



when sussex spells s-u-c-c-e-s-s

GORDON HARRISON'S GALLERY HAS GROWN, AND SO HAS HIS ART

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Gordon Harrison's former art gallery was 300 square feet. I've seen paintings that were bigger.

No surprise then that Harrison has moved to a new space on Sussex Drive, more than five times the size of the Murray Street gallery he has occupied, exclusively, for several years.

His partner and gallery director Phil Émond was walking on Sussex a while back when he passed what was until recently the Carisse Studio Café and noticed the "for lease" sign in the window. Émond leased the space. When the deal was done, he brought a fancy bottle of champagne to a dinner party and announced to surprised guests — and a surprised Harrison — that the gallery was moving around the corner to Sussex and what is, perhaps, Ottawa's most exclusive clutch of shops.

"I saw the 'for lease' sign and said, 'Sussex? You can't go wrong on Sussex when you've got the National Gallery on Sussex,'" Émond says during an interview in the gallery on Monday afternoon. "And we've got so many beautiful galleries on Sussex." (Most notable is the Terence Robert Gallery, one block to the south, which, coincidentally, also has a vernissage this Friday of Canadian landscapes, by the Ottawa painter Philip Craig. Watch for a column on that show on Saturday.)

Harrison and Émond sit in the gallery and their enthusiasm for the new space and the new venture — for the first time, Émond is managing other artists and exhibiting their art at the new gallery — bubbles through.

"It's good for Gordon to feel a little bit of competition with his art, and to bring in other artists," Émond says.

I turn and ask Harrison, "Is it good?"

From left to right: Andrew Smallwood; Phil Émond, Gallerist; the Honourable David C. Jacobson, Ambassador of the United States of America to Canada and his wife Julie Jacobson; Patricia Kirby, Artist; Césan d'Ornellas Levine, Artist; Catherine Vamvakas Lay, Artist; Brian Barrett, Chair, Arts, Heritage and Culture Advisory Committee to the City of Ottawa; and Gordon Harrison, Artist.

He smiles, and concedes, “I’m more competitive than I thought I was. . . I didn’t think I would be, but I am.”

Émond interjects. “Gordon would call the gallery daily to see if a painting had sold, and he wanted to ensure it was a Gordon Harrison painting that sold first.”

“No,” Harrison says, though not forcefully.

“I’ve managed Gordon’s art for years, so now it’s an opportunity to branch out and manage other artists,” Émond says. “It’s a whole new world out there to manage other artists. What we’re trying to create here is a real artistic sense of community.”

There are four other artists showing at the new gallery. Catherine Vamvakas Lay is from Toronto and does vibrantly coloured blown glass. Césan d’Ornellas Levine is from Toronto and has loose acrylics on wood that seem almost folk art-ish, until you notice the detail. Peter Colbert is from Oakville, and his oils flirt with and sometimes embrace abstraction. Patricia Kirby, who works at the gallery, is an Ottawa artist who does watercolours and pastels on birch board. While I usually find watercolours to be underwhelming, Kirby’s are distinct. The media is opaque enough to allow the natural grain of the birch board to become part of the works, as the natural curve and swirl of the grain defines and animates her skies.

There could be more artists in the gallery, as Émond and Harrison are open to submissions of Canadian landscapes. They both remember what it was like to be knocking on gallery doors asking for wall space, and they’re determined to give their associate artists the representation, marketing, guidance and exposure they need. “We can do for them what we wanted galleries to do for us,” Émond says.

Through all the change and expansion, the name remains the same — the Gordon Harrison Gallery — and most of the art on the walls of the two-level space still comes from the hand of Harrison. At the moment, the focus is on his new collection of fall paintings, culled from travels east and west, though home is where his artistic heart is.

“I always seem to come back to the local landscapes,” he says. “You really get the striking reds and oranges just here in our own backyard.”

It’s perhaps best displayed in four paintings titled *Forest Symphony*, which testify to Harrison’s changing technique and style. “It was beech trees and maple trees and it was a windy day, and I tried to capture the two trees sort of playing with one another, the branches of the tree sort of reaching out and touching one another.”

The paintings are not abstract, but they’re looser and built of broader brushstrokes than most of his earlier work.

“I think my work has changed,” Harrison says. “There’s been an evolution and I see the evolution. I think it’s purely from confidence I’ve gained in my subject matter, confidence in my brush strokes, and just personal confidence.”

Selling a lot of paintings is a confidence builder, and Harrison has a dedicated clientele. His admirers include the current U.S. ambassador to Canada, David Jacobson, and his wife Julie. They’ll be at the official opening of the gallery Friday, when Harrison will unveil a large Canadian landscape commissioned by Mrs. Jacobson. “She’s excited!” Émond says.

She’s not the only one. “It’s a perfect location,” Harrison says, as he sits and looks out over Sussex Drive. “I don’t think you could improve on this location.”

Well, there is that infuriating, summer-long construction on Sussex, which has been forcing the bravest pedestrians into an obstacle course that could train Navy Seals, but the work is almost complete.