with an unusual passion, and his commitment to it has done much to transform an area that at one time seemed an unlikely place for collectors.

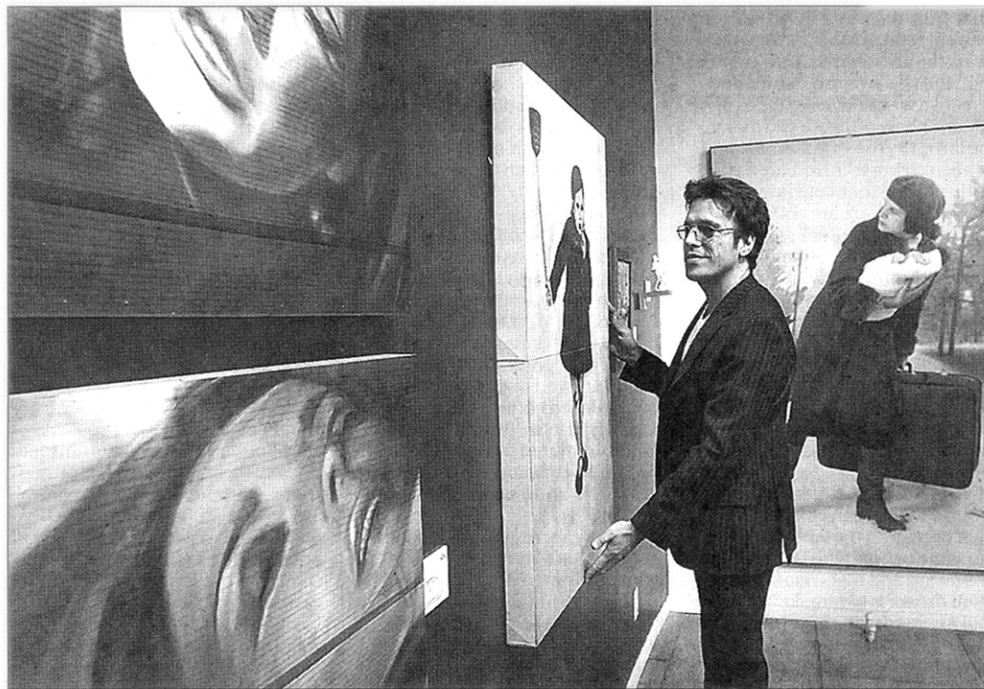
When he opened the gallery, new artists had few champions; most formed collectives to cobble together shows at spaces like 80 Spadina. But a non-profit called Art

scape, funded by three levels of government, had just built artists' housing on the northwest corner of Queen and Crawford. Mr. Angell, who had many artist friends living in the rundown hood, saw the future. (The cliché is true: Gentrification always follows the smell of paint.) He decided to focus on up-and-coming artists, not only because they offered a niche in the market, but because the emerging generation's quirky aesthetic provided a challenge to the status quo that appealed to him.

It was quite a leap of faith, in himself and in the area. Mr. Angell, who is of Lebanese-Greek descent, had worked for years in Yorkville as a hairdresser at salons such as Monroe and Vidal Sassoon. He ran off to Paris, "cutting hair for diplomats and their wives in their sprawling apartments," and then did a stint on the fashion circuit in New York.

When he returned to this city, he worked at Civello on Queen Street West to save money to follow his dream. "Living abroad, I learned about living with art," he says. The very social Mr. Angell began to work his contacts, hooking up with the Ontario College of Art & Design to keep an eye on their top students and becoming a docent at the Art Gallery of Ontario to learn about contemporary Canadian art.

He also asked his hair clients, and explored their walls. Lawyer Ron Manes was one of those whose heads Mr. Angell tended. "I had no real approach or shape to my collecting at the time," Mr. Manes recalls. "When Jamie opened his gallery, I was really impressed with the knowledge he'd accrued." Mr. Manes has gone on to scoop up work by some of Mr. Angell's prize



KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

**Gallery owner and 'ambassador of cool' Jamie Angell is celebrating 10 years in business with his 'Retro' show.**

artists, including Kim Dorland and Jakub Dolejs.

But Mr. Angell had to develop a clientele, and inexperienced collectors like Stephen Tapp, now the president of XM Satellite Radio, took some persuasion. "It took me two years to get him down here to the gallery," Mr. Angell says. "Jamie got the Farrah Fawcett posters off my walls," Mr. Tapp says. "He is the ambassador of cool."

You can pick out Mr. Angell at any of his openings: he's the guy with the blue glasses surrounded by adoring female friends (who call themselves Jamie's Angels, naturally), a glass of champagne in hand, oysters at the ready.

Times were not always this swish, though Mr. Angell always kept up appearances. "I lived in this gallery," he says. "It was hand-to-mouth for a lot of years. My food budget was \$35 a week."

But it was his belief in community that kept him going. "I chose this place because it was near a park," he says of the nearby Trinity Bellwoods. Yet the park was a barrier to growth; that break in the streetscape was why it took so long for the so-called Queen West Art and Design District to flourish. It is only in the past two years that the restaurants, bars and big-hitter galleries

have made the strip from Bathurst to Dufferin the place for Rosedale and Forest Hill Beemers to cruise on Saturdays.

Creating a market for new art is a funny numbers game, and Mary Sue Rankin, owner of the Edward Day Gallery (which moved from Kingston to Yorkville and finally down to Queen West two years ago) credits Mr. Angell with helping give the local market a quantifiable presence. "He is an honest dealer," she says. "And his pricing gave a framework for the galleries that followed."

Mr. Angell's picks have been pretty good; a number of his stable have gone on to international acclaim, chiefly Mr. Dorland. He has taken a few on the road himself, setting up booths at Art Basel Miami Beach (the it show on the circuit and a magnet for Toronto's heated-up art scene) and the Scope Art Fair and the Armory Show in New York.

A few of the artists he carefully cultivated have left for bigger galleries here and abroad, Mr. Manes says. But when it comes to his former artists, "Jamie just talks more effusively about how well they are doing, not that they left his fold."

The artists who have stayed (and that's most of them) have also seen their work rise in value. While Mr.

Angell remains committed to his "emerging" philosophy, prices are going up. (You can still find an entry point into the market for about \$1,000 though, Mr. Angell reports.) "I pay \$2,800 in rent now," he says, which of course has to be factored in to the equation.

So pioneer or not, Mr. Angell is now a pillar of the growing community. But as the artists push farther west into Parkdale and north to the Junction, will he move with them? Not unless he can find someone to deliver the champagne and oysters.