

art in motion

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Janice Edgar leads tourists into Gallery 240, one of the stops on the ByWard Market gallery tour.

You may have noticed many things if you had been walking around the ByWard Market last Saturday morning.

You may have noticed a woman on Dalhousie Street who was curiously well-dressed for 11 a.m., and a bit shaky on her nightclubs heels as she did “the walk of shame” home after a long night of better-not-to-know.

You may have noticed the grey-haired chap on Clarence Street with the white shorts, blue-and-white striped sailor shirt, tiny cap and a jaunty step who looked like an extra from Lawrence Welk’s production of HMS Pinafore.

You may also have noticed the art galleries — but maybe not. That’s why Phil Émond wants you to take the ByWard Market art gallery walking tour, so you’ll realize the Market is more than wobbly women and men who order their clothes from the Gilbert & Sullivan catalogue.

“There are something like 15 or 17 art galleries in the Market,” says Émond, before the tour starts at 11 a.m. and weaves through the streets of Lowertown for four hours. Émond runs the Gordon Harrison Gallery on Murray Street and even he was surprised to learn how much art there is in the neighbourhood. “Where are these galleries?” he wondered aloud. “And then all of a sudden you walk around and say, ‘Hey, there’s a neat little place here.’” So Émond signed up a dozen or so galleries and started the tour last summer. Now, with a few tweaks, such as adding a 30-minute coffee break in the middle, it’s officially a part of Saturdays in the Market.

“Good morning to people from Korea, good morning to Germany, and good morning to Canada,” Émond says to the tour group, as two Korean women, one German couple, two Canadian women and one British woman cleverly disguised

as a Canadian gather at the Harrison gallery. Émond explains the tour, and talks about the work of Harrison, who gave up his job at city hall a few years ago to work full time on his boldly coloured landscapes. Soon we are out the door, with 10 galleries to visit in three hours.

It used to be 12 galleries but two, Detour and Art Mode, have closed. This makes the tour less hurried, which is a relief for even 10 galleries in three hours is a long haul, especially on a hot day. I'm already hoping somebody has painted a portrait of a refreshing beverage, or maybe sculpted an air conditioner from found objects.

"We didn't know what to expect when we first started, and we're pleasantly surprised how it's taken off," says Janice Edgar, a federal public servant, writer of children's books and our tour guide. She says eight to 10 people is ideal for the tour, as more can be cumbersome.

First stop is Gallery 240, on Guigues Street, just past an old gent who's been banished to the sidewalk with his morning cigar and who gives me a wise-guy nod. He recognizes that I've taken up position at the back of our group to guard against those who would deprive us of art, such as Philistines, the Taliban, a few members of Ottawa city council and most of Stephen Harper's caucus.

The art in Gallery 240 is dark and disturbing. Deb Mukerji's portraits are by times comic or grotesque. They bring to mind Goya's macabre masterpiece Saturn Eating his Son, especially a large piece titled This One I Offer to My God, which shows one man dragging the bloodied corpse of another. Cheerio! We head back to Murray Street, past the French Baker (mmm, the art of the chocolate croissant), and the defunct Detour Gallery with a "nail salon coming soon" sign in the window (at least something is getting painted), and reach our next stop, Calligrammes. The gallery is dominated by Pierre Raphaël Pelletier's huge painting Le Chantier du Petit Jour, a \$15,000 explosion of yellow and white and specks of purple, like you've stuck your face into a flock of canaries that's attacking a finch. It's 79 inches across the top, not the sort of thing you buy on a walking tour.

"My guess is they probably do buy eventually," Edgar says. "When people are interested in art, when it speaks to them, they'll put the money out." She moves us toward St. Patrick Street, and the Galerie D'art Jean-Claude Bergeron. It's in

a fine old heritage home, and inside the highlight is a small print (\$6,000) by Louise Bourgeois, best known round these parts as the mother of Maman, the giant spider outside the National Gallery.

Next is the city-owned Karsh-Masson Gallery, which is almost reverentially silent, in contrast to the Internet-media cacophony represented in Amy Schissel's giant abstract paintings, which crackle with almost impenetrable motion and detail. The space is peaceful, a sanctuary from the bustle outside, like sitting in the Rideau Chapel at the National Gallery up the street.

Equally abstract, but far more spacious, is the work of Mario Varguez at Galerie Jason Duval on Sussex Drive. Varguez's canvases are studies of bronze and orange and yellow, plumbed from the dark depths of the artist's mind.

There's an entirely different style just up the street at the Terence Robert Gallery, where Chelsea, Que., artist John Ovcacik's scenes of sheds and other utility buildings have a depth that is often lacking in Canadian hyperrealism these days. It has soul, something that is not real. A couple not on the tour seem to be trying to decide which of two Ovcacik paintings — at about \$5,000 each — to buy. A few days later, when I check Ovcacik's website, I see that both paintings are now labelled "sold." It's almost 2 p.m. and there are still three more stops — Santé Restaurant (and gallery), the Ottawa School of Art and the Ottawa Art Gallery — but another deadline is calling me away. Edgar cheerfully leads the remaining tourists up Sussex, as I round

the corner toward a cab. The last piece of art I see on my tour is a poster taped to a utility pole, and it's the Mona Lisa with a rather large set of boobs drawn on.

Oh, the things you see in the ByWard Market.