

Who puts the “art” in Art with Heart?

by David Liss

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Working within the highly specialized field of contemporary art, I am most intrigued when art intersects with everyday life to reveal something profound and inexplicable about humanity, something reflective of our character and identity, of who we are. Considering the success and longevity of the annual Casey House Art with Heart auction over the last 18 years, I see this event representing a unique confluence between art and lived experience.

Each year since 1994, a dynamic and knowledgeable group of individuals—artists, gallerists, curators and consultants, administrators, designers, collectors, auctioneers, donors and sponsors, framers, art handlers, professionals and individuals from outside of the arts—come together to produce an extraordinary event that has generated over \$4 million for Casey House, a facility created by people to care for people in a spirit of empathy and generosity. Having co-curated the auction from 2002 through 2004, I can state with certainty that this is no insignificant feat, no easy engagement of one’s skills and expertise, no lack of belief in the relevance of art and its ability to make a difference, no lack of commitment to contributing to the community, no small amount of straight-up hard work. As the auction’s honorary director and patron saint June Callwood declared in the 2003 catalogue, Art with Heart is all about the “drudgery and glory.”

Of course, there are many similar worthwhile endeavours on the calendar in Toronto and communities across Canada. Nevertheless, Art with Heart has enjoyed unusual longevity and astonishing success to become the pre-eminent live fundraising art auction in Canada. This is surely no accident. Simon Clements, co-chair of this year’s curatorial committee, attributes the event’s sustained success to it “consistently being well managed and professional, and its ability to intersect the interests of artists, gallerists and collectors, with a demonstrated history of strong sales.”

Without a doubt, many other motivations and factors are at play, besides the very worthy cause and the bottom line. The event hinges on the generosity of artists—not necessarily the most affluent among us—as their works drive the effort. Behind the scenes, though, a large part of Art with Heart’s success can be attributed to the curatorial committee’s rigorous selection of work that is intended to appeal to both seasoned collectors and first-time buyers. The selection of the curators, then, is a crucial component of the auction’s profile, integrity and financial success. Since Art with Heart’s inception, nearly 200 people from diverse backgrounds have curated or served on the selection committees. What they share in common is the ability to take into account all of the factors and variables during the selection process, and to engage their



Top: Jane Hutchison, Robert Mitchell.

Middle: Simon Clements, Camilla Singh.

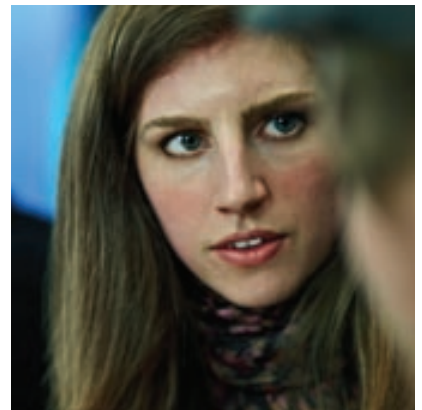
Bottom: Steven Rapkin, Brian Pel.

Right: Simon Clements, Erin Stump.

“I think Art with Heart supports a great cause. I also think it’s the best collection of Canadian contemporary art in an auction format across the country.” —Mark Robert, Managing Partner, The Carlu



Top: Steven Rapkin, Brian Pel.
Middle right: Vanessa Nicholas.
Bottom right: Perry Tung.
Left: Brian Pel, Steven Rapkin.



knowledge of art and markets, as well as their relationships with artists and galleries. The process involves extensive research, including visits to exhibitions and studios, scouring publications, auction catalogues and websites, probing contacts for tips, championing and defending selections with the other committee members, and then facing the inevitable art-world politics. In addition to keeping an eye on the bottom line, the curators must also strike a balance between works that are challenging and those that may be more readily appealing, and between established artists with strong histories of sales at the auction and less familiar names. It's a tricky bit of business.

For this year's auction, a curatorial committee of 16, assembled under the guidance of curatorial co-chairs Clements and Toronto gallerist Erin Stump, includes professional curators, artists, collectors, gallerists, consultants and enthusiasts. According to Clements, the intention in organizing the committee was to gain a wide spectrum of perspectives from curators, artists, collectors, academics and corporate consultants in order to provide a broad scope of work by artists at all stages of practice. Since Clements feels that the viability of Art with Heart depends on evolution and growth, efforts have been made in recent years to expand the reach of the collection beyond its home base in Toronto. It is important that the auction represents the best of contemporary art right across Canada. Fortunately, we are blessed with an amazing pool of great artists who are willing to share their imaginative talents beyond the confines of the art world.

Artists whose work is selected for the Art with Heart collection receive a high degree of visibility; many young artists have been discovered through the auction and the always impressively designed catalogue. Fortunately too, many art dealers in Canada are, despite being involved in a notoriously tough business, willing to donate to a cause beyond their own. We should never take this generosity for granted. This year there are artists and galleries participating from Newfoundland to British Columbia, as well as New York. The expanded scope of this year's collection provides opportunities for exposure for artists and galleries in Canada's largest population base; at the same time it allows collectors and curators opportunities to see work that otherwise might not be known or accessible in Toronto.

This year, the committee looked at over 200 artists and, in the end, selected just 86 lots. Curatorial committee member and art collector Pam Dinsmore provides some insight into the challenges of the process:

There is lots of heated discussion and debate, and we have to be ready to defend our selections! The process is enjoyable, although sometimes you feel a bit discouraged if your selection does not make it in—after all, majority rules. To some degree, Art with Heart has brought our audience along over the years. I think they have faith in us, and they expect us to continue to push the envelope and present works that represent the best of the contemporary art scene in Canada.

The live auction is, as live auctions always are, a spectacle of human drama, featuring large sums of money changing hands, winners and losers, cheers and jeers, unpredictability and risk, a roll of the dice that we find ourselves drawn to. The auctioneers, bidders, collectors and audience in attendance generate a palpable buzz of edgy excitement in the room that keeps the spirit of the event alive and absolutely worth the price of admission. It is the exhilaration and character—the human elements of the event—that draw people back year after year.

“I’ve learned a lot about Canadian contemporary art through this event, and I think it’s really well chosen, and it’s a really great mix. There hasn’t been one year where I wasn’t just blown away by what was available.” —Stephen Brunt, The Globe and Mail columnist



Top: Curatorial committee at work.

Bottom: Jacques Bernier.

While “risk” at an art auction should never be confused with what is at stake for those suffering life-or-death medical conditions, it is ultimately the humanity of the event that propels its success. Having spoken with participants past and present, I know that one common factor motivates them all, whether they be artists, collectors, curators or organizers: Art with Heart is a way for them to give something back to the community, to the world in which they live. It is a way to connect with our fellow beings.

It strikes me that this spirit of connection is the same inherent impulse behind the uniquely human process of creativity and art making. It makes perfect sense then, that art is the driving force and binding agent at the core of a charitable act. As a visual language or a code of communication, art conveys the often-mysterious realities that lie just beyond the grasp of ordinary consciousness and understanding. The “heart” in Art with Heart refers to an inexplicable emotion, that part of our being that generates love and compassion, that aspiration to connectivity that makes us human.

Certainly, there must be something similarly inexplicable about the success of this event. Art Gallery of Ontario Director and CEO Matthew Teitelbaum, long-time honorary chair of Art with Heart, offers a possible explanation for these less tangible factors of the auction’s success:

Art with Heart has been an important part of my life, and that of our community, for more than a decade. It has meant a lot to me because it so evidently celebrates the imagination and encourages generosity. It is a project filled with optimism in relation to a great and soul-filling cause. Art in action and serving as a catalyst for change: a good definition of magic.

So there is no “logical” explanation for the long-running success of Art with Heart. It really is about imagination and generosity: characteristic aspects of the human condition that make us who we are. It is people, lots of them, coming together in empathy with other people, that put the “art” in Art with Heart.

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