



Photographer Ross den Otter focuses on the eclectic mix of businesses in this streetscape from Main + Hastings.

# Artist captures changing streets

> BY JANET SMITH

Since moving here from Vancouver Island in the late 1980s, artist Ross den Otter has always lived or worked within two blocks of Hastings or Main Street. But it's only in the last two years that he's been meticulously documenting those historical arteries on film, capturing carefully selected locations undergoing a sea change.

"I don't remember much of what Vancouver looked like before Yaletown and the Expo lands got developed, which is part of why I'm doing this," explains the artist over the phone before hanging the resulting street views in his Main + Hastings exhibit at the Seymour Art Gallery in Deep Cove. "I was interested in how the mixed use of buildings that have been around for a while develops over time. It was about documenting those spaces that develop an eclectic mix of uses."

In one of his long, narrow streetscapes, Excellent Auto Repair Centre abuts a bridal shop, which sits next to a waffle house. In others, coin laundries with nondescript upstairs housing sandwich a medicinal-marijuana shop, and a seemingly vacant low-rise strip features a condo pre-buy billboard sitting near a crate store. Apparently, the offbeat mix of businesses and residences could only exist on Hastings and Main streets because they are older neighbourhoods and have a grandfathering of now disallowed uses.

"It was not consciously done as a series," den Otter adds of the way the project started, "but as a way to archive the time we're at *now*."

That time is one of gentrification and other highly loaded issues, as condos are planned for the Hastings strip and the poor and addicted battle it out against development along the grittier parts of Main. So it's interesting to find den Otter's somewhat desolate photographs displayed in the charming hamlet of Deep Cove. By removing them from the heated territory of Hastings and Main (though den Otter has chosen not to shoot the infamous intersection itself) we can see the streetscapes in a new light, explains the gallery's interim curator, Hilary Letwin.

"With the views of primarily architectural details, we're being forced to consider the formal qualities of the buildings and of the photographs," she explains over the phone, adding that the photos will be placed around the gallery nonchronologically for a further sense of geographical displacement. "These are historical buildings that may have seen better days, and now there's such a diversity of businesses and signage. These are slices in time, but very carefully selected ones."

As he's shot the project, den Otter has seen the blocks literally change in front of his eyes over the past two years. Businesses have moved up or down the street (Excellent Auto Repair used to be beside the Glenhaven Memorial Chapel, for instance) or changed uses (the Fox Cabaret was still an adult theatre, instead of a live-music club, when he captured it next to the historic Goh

Ballet Academy), and other blocks have disappeared entirely under the wrecking ball. "I'll drive along and kick myself for not taking a picture of the block two weeks ago," den Otter says. "It's been a bit frustrating because of the pace of it."

Letwin points out the works are unique because they're neither purely documentary nor wholly digitally altered. Den Otter shoots the blocks in vertical slices to achieve the highest resolution, then pastes them together in Photoshop. That way, he's able to get rid of or move passersby and cars, though he also tries to shoot during hours of parking restrictions. That's had a curious, unintended effect on the mood of his photos.

"When I went into it I had a sense that I would record them as objective overviews of what was there and I didn't want to put any emotion into them," den Otter says. "But oddly, the time of day I've shot them, mostly because of the parking restrictions, did make the photos seem somewhat lonely." The plethora of For Lease signs adds to that feeling as well.

Den Otter has put plenty of footwork into these neighbourhoods on the brink of massive change, but he's not done yet. "I don't think the project is finished, necessarily," he says, adding of the work completed so far: "I concentrated on buildings that wouldn't last that much longer." ♦

Main + Hastings is at the Seymour Art Gallery from Wednesday (August 13) to September 6.