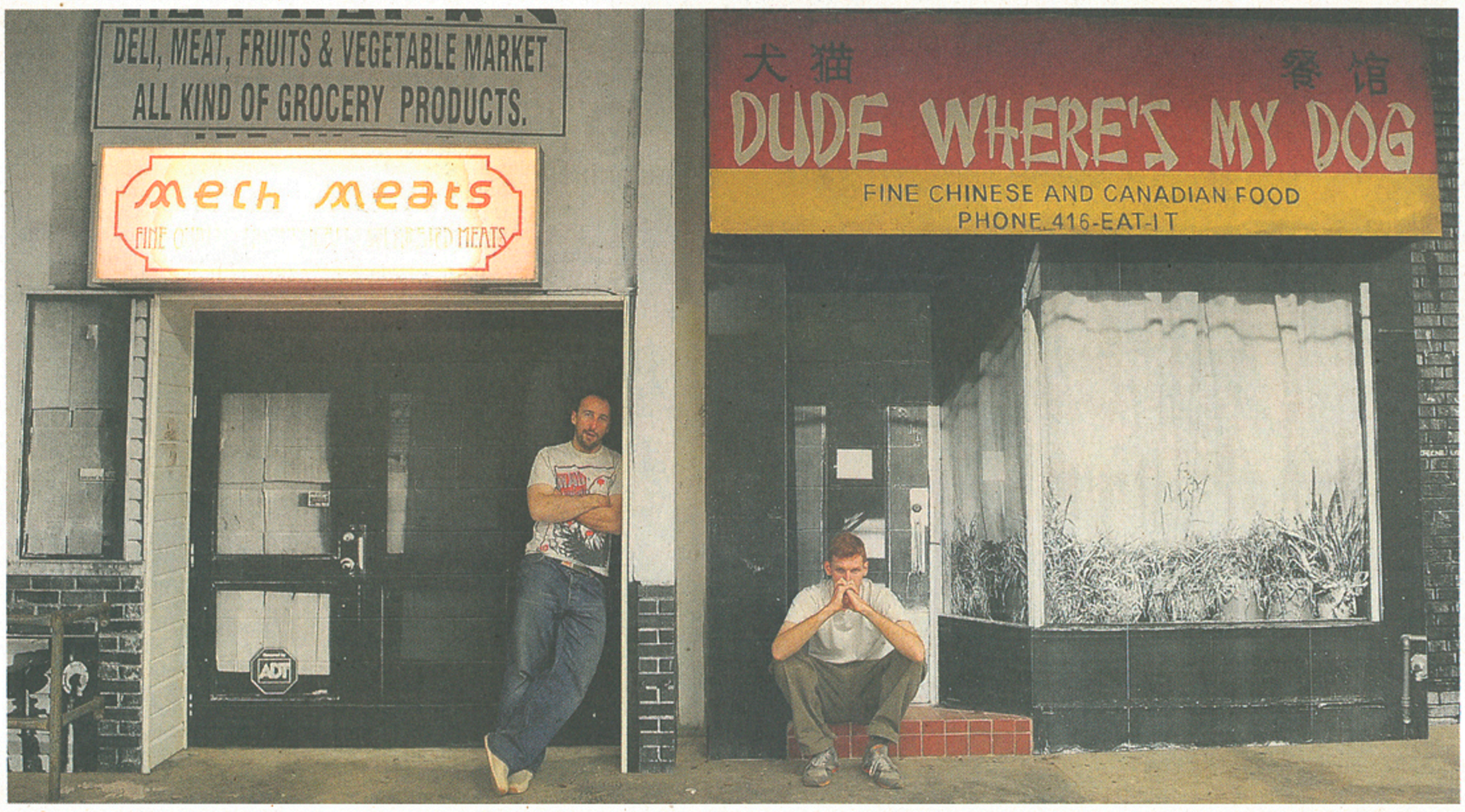
Globe Review

The swing state It's always golf season in Florida **Travel, page 10**

VISUAL ART » A CITY RENEWAL PROJECT



Creating new signs of life

Two street artists have co-opted the derelict buildings of downtown Toronto as their canvases

BY GUY DIXON

At Queen and Sherbourne streets in Toronto, amid the uneasy mix of skid row strivers and the influx of upwardly mobile professionals, sits the image of a woman in her late 20s, sitting contentedly on the wall of an old, boarded-up tavern.

She's a tremendously calming presence on this downtown eastside corner, a life-sized black-and-white cut-out image plastered onto the bricks. Wearing sensible shoes and a casual blazer, she sits with her shoulders hunched, watching the street life. She is Lilia Anne Bergeron, the now-deceased mother of prominent Toronto street artist Dan Bergeron, taken from an old photo he found while clearing out her possessions. She will be missed once a large condo building goes up in her place.

It's that sense of loss that Bergeron (a.k.a. Fauxreel) and fellow street artist Gabriel Reese (alias Specter) are commemorating in a new art exhibition called A City Renewal Project, which takes place in a Toronto warehouse this month.

Just as street art has hit new levels of sophistication, from the groundbreaking work of France's Blek le Rat to that of British artist Banksy and countless other urban artists around the world, the brick walls and abandoned storefronts of Canadian downtowns that provide a canvas for artists are fast disappearing. In their place are the glass, concrete and steel of condo buildings.

» SEE 'STREET ART' PAGE 2

Artists Dan Bergeron, left, and Gabriel Reese in front of a detail of the cityscape they have created within a warehouse to showcase the transition of old to new in downtown Toronto.
FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The artwork signals imminent destruction

So Bergeron and Reese have taken an empty warehouse and created their own streetscape indoors to showcase this transition. Using many of the same techniques as in their outdoor work, in which large photos are plastered to walls, they have taken the images of actual buildings and have adorned them with street art, fake signs and painted-over condo ads. On view until Nov. 23, it is an homage to downtown dereliction and disappearing street-art surfaces.

There's a flipside to this though. Abandoned buildings and old walls tend to get covered with street art just before they are demolished. So, in a way, the artwork itself signals their imminent destruction.

"We're not choosing a side on the issue. It's more about documenting this change that's happening, and showing the beauty in the [older] buildings that still exist," Reese says. "They are the buildings which, to us, are the most beautiful spaces, whereas to everyone else on the block they are the blight of the neighbourhood."

Unlike most graffiti, which appropriates a wall and demands attention, Reese and Bergeron's work often blends in with the surroundings. And unlike graffiti, it is meant for ordinary passersby as much as for other artists.

"Graffiti is codified. It's for other writers for the most part. But we're trying to be inclusive." Bergeron says.

For instance, Reese has created a blue sticker with the symbol for wheelchair access – but in this case with a line drawn across the figure and the caption "not wheelchair accessible" – for sticking on entrances with imposing stairs. It's easy social commentary in artistic form. So, some guerrilla impulses do cross over into their work, particularly the drive to stir public attention by working outdoors. So even if they see a distinction between their work and graffiti, "we've always been influenced by graffiti," Bergeron says.

His work often involves painting over billboard ads. One example was his retouched billboard at Toronto's Front and Bathurst streets showing multiple images of Kanye West and the message "Just don't let it get to your head!" Coming from skateboarding culture and photography, Bergeron, 33, transferred that same sense of scouting around for perfect urban locations to his street work.

"I would rather have someone feel something about the work, whether it's positive or negative. If it's just there and you've passively looked at it, well then it's just as memorable as any of the bad advertising you see or some street furniture that's boring," he says.

Bergeron is also the artist behind the Vespa ads plastered on downtown walls around Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, Vancouver and Calgary, depicting people with motor-scooter handlebars for heads, using the same photo-appliqué technique as much of his other artwork. Inevitably it garnered criticism once people began to realize that it wasn't street art, but advertising. Bergeron counters that all artists need to pay the bills, especially with Canadian galleries relatively slow to embrace street artists. Advertisers are the ones filling that gap. The energy drink Red Bull, for instance, is sponsoring A City Renewal Project.

Reese, 30, who recently relocated to New York, has a similar site-specific approach to his work, which tends to be even subtler than Bergeron's, such as repainting storefront signs. One piece, for instance, involved changing the sign of an abandoned Chinese storefront to read "Gentrification." Or changing the sign above a boarded-up restaurant from "Christine's Place" to "Christine's Livelihood." The whole point is to make the changes look like the original old signs. (Both Bergeron and Reese have detailed websites featuring their work, at fauxreel.ca and specterart.com, respectively.)

In a way, their work and the small warehouse installation show the continued intimacy and small scale of Canadian street art as opposed to, say, the much larger city art projects organized by New York's Deitch Gallery. In lower Manhattan this past spring, for instance, Deitch unveiled a massive re-creation of one of the late Keith Haring's downtown murals to commemorate what would have been the artist's 50th birthday.

Meanwhile, you have Bergeron quietly adding an image of his mother to his street work. In Canadian downtowns, with the condo buildings moving in, much of the work remains small and personal. "We would put up work on these spaces because no one cares about them," Bergeron says.

» A City Renewal Project runs until Nov. 23 in Toronto at 39 Lisgar Ave. in Toronto, 6 to 9 p.m. Wednesday to Friday, 12 to 5 p.m. weekends.