CONTACT FEST

# Evolution of a street art rebel

## Once an anonymous prankster, Dan Bergeron has slipped into art-scene spotlight

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Legs dangle and pinwheel in the light morning breeze and the head sags over as Dan Bergeron slops a thick, opaque brushful of wheat paste across the chest, pinning it to the ragged brick.

"I like it to be part of the wall," says Bergeron, 33, better-known to a community of street artists as Fauxreel, as he pokes his rubber-gloved fingers into the mortar, sinking slightly-larger-than-life photo portrait deeper into the wall.

The midsection firmly in place, he folds the head up, unleashing a hollow, plaintive gaze for all the world — but specifically, Queen Street West, here in deepest, darkest Parkdale — to see. Haggard and bearded, weary but resolute, the man in the picture holds a hand-scrawled sign says what his eyes imply: "I want a place to call my own."

A woman drops off the streetcar in front of Bergeron and bursts into a huge grin. "That's so great!" she says. The building, at Queen and Dowling, was a dangerous squat; it's now city-owned and being repurposed as assisted housing. The woman is on a transition committee. "How did you know?"

Bergeron didn't, but he grins at the happy coincidence. But strong reactions are to be expected here. The image is one of 18 Bergeron made for the Royal Ontario Museum, which it offered to this year's Contact Photography Festival. Bergeron interviewed his subjects, all of them either homeless now or in the past, before shooting them displaying slogans they wrote themselves. Just like on Queen, they are simple, direct and accusing: "The system is broken. I am not," or "For me, this was not a choice."

Printed and cropped close around the subject's body, they were ready for Bergeron's gallery — the street, where he has been pasting them up, all over the city and in multiple copies, since early May. The ROM didn't want it that way — they saw the portraits as gallery-only, failing to see the irony, for their ongoing street-art series, "Housepaint" —

**ART** continued on **E10**

# 'Hopefully, I'm selling their voice'

**ART** from **E1**

**Dan Bergeron has been pasting images like these around Toronto since May. The installation, commissioned by the ROM, is part of the Contact Photography Festival.**

but Bergeron demurred.

"It took some convincing," he smiles, a little impish. "I told them, 'If you want to think of it in a business way, it's good for it to be outdoors, because it'll get people into the ROM. It's free advertising.' "

Bergeron is making a joke, of course, jabbing a particularly touchy nerve in the generally raw world of street art. And for the purist, working with big institutions and corporate-sponsored festivals might seem a little sanctified for a form meant — in spirit, anyway — to subvert such things (for the record, Bergeron worked last year with the AGO for Luminato). But to some, it's not funny. Bergeron knows all too well the outrage that attends transgressions from street to corporate collusion.

Last spring, after years of pranksterish, anonymous public installations — for anyone who saw it, it's hard to forget Bergeron's alteration of a billboard of George W. Bush to which he added an image of Kanye West, and a script: "Isn't Kanye an A-rab name?" — Bergeron engaged in a what qualified in his world as a scandal. Skinny men and women clad in stylish mod garb started appearing, cut out and pasted up, on walls all over the city. In place of heads, they had the distinctive single headlight of a Vespa scooter.

It was, in fact, a guerrilla campaign for the scooters, done by Bergeron. But absent the actual branding, its meaning was deliberately obscure.

When the truth was revealed, Bergeron came under attack. On Illegalsigns.ca, a grassroots group that polices illegally intrusive ad transgressions, Posterchild, another Toronto street artist, wrote that Bergeron was vaporizing any collective goodwill, saying tolerance for the form "will disappear when the perpetrator is thought to be aggressive companies pushing even further into our lives."

Not long after being outed, one of Bergeron's personal pieces, a woman in profile with a gravity-defying mohawk pasted up near Dufferin St., had scrawled on it the street-art equivalent of a scarlet letter: "SOLD OUT FOR REAL."

Bergeron shrugs off the debate as juvenile. "Some people feel like they have to have a certain reaction if something is commercial — because they're too cool," he says. "It's 2009, and we're talking about an artist selling out? It's kind of silly, isn't it? Graffiti is like advertising. So is street art. A lot of these people are graphic designers. They have their own clothing lines and stores — T-shirts, stickers. What they're selling is themselves."

When asked what Bergeron is selling, he pauses. Not Vespas anymore; in an ironic twist, the campaign's notoriety helped him move past the need of the ad world's deep pockets, and into art for its own sake via places like the AGO and the ROM.

Still, "that's a good question," he says. "My name is attached to it, but the ideas, all the statements, those are from the people in the photographs. I'm in a fortunate position. Hopefully, I'm doing something with my position to help someone else. Hopefully, I'm selling their voice and their concerns."

Bergeron squats low, pasting the boots of his subject to the wall on Dowling St., when a young woman crosses the street and beelines towards him. "I just wanted to come up to congratulate you," she says. "I've seen this all over. It really makes a statement."

Bergeron quietly thanks her and turns back to his paste, when a young man in a fedora and cargo shorts approaches. "Is that the same ad for the scooters?" he says, glaring. Bergeron just smiles. "Yeah, man. It is," he says. The man stares, seething, and stomps away. Bergeron slathers the last of his paste on the image's toes, and moves on to the next.