

Art rocks, man

Spin Gallery latest emblem of hip status



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Visual Art

Jeff Stober has this theory. Art is the new rock 'n' roll.

You pay attention to Stober, and not just because he's the owner of the Drake Hotel, although I suppose that's reason enough these days.

Lineups of vibe-seeking suburbanites outside his door most weekends are the show what \$6 million in renovations can bring to an erstwhile flophouse.

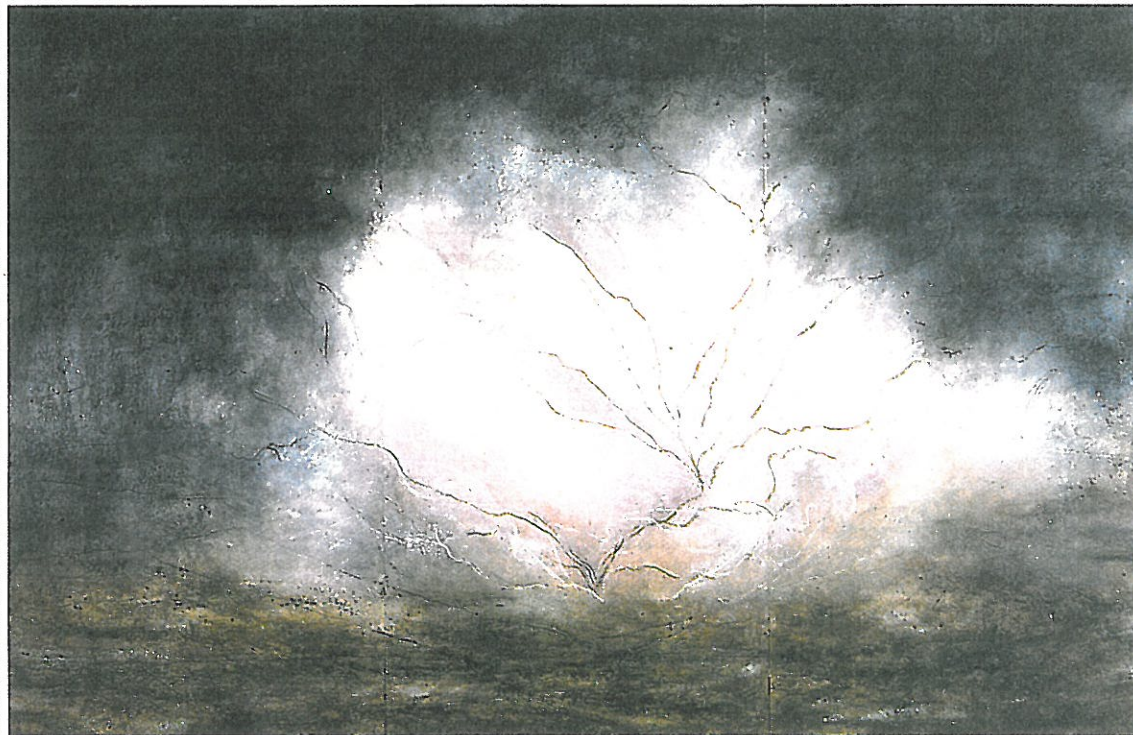
"They want to get into the bar," says Stober. "There's a lounge downstairs. You don't have to wait, I tell them. It's great. But they wait."

But this is the point, as Stober should know. Today, the boutique hotel is what a bar-and-ballroom joint like the El Mocambo on Spadina Ave. was to the '60s and '70s. The children and grandchildren of crazed Buffalo Springfield fans who jammed into the Fillmore East in New York City are now waiting in line outside the suburban-friendly Mercer Hotel in Manhattan for lunch, before heading out to the SoHo shops and galleries.

If still further proof of the wisdom of Stober's theory is needed, you need only walk a bit east — the Drake is at 1150 Queen W. — to 1100 Queen W., the new digs for the Spin Gallery, and its debut "Nightscapes" show from Montreal artist Dana Velan.

For years, Spin's daring directing duo of Stewart Pollock and Juno Youn once positioned their space as the outsiders' gallery, showing plenty of queer art and some rougher stuff with a crash-and-burn aesthetic.

If bikers made anything more than tattoos and bombs, they'd probably get shown here. Yet Spin's move to a posh second-floor loft over a vintage clothing store signals a change. As it yields to the gravitational pull exerted by Queen St. W., its inevitable upscale climb has



Montreal artist Dana Velan's large "Nightscapes" paintings at the Spin Gallery on Queen St. W. reminds one of FM album rock in their scope and impact.

begun.

Upscale is reflected in Spin's new digs. A great high-ceilinged environment overlooking Queen with a spectacular amount of wall space, it's one of the more impressive gallery spaces in town. Velan's show (on to April 17), with its swirly mural-sized paintings on pale Mylar, keeps the gallery's new promise. If art could ever be compared to FM album rock, this is it.

In general, such a comparison cannot be taken as a good thing. For me, two of the more frightening words spoken over the course of the past 25 years are "Pink Floyd." But I'll take Velan's dark-side-of-the-moon tripping any time, even when it results in Floyd-y titles like *Ethereal* (2003) or *Field* (2003).

A description of the size and scope of the paintings, a number 90 inches by 126 inches in size, can be misleading. They're big but you sense that they could have been much bigger. Velan's approach is meticulous — lines as fine as veins criss-cross the surface of *Ethereal* like capillaries between tiny arteries — yet the painting is terrifically bravura and the results are hugely dramatic, if sometimes over the top (à la old album rock).

In effect, Velan both conjures up an explosion only to contain it, but just

barely.

This can be dangerous to your understanding, at least when it comes to describing what's there. The language used to describe these pieces tends to be as expansive as the art, with words like "spirituality" and "mutability" cropping up.

"We are deep within ourselves at the same time as we are in the far reaches of the nebulae, attempting to conjure for ourselves a home," writes critic Victoria LeBlanc about the pictures at this exhibition. She goes on to talk elsewhere about "a fragile intercourse between humanity and cosmos."

What's also going on in this painting is something as pointed as a piercing pain — an awful lot of loneliness. Fleeing what was Czechoslovakia in the rebellion of 1968, Velan was educated in Montreal in the '70s and '80s, but has remained somewhat of an outsider, often concentrating on making art books.

A visit to the remote lava fields in Iceland provided the spiritual jumping-off point for "Nightscapes," although the painting is a lot more fun, and revealing, if you don't spend much time looking for craters, rivers of mud or whatever.

Field, the most imposing work of the collection (although not my favourite),

could be Velan's heated vision of a muddy meadow somewhere, or a magnetic force field — lacy white lines flicker over the molten red-bronze "background" like electrical impulses gone bonkers — or both, making it both earthy and spacey for those after those kinds of things.

But it feels even more vibrant than you let its rush of shapes take over, as they appear headed for a collision somewhere well beyond and to the right of the painting itself.

Whew. It's almost enough to make me look and see if I still have that copy of Floyd's *Atom Heart Mother* — it's where the band peaked, to my mind — so I can hear "Alan's Psychedelic Breakfast."

Almost. Certainly, the art-as-rock analogy doesn't end here. In fact, the closer one looks at the art/rock parallels, the better the comparison plays out:

THE BRITISH FACTOR: As in the '60s with John, Paul, Mick and the rest, a recent British invasion has brought new edge to the scene with the likes Chris Ofili, the Chapman brothers and Sam Taylor-Wood (who on her own sounds like the old Stones lineup.)

STAR POWER: Star power still matters, of course, but these days it's the art it-

self, not the artist. Artists are like the famous producers, or promoters of old, making it happen while getting rich in the process. But it's conceptual artists Damien Hirst's famous 17-foot embalmed tiger shark that's the new David Bowie, not Damien Hirst. (Look at the teeth to see the connection.)

FESTIVALS: To Stober, art fairs — he'd just come back from the recent Armoury Show in New York — are the new rock festivals. Certainly art expos like Art Basel at Miami Beach last December offer a good enough reason to book a trip to frolic in the sun. What's better, there are so many art fairs these days you don't have to wait for the one you want to start, which still remains a concern at any Grateful Dead gig.

POWER MOVES: Speaking of all-star lineups, three provocative shows open today at The Power Plant. Besides Belgian artist "Wim Delvoeye: Cloaca, New And Improved," you'll find "Republic Of Love," with Shary Boyle, Tony Romano, Jay Isaac and Paul P., along with "Daniel Richter: Pink Flag-White Horse," a representation of recent painting from the Berlin-based painter. The three exhibitions continue to May 23.

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