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ARTS

RUNNING WITH VISSERS

By AGNIESZKA MATEJKO

Former engineer Erik Visser reinvents himself as a creator of abstract *Portraits*

There probably aren't many people in the world who don't have secret longings to write, to paint, to play an instrument or to become an artist of some kind. Only a few weeks ago a physician friend of mine told me of his secret plans to exhibit his photography, and just yesterday, I received a poignant letter from a close friend—a successful lawyer—who spoke of his desire to quit the practice and become a writer. Perhaps art is as deeply embedded in our genes as love or sex; only sex and love we usually get for free, while art comes at a huge economic price. (We all know those scary stories of famous artists who lived in poverty; Brancusi said that he was so weakened by hunger that he walked down Paris streets leaning on buildings, while Van Gogh survived only through the kindness of by his brother.) To leave economic security for an uncertain career in the arts takes a combination of daring, recklessness, naïveté and courage that only a few select people possess. Erik Visser is one such brave soul. Seven months ago Visser left a very successful career and became a full-time artist. In that short time he created a solo exhibition entitled *Portraits*.



After working as a mechanical engineer in his native Netherlands, Visser moved to Canada and became co-owner of a metal fabrication company. He was by all standards successful, wealthy and respected. Only there was something missing. “I was not very happy with the in the work I did as a mechanical engineer; it was not very fulfilling,” he explains. “You have to make a living and it was easy to make a living that way.”

But the incessant drive to make more and more money was not something he wanted to spend a lifetime on. “I was not comfortable with that, so I decided to do something about it,” he says. “[My wife] Josephine had a good musical career, so it was possible to stop.” To Visser's amazement, his loss in financial status was not nearly the ordeal he thought that it would be. “You start to realize that you work for things you buy that you really don't need,” he explains. “We sold our second car and we are doing really well.”

Visser's art explores the most personal spheres of life: emotions, friendships, character. His show of “portraits” is a series of human-sized abstract paintings, each one representing a close personal friend. “For me,” he says, “when I take a picture of somebody, that somebody smiles. You have to smile, but actually it is not smiling; it's an outside expression—the eyes are not smiling. I wanted to express what's behind that smile. I wanted to present their character. It's not what they look like; it's what that person is.”

For example, his portrait of “Andrea” depicts a friend who has two contrasting personalities. “She has mood swings,” Visser explains. “When you meet her you don’t know what kind of mood she will have this time. But after a few minutes you know she is going to be the left person or the right person. You have to react differently to her.” To paint Andrea, Visser split his canvas into two contrasting colours splashed with a foreground of energetic strokes of paint to symbolize the front Andrea (like all of us) presents to the world. “She is really trying to be cheerful for people,” Visser says. “Yet there is this background that when she is at home [alone] she will not be that cheery person; she might be sad.”

Now that Visser has hung his show, he can’t wait for the opening when all his friends will come and see his work all collected in one place. “Normally I would see them one at a time,” he says. “[The opening] is almost like a birthday party. All the friends have different characters, but they somehow all fit together.” The party will be all the more interesting as none of the friends know which painting represents them. (The “name” titles of the paintings are pseudonyms Visser found in a book of baby names that described the personality traits associated with each name.) As for Visser, he will be able to stand proudly amidst it all. “My dreams are all about realistic things,” he says with the practical tone of an engineer. “I wanted to be an artist, and I am an artist now.” V

Portraits

By Erik Visser • Ortona Gallery • To Feb 13

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