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## A gallery that gives back

By Stephanie Dickison



*Sea Torso by Paul Richard James, encaustic 36 X 36", on view at ACA until December 16.*

Carol Mark has not stopped talking since I walked into the gallery. She is a veritable whirlwind of stories, though we are constantly interrupted by people trying to get by.

We're in Mark's gallery – ACA (Art Culture Aid Spirit: Art Can Change the World) on Queen at Jarvis and while her stories have piqued my interest, it is the opening reception of a show of 25 artists – most of whom fill the narrow space both here upstairs and on the lower level – and she is pausing either to let people pass or to answer a question about where to put the grapes or where to put the CD player. It seems her work is a 24-hour gig.

And that's just the beginning.

Mark tells me that she mortgaged her house in order to buy the gallery (back in June 2004) and since then, through ACA, she has established a medical clinic in Afghanistan, is helping to build houses at Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, is involved in kidsreadAfghanistan and other humanitarian projects. A percentage of the art sales at ACA are donated to some of these grassroots projects.

And did I mention that she still works as a nurse?

Just listening to all that she has going on exhausts me and I slump beneath my heavy coat, but before I can relax too much, Mark introduces me some of the artists, like we are at her family reunion and I just have to meet her Uncle André, Aunt Mary, etc.

This is not your typical downtown gallery.

Surface and Symbol - Dec-Jan 2007

Page: 1

And that includes the art and artists.

“(I believe that) everyone has the power to effectively create change,” says Mark, and the artists that she shows reflects that.



*Obsession* by Giselle Silvestri, acrylic on board, 24" X 48".

Carol Mark is not afraid to bring in artists that showcase works that might not be welcomed at other galleries, either for their political or controversial subject matter. The art here today at the Reflections Group Exhibit includes fine art in oil, acrylic, encaustics, mixed media, photography and sculpture, and the artists are from around the globe. Christine Maudy is from Queensland, André Paradis flew in from Montreal and there are a lot of Ontario folk, coming in from Guelph and somewhere named Chesley.

I speak with André Paradis, who found his method of painting by sheer accident.

“I was working at an environmental company where glass bottles were being ground and shipped out to make other products.”

It was then that he became intrigued by trying to use the leftover product. Already firmly entrenched in painting, he investigated methods of integrating the glass with his paint. He mastered the integration of recycled glass and quartz powder in an acrylic medium “to build sculptures within paintings.” He has said that the recycled glass “brings transparency, thickness and volume to the subject. Mixed with acrylic medium, the strokes of colour are thick, sensual and tactile, almost a sculpture within the painting.”

An up-close look at his work reveals a sheer illumination over the soft pastel landscapes. The story though, is worthy of being framed. And while I wind my way through the crowd with my artist father navigating his way close behind, I remember what a joy it is to hear what the artists have to say about the work. Often I see the piece in a whole different light.



Preludé by André Paradis 40 X 122 cm. Acrylic with glass & quartz.

Same goes for artist **Mary Kroetsch**. We are looking at her textile/mixed media pieces and she tells us how she transfers photos onto the canvas. But then she points to “Unforgettable,” a piece that shows a photo of a woman from the back, walking away. The text reads:

She has it down to a weekly ritual. Every Friday!  
When he first left her, she came everyday.  
Tended the flower bed she had planted for him. Roses were his favourite.  
But as time has continued passing, she feels he is slipping away from her. There really isn't a person left there. Just memories!  
Still she is determined to never  
forget him and so her Fridays are eternally booked.

Kroetsch then explains the photo.

“I took my Mom to Paris for a holiday and we had seen this woman” she says.

One day Kroetsch saw the woman walking away and was captivated by the image. She quickly snapped the photo and then created a story for her. Kroetsch often will incorporate a little bit of herself in the story, she says and is in possession of a collection of old family photos where there is no way to identify the folks in them, so she's “created names and stories for them.” Her mixed media work often uses textile pieces, photos and found objects and one piece is on a canvas outlined by blueprints. The pieces are enveloping on their own, but the stories Mary shares with us take us right inside of them

I see inspiring works. Paul Richard James says “my work is very difficult to pigeonhole,” but with the mix of bold images and encaustic techniques, it is invigorating. And after seeing James' other work, I can see how his work would be difficult to encapsulate into one definition.

Giselle Silvestri's gold and warm red paintings, one of which includes an old toy robot, are political and immediately striking. In her artist's statement she writes of investigating the “age old struggle of good versus evil,” and that by “using vintage images, I illustrate life as I see it; over processed, overindulged, overfed shiny plastic western society versus the rest of the world.”

And then there is Liam Harper, a young artist who paints in the old style, as seen here in his self-portrait. The medium he uses is egg tempera. It is inspiring to see someone so young appreciate the works of the masters.

So whether it is mixed media or landscape oils – whatever makes your heart flutter – Carol Mark will have it. And while you are perusing the collections, know that anything you buy will go towards building something important elsewhere in the world. Art makes you feel good, but that will make you feel incredible.

There is still time to catch the show – it runs until December 16. For info, check out [www.acagallery.com](http://www.acagallery.com).