

My TOWN CRIER

IT'S ALL ABOUT COMMUNITY.

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By Eric Emin Wood

10 years of selling art on Yonge Street

Summerhill gallery celebrates anniversary of 'challenging' business



ERIC EMIN WOOD/TOWN CRIER

LABOUR OF LOVE: Muse Gallery director Jay Belmore surrounded by the contemporary Canadian art he has loved promoting and selling for the past 10 years.

With near-constant road construction, skyrocketing rents, and dearth of parking, it's astounding when any store on Yonge Street is able to celebrate a decade in business, let alone an art gallery.

Yet, despite the apparent odds, Summerhill's Muse Gallery will be celebrating its 10th anniversary in October.

"The store beside us has changed hands three times, and we've witnessed crews tear up Yonge Street for various cable and piping projects at least 10 times," Muse Gallery director and co-owner Jay Belmore admits. "But it's been going very well for 10 years, despite the 2008 downturn. And most importantly, we love what we do."

Belmore, himself a painter and illustrator whose work has appeared in high-profile magazines including *Esquire* and *Newsweek* during his 25-year career, opened Muse in 2005 with wife Lisa Low to showcase their favourite Canadian contemporary art.

They decided on Summerhill as the gallery's location partly because of Belmore's memories: his brother was living in the neighbourhood when he first arrived in Toronto from Alberta 32 years ago, and he stayed there while looking for an apartment.

"I loved this area," Belmore recalls. "It was very genteel — beautiful trees, upscale businesses. I really wanted to be part of this."

They also chose the neighbourhood because there were no other contemporary galleries nearby. (D & E Lake Ltd., across the street, specializes in rare books and pre-2000 art.)

"I didn't want to become part of a community like Queen West or Yorkville," Belmore says. "I wanted to be off on my own and have the solitude needed to make your own decisions and not be influenced by other galleries."

Asked if he and his wife look for any themes in particular, Belmore cites two broad guidelines. One is the "hair standing on the back of your neck" feeling inspired by all great works of art.

"Where they live has a huge influence on Canadians," he says, showcasing some of his favourite work. "You get a lot of paintings that are direct reflections of nature, or surroundings such as the artist's studio in Montreal looking down at the tangled clotheslines in the alleyway, which are then abstracted."

As an example, he points to "Scattered Showers," an abstract by artist Jean Jewer, whose exhibition, *The Elements*, runs at the gallery until Oct. 15.

The daughter of a Newfoundland fisherman, Jewer has used natural shades of blue, green and pink punctuated with splotches of black and white to depict what's left of a tidal pool after most of it has been swept into the ocean. "It's all about nature and its various effects – wind and erosion and swirling things around," Belmore says.

Though challenging, the gallery business has been a rewarding one for Belmore, who partly credits his success to a general movement in the Canadian art world towards self-education and the discovery of new work.

"We have clients, who haven't changed their art in 40 years, suddenly saying 'it's time for a change,'" he says. "It's an exciting, very gratifying process to introduce that sort of client, or a younger client, to contemporary art for the very first time."