

# Hamilton

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## A&E ART | Learning To Walk



### **James North's art crawl is a phenomenon, but can it take the next step?**

*By Tor Lukasik-Foss*

You hit the street just as it's getting dark. The weather's perfect and everyone is out and energized. As you wind through different studios and galleries, you see lots of work that seems interesting and there's at least one moment of real inspiration. Maybe you overhear Shelly Niro, one of the most respected First Nation artists in the country, explain how the large canvases she has hung at the You Me Gallery will be part of a feature film shoot the next day. Maybe you stumble into the vaulted space of Christ Church Cathedral only to find Michael Snow laying out some expansive musical improvisation as part of an ongoing experimental music series. By the end of the night you're so invigorated you smuggle a beer out of one of the licensed galleries and sneak up to an impromptu loft party that stretches into the early morning hours. That's the James North Art Crawl at its best.

And here it is at its worst: The bad weather hasn't discouraged the amateur street mimes and human statues, so your only defense is to keep your head down and duck into yet another hastily construed, poorly installed group show, the kind where the amateur art on the wall seems to drain the potency of any capable artwork nearby. You look around and everyone seems a bit tired - there won't be any late night karaoke jaunts tonight. When the coast is clear, you exit, scramble down the street towards home, averting the stern gazes from the men smoking outside the sports bars, wondering to yourself,

'Has James North suddenly become complacent? How can this street rotate its exhibitions a dozen times a year and not burn out?'

Good or bad, the James North scene is a phenomenon. After nearly four years, its Art Crawl now routinely attracts a steady and diverse crowd, bringing hundreds to the street in a single night to inspect galleries, studios and stores peppered along the strip. Its alluring combination of historic architecture, ethnic activity and grassroots cultural entrepreneurship even has Toronto media salivating over it. Most importantly, James North has now become a compelling argument to invest in culture as a means to rebuild downtown neighbourhoods.

Yet what makes the phenomenon so exciting and so wildly inconsistent is that James North exists without an underlying economy. It's an arts hub still in its infancy, growing very slowly and cautiously towards sustainability. This seems like a cause for worry, particularly as a global recession begins to reconfigure the landscape. But as you learn about the street, you realize just how fiercely committed its key players are to its success: A recession is merely one of many hurdles this community is determined to leap. "In straight-up financial terms, I think everyone here is already set-up for hard times," explains Dane Pedersen, owner of Loose Canon Gallery. "Hamilton has never really had an area like this, so no one has really come into it with an expectation for immediate success."

The shoebox space Pedersen manages is small and charmingly rough, fitting for his mandate of showcasing exclusively young artists. Its shows can be sloppy and brash, yet are often the most energized exhibitions and receptions on the street. Works hung here rarely list for more than \$400 and are sometimes as low as \$25. Clearly, this is not a gallery that can live off its sales. But that's not the point. "I'm fully invested in the idea of the emerging artist," he insists. "In some cases I am working with kids right out of high school and following them through their post-secondary education. As a result, the price point on the work is very low. And in this way, I feel that I am also catering to the emerging buyer as well. I've put almost five years into this project, and I think I'll have to put in another five before I see any real return from it."



In contrast, Bryce Kanbara's You Me Gallery, an intimate venue that opened on the street in 2003, is a cleaner, warmer space, which caters to a wider range of junior and senior artists and tends to put out more professional looking exhibitions. Neither can be considered a traditional commercial gallery, however.

They aren't like the Transit Gallery on Locke Street or Gallery on the Bay, operations where the gallery owners focus on cultivating a market for a stable of artists. You Me and Loose Canon can almost be described as pre-commercial – entities designed to cultivate the scene rather than draw profit from it. "I don't have aspirations of running a purely commercial gallery," Kanbara confesses. "I am more interested in building an arts scene, one that is symbiotic with the restaurants and the social services that also occupy the street. This is a harder path, and it's always going to be fragile, always going to be a couple of gallery closings away from ceasing. But I think the real purpose of the street is to build a more contemplative experience, to establish this street as an area where people can root themselves."

Like many arts entrepreneurs operating on James North, Kanbara and Pedersen own their buildings, subsidizing their operations with rent from

their upper floors, and recession-proofing by keeping their operations as streamlined as possible. And while both are happy to allow the street to develop organically, they know that that sweat equity can carry a business only so far. Eventually a larger transformation has to occur. "We don't have echelons here," notes Pedersen. "After you show here, there's not really a next level of gallery to which you can aspire. They're all basically on the same plane. It's not like Queen West, where you have student level and emerging galleries feeding into more upscale, more established venues."

According to Dave Kuruc, who with his wife Teresa Devries, owns and operates the arts supply store Mixed Media, the transformation begins with infill. Street level arts economy relies on human traffic, and the Art Crawl simply illustrates the pedestrian culture needed on the street on a day-to-day basis. Over the course of a 20-minute discussion in his shop, Kuruc rhymes off a list of necessary initiatives: Traffic calming on Cannon and Wilson Streets; dealing with the husks of the former Tivoli Theatre and Lister Block; avoiding cosmetic improvements that do nothing to elevate the economic life of the area; and encouraging new ventures that will draw people to the area more frequently. He also suggests that the arts community itself can start changing. There needs to be a critical culture, he says, a review culture. Businesses should be constantly tinkering with their formulas in order to draw some attention. Artists themselves can re-think their practices, toying with ways to generate income off their abilities. "More than anything," he says, "we need to see 50 to 60 new spaces opening up in the next few years, and primarily second-floor living and office spaces. It's not hard to find them. It's just hard to convince building owners, many of whom are just sitting on their properties doing nothing, to activate their spaces."

Kuruc, who is renovating the units above his store, points to his neighbours to the south, artist/DJ Gary Buttrum and lawyer Kieran Dickson, who own and are re-fitting three buildings on the street. Some of the apartment units on the upper floors of these buildings haven't been occupied since the 1960s, and the pair have been slowly re-wiring and replacing windows, plumbing and heating systems. This is a labour of love, not business. "We invest in order to see increase in the quality of living," Buttrum says of Dickson and himself. "James North cannot rely on people driving down here. There have to be people living on the street. And people want to live down here, want reasonable apartments in interesting buildings that are part of interesting neighbourhoods. And if we don't get people downtown, then downtown dies."

In one sense, there's already a solid foundation in place. Unlike much of the real estate in the core, James north of Cannon is bracketed by single-family homes for much of its length. That underlying familiarity, never far from the commercial mix, makes it a palatable introduction to urban life. A portal for people to sample the aestheticized grittiness of James North, the Art Crawl derives authenticity from the strip's eclectic mix. Soup kitchens, street grocers, raucous Portuguese sports bars, multicultural eateries and sporadic eruptions of violence all contribute to the air of uncontrived Bohemia. Buttrum insists that the key to James North is measured progress: projects paced

out in modest, affordable ways over the long term. This advice certainly bears out when you consider that larger, flashier projects, like the Canadian Youth Ballet's 2006 announcement of a multi-million dollar reinvention of the dejected Tivoli Theatre site and a \$3.15-million, five-storey retail/office building proposed that same year for the corner of James and Vine, have yet to crystallize.

Most notably, the Hamilton Artists Inc.'s grand plan to makeover the former Jerry's Man Shop into a flashy glass-enclosed contemporary art centre has turned into something of an endurance test. A 16-month process to secure funds from Canadian Heritage and the municipal government has drained

the energy of its staff and membership. It has also diminished their influence on James North because they have been without a main exhibition space for over a year, relying on off-site programs and smaller exhibitions in their members' gallery. Tides are turning however. Federal funding for their project has finally been secured, their Board of Directors reinvigorated, and their strategy for the building has been revised in order to allow a more modest renovation to occur in phases. When it activates its main space this year, the Inc. can begin expanding its profile.

Indeed, the street's three artist-run centres – the Inc, the Factory (a centre for film and video) and The Print Studio – have the potential to play the most crucial role to the health of the street. This is largely because they're larger organizations with paid staff, are committed to paying exhibition fees and generally exhibit work on a larger and more professional scale. They have the potential to secure private and public money and mobilize audiences and community partnership in a way that smaller private ventures simply can't.

The Print Studio is arguably the most vibrant of the three. Its polished exhibitions not only describe a mobilized local community of printmakers, but routinely feature master printmakers from all over the world. The organization is still very much within the rubric of a modest, scaled-back organization, however, and is just now beginning to inch away from the subsidy of founder Colina Maxwell, who owns the building and serves as the organization's director.

"We are always going to be underfunded, understaffed, and working on a lean budget," says Maxwell. "At the same time, we're working at a very diversified set of interests. The Print Studio is a production space, it is a presentation space and it is a community centre. And we need to be able to draw support and be funded for each of those things. That's how we will be able to grow.

"One of the things an artist-run centre can do is to take charge of the perception of arts and artists in this town," she adds. "When we invite people to invest in the arts, we have to show them that they aren't just subsidizing a painter or a print maker. Art is not just about putting pictures on walls or in people's homes. It is about how art enlists the participation of the entire community. How the work being done here on James is not just about art, but about identity, the identity of this city."

According to a report issued by Hill Strategies Research, a locally based company that compiles data on the arts, Canada's culture sector has been growing steadily in the last few decades. The current number of people working in culture is significant (as many as the automotive forestry and banking sectors combined), and their level of education is above average. But the average in income for an artist hovers near the poverty line, around \$22,700 (two-thirds the national average), with the median income plummeting to about \$12,900. Female artists earn less than their male counterparts, and visible minority artists earn even less. Although culture is an active industry, it's not an especially lucrative one.

In a way, these sobering findings also reflect the realities of James North, a street where culture toils endlessly, waiting for an economy to eventually emerge. **HM**

*Photos of Dane Pedersen and Bryce Kanbara by Stephanie Bell / Illustration by Sylvia Nickerson*