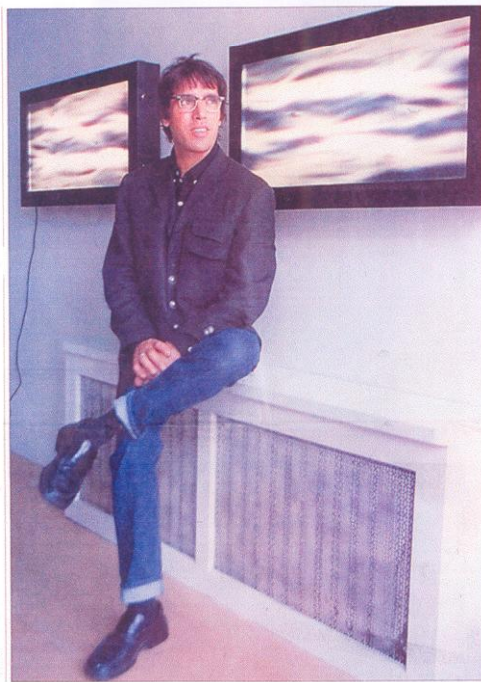


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Jamie Angell is one of the deans of the Queen Street West gallery scene. He has been open for five years.

The wild West

Toronto's avant-garde art scene settles into a changing Queen Street neighbourhood

BY CHRISTIAN GIROUX

Stewart H. Pollock is explaining the curatorial vision of his wildly successful gallery, S.P.I.N. Barely a year old, the gallery started up on Queen Street West with \$1,000 and the works of 13 local artists and became profitable within five months of its opening.

S.P.I.N. has just moved to a more spacious location south of Queen, on Bathurst Street, and from there Mr. Pollock is preparing to make his presence felt at the Toronto International Art Fair this fall.

"Once we decide we can stand behind an artist," he explains, "we allow them to hang their own show and we don't censor works that might be considered controversial."

"What we tell our audience is, 'If you like it, it's good.'"

A statement like that made in the

wrong circles in this city would be greeted with condescending snorts. But in this case it is just more proof that Mr. Pollock, lounging on a leather couch in his office area, a cellphone headset dangling around his neck as he talks, is a representative of a new breed of Toronto gallery.

Comprised of about 30 galleries strung on or near Queen Street West from Spadina Avenue to Parkdale, this ragtag fleet is still finding its place within Toronto's larger art community, at the same time as playing a role distinct from the established galleries elsewhere in the city.

The polished concrete floors, false walls and exposed steel girders of S.P.I.N. create the ideal stripped-down ambience for a mix of young, emerging and mid-career artists who work in a myriad of media, from painting and drawing to photography, video and sculptural installation.

Not only are the galleries' customers

buying works that deal with traditionally challenging subjects (in one case, the desire to play with one's own bodily fluids), they are also buying works in new media, such as digitally re-worked photographs.

"The economy over the past few years has helped, but your average buyer is not wealthy," says Mr. Pollock. "They make whatever — two, three, four thousand a month — but they're people who see the gallery as part of their neighbourhood and who see going to galleries as part of their social life."

Not every gallery on the Queen West strip has met with S.P.I.N.'s success, but not every gallery is a commercial operation. Some, like Loop (1174 Queen St. W.), are run by small collectives whose members share the rent and the exhibition schedule. Others, like West Wing (1267 Queen St. W.), maintain and rent a gallery space to others in order to subsidize their own workspace in the back.

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Success could be a problem

S.P.I.N.

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Just about all of them, however, enjoy the critical mass created by a community of practitioners, hangers-on and buyers who regularly pack openings and generate a vibrant scene.

Mr. Pollock runs his gallery in partnership with Juno Youn, who sometimes exhibits his own work (like many young artists in the Queen West scene for whom the distinction between artist and curator is at times blurred).

In similar fashion, many artists float between galleries through their inclusion in group shows. In a business traditionally defined by cutthroat competition, what is particularly striking in these instances is that the galleries have negotiated to split a percentage of revenues, regardless of who sells the work.

Jamie Angell opened Angell (890 Queen St. W.) in 1996. He is now one of the elder statesmen of the community and a driving force behind the creation of the Queen West Gallery District Association.

About 22 of the galleries that have appeared over the past five years (many of them in the past year) have joined forces to undertake joint marketing ventures and create a forum for sharing expertise and resolving conflicts.

One problem the association will inevitably have to deal with is its own success. The section of Queen that runs west of Trinity Bellwoods Park was decidedly run-down five years ago when Mr. Angell moved in. Now art patrons can make a day of window-shopping in the area and stop in for dinner at trendy Swan Café or Bar One. (In recognition of the impact the gallery had on the development of the area, Mr. Angell's new landlords chose not to raise his rent when they bought his building.)

The loft developments that push ever westward along Queen Street have also brought in young professionals for whom a framed poster is a painful reminder of their university dorm room.

Mr. Angell attributes his success in the neighbourhood to a design-



KEVIN VAN PRAASEN / NATIONAL POST

Stewart H. Pollock, left, and Juno Youn of S.P.I.N. Gallery.

savvy generation that combines a real desire to support young artists with a preference for small original artworks to put in their lofts.

Another of the major gallery owners in the area is Katherine Mulherin. In operation for three years, she now operates a trio of spaces and, for many, has come to characterize not only the success of the scene but its tenor and feel.

While the new Katherine Mulherin Gallery (1086 Queen St. W.) is a highly polished space with a set stable of artists that runs like more conventional galleries, her smaller BUS galleries (1040 and 1080 Queen St. W.) operate on a more communal model, wherein the artists contribute part of the rent and exhibition costs upfront.

Once they have made back their original investment through sales, they begin splitting the profits with Ms. Mulherin.

It's the way Ms. Mulherin began operating in her first space, which she saw as a natural extension of her participation in the megagroup show phenomenon prevalent in Toronto throughout the 1990s. These mammoth shows of limited duration, organized in provisional spaces and often involving dozens of artists who were

generally young and locked out of the established gallery scenes, created the community of artists that has settled in the Queen West district.

They carry with them a legacy, part of which, curatorially, has a predilection toward the chaotic and inclusive, as well as for simple and clear themes that have wide appeal in the crowd they serve (often sex and drugs).

"I'm more of a facilitator than a curator," says Ms. Mulherin, "but I do like painting about painting, or photography about photography. There is no identifiable aesthetic to the galleries, but I do try to create a continuity between the different shows."

If the height of urbane sophistication was once an austere gallery hidden away on the fourth floor of a renovated warehouse, then the Queen West scene might be better described as your friendly neighbourhood art store.

This may partially explain the galleries' commercial success. But the real secret is this: While these are not the Yorkville galleries catering to blue-chip investors, their avant-garde cachet is undeniable.

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