





TALES FROM THE CAMERON

The Goldstein Chapel, the Alien Lounge, the travelling ant as ad hoc hood ornament, and other mixed-media legends in the making

By HANS WERNER

Undoubtedly one of the more successful performance pieces on record must be The Hummer Sisters' mayoralty campaign in 1982, with its headquarters in a bizarre Queen Street West Toronto pub called the Cameron House. The Hummers (performers Deanne Taylor, Janet Burke and Jennifer Dean) managed to capture one out of every 10 ballots cast, enough to put them in second place behind Toronto Mayor Art Eggleton, and to bring Eggleton's communications adviser Bill Marshall down to the Cameron, not because he needed a drink, but because he needed to take notes. Of such stuff are legends made.

As one of the pub's four owners said some two hours after they found themselves the unlikely proprietors of a grotty downtown beer parlour inhabited by old down-and-outers

Queen Street irregulars (from left to right): Robert Nasrith, Paul Sannella, Paul Bettis, Graham Greene, Robert Stewart, Carl Johnson, Derek Caines, Pauline Choi, Michael Hollingsworth, Handsome Ned, Janet Burke, Herb Tookey.



Toronto artist Pauline Choi (above) exults in the Cameron's bar. Last fall she decorated the walls of one of the upstairs bathrooms; members of the public were invited to enjoy the view from the tub. On every level the Cameron blurs the lines between museum, pub and half-star hostel.

and younger neighbourhood toughs. "If we can't make a living, let's make a legend." They did. Since then the Cameron has facetiously become known as a hostel for poor artists who can often find a room and money for materials in exchange for artwork, and "Heartbreak Hotel" to those who burrow away in its upper warren of rooms whenever their connubial arrangements are subject to abrupt alteration. It is where hopeful out-of-towners gravitate to make contacts and pick up a few hints as to just where the Toronto art world's intricately political paths may actually be paved with gold.

It is a showcase for rock bands and musicians, a "shakedown place", a matrix for the cross-over of artforms and the incubator for

hatching artistic events usually seasoned with a good dash of brash self-advertisement. To a younger generation of art students the Cameron has already become an institution that's been around longer than they can remember, a conception evidently shared by the *Toronto Star* earlier this year when it called the place "an anchor in a sea of change". Not bad for a pub whose present incarnation began in October 1981.

Way back then, Queen Street West, surrounded by blocks of artists' lofts in run-down warehouses, was still pretty dark at night. Herb Tookey had just got his Ph.D. in psychology and wasn't seeing much of a future in it, while Paul Sannella was just returning from writing kids' shows for CBS in Los Angeles. They got together with Sannella's sister, Ann-Marie, who had been working in bars for eight years, and brother, Michael, who was in the mortgage business, and much to their surprise found themselves buying the Cameron. Surprise,

because they were originally looking for a building where they could rent out space to artists, cheap. Instead, they ended up providing a space where artists could hang out and drink beer, also cheap. But this was also the time when a core group of young Toronto artists calling themselves Chroma-Zone was just beginning to unfurl the banner of "the new art" and planting it firmly between the eyes of the critics.

Tookey, who had been living in the area for some years, knew "chromazoid" Rae Johnson and commissioned her to do a series of paintings for the Cameron's back room, where the rock bands blast away amid mock-Tudor trimmings. "It was putting art back where people are," Johnson recalls, and since the works were based on Polaroids of the Cameron's opening bash, it was also "art returning to its origins." The *Globe and Mail's* John Bentley Mays gave the show his blessing and the Cameron legend was well under way.

As was the tradition of showing paintings

On Saturday afternoons, Handsome Ned leads the Cameron's older habitués — serious drinkers one and all — in rockabilly song.

and photographic exhibitions, among them works by Andy Fabo, Eldon Garnet and Isaac Applebaum, each show hanging around for some six months until it became part of the furniture, blurring the distinction between museum and pub. But if you're going to have a museum that's a pub, you might as well have a pub that's a museum. So, while artist Sybil Goldstein was waitressing at the Cameron, a gorgeous old Victorian ceiling discovered concealed high above the pub's drop-ceiling seized her with an irresistible desire to do a painting. After about a year of planning and eight months work in her studio, the finished work was finally installed (with marbelling by Vancouver scene-painter Hugh Poole) as the old-timers cheered Goldstein on with shouts of "The more you drink, the better it looks." Known as "the Goldstein Chapel", the bright, neo-rococo depiction of the marriage of Bacchus and Ariadne, with its many personal references including Goldstein's cat Ratso doubling as a mythological tiger pup, now dominates the main beer parlour. *This Is Paradise*, Tom Dean's conceptual piece, responds from the lower walls.

But paradise has vermin, or at least outsize antlike creatures, crawling up its outer walls of dull soot-black brick. Spawnd from the brain of Napoleon Brousseau, better known as Napo B. of the artist trio Fast Würms, the creatures are the Cameron's unmistakable trademark. One was even stolen and later sighted — perhaps as another example of bringing art to the people — as a hood ornament on somebody's car. Napo B. was brought into the Cameron orbit by his friend Paul Sannella, who offered the artist a room when he was in desperate need of one. In return, Napo produced the antediluvian grotto complete with troglodyte-like fossil traces embedded in the amorphous mass that serves as the pub's entrance, and painted the hall and landing leading up to the second floor with flying phalli winging through a riot of light that has exploded into all the colours of the prism. Finding himself with nothing better to do one day, Napo B. also decorated what was ever after known as the Alien Lounge, four panels of which eventually found their way into the Art Gallery of Ontario when the pub was stripped down to make a home for Toronto's avant-garde Videocabaret.

All of which proves that if you give artists enough space, they'll fill it. Either by living and working in it, like Videocab's artistic directors Hummer Deanne Taylor (described by the *Globe* as "the Northrop Frye of the art underground" and once-upon-a-time TV character Maggie Muggins), playwright Michael Hollingsworth (fresh from his recent success, *History of the Village of Small Huts*), singer Molly Johnson and three of the four Cameron owners. Or by covering its surface, like some of the new generation of painters such as Rae Johnson and Joanne Todd, who were among the many artists who turned out for a May Day painting spree earlier this year when city authorities advised the Cameron to remove the accumulated graffiti from its side wall. The wall is now one continuous visual fantasy, another Toronto landmark and flashy ad for a pub that doesn't need to advertise because it draws attention to itself by arrogantly being what it is.

And what it is isn't for everyone, although anyone with any interest in the Toronto art scene ends up there sooner or later. Even the curious from Toronto's venerable Rosedale district have been known to wander through after a particularly good review, acting as if they were in the AGO as they crane their necks over the heads of the afternoon agglomeration of old regulars still arguing about the last war and boozing away their pensions. Until the younger crowd arrives in the evening, the old guys continue to rule the place, having during the last four years become thoroughly integrated into the new scene, particularly through the efforts of the Cameron's young rockabilly Handsome Ned, who knows them all by name and even invites them to take part in the lively Saturday matinees he's been performing for three years running. The Cameron is a community.

It's an environment and an installation. But most of all, it's a performance. A case in point was last year's "meditation on economics", which consisted of five-dollar scrip designed by Rae Johnson, endorsed by the Cameron, and still good currency in neighbourhood establishments that artists are likely to frequent. A real work of conceptual art, spun out of the mind of Herb Tookey. Just like the Cameron itself. [X]

Hans Werner is a Toronto writer and translator.



Herb Tookey and Paul Sannella (above) grace the Cameron's entranceway. In 1981, they decided (along with Sannella's brother and sister) to buy a space that they could rent cheaply to artists. Since then, it's become an institution, an installation and a rapidly unfolding performance.

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