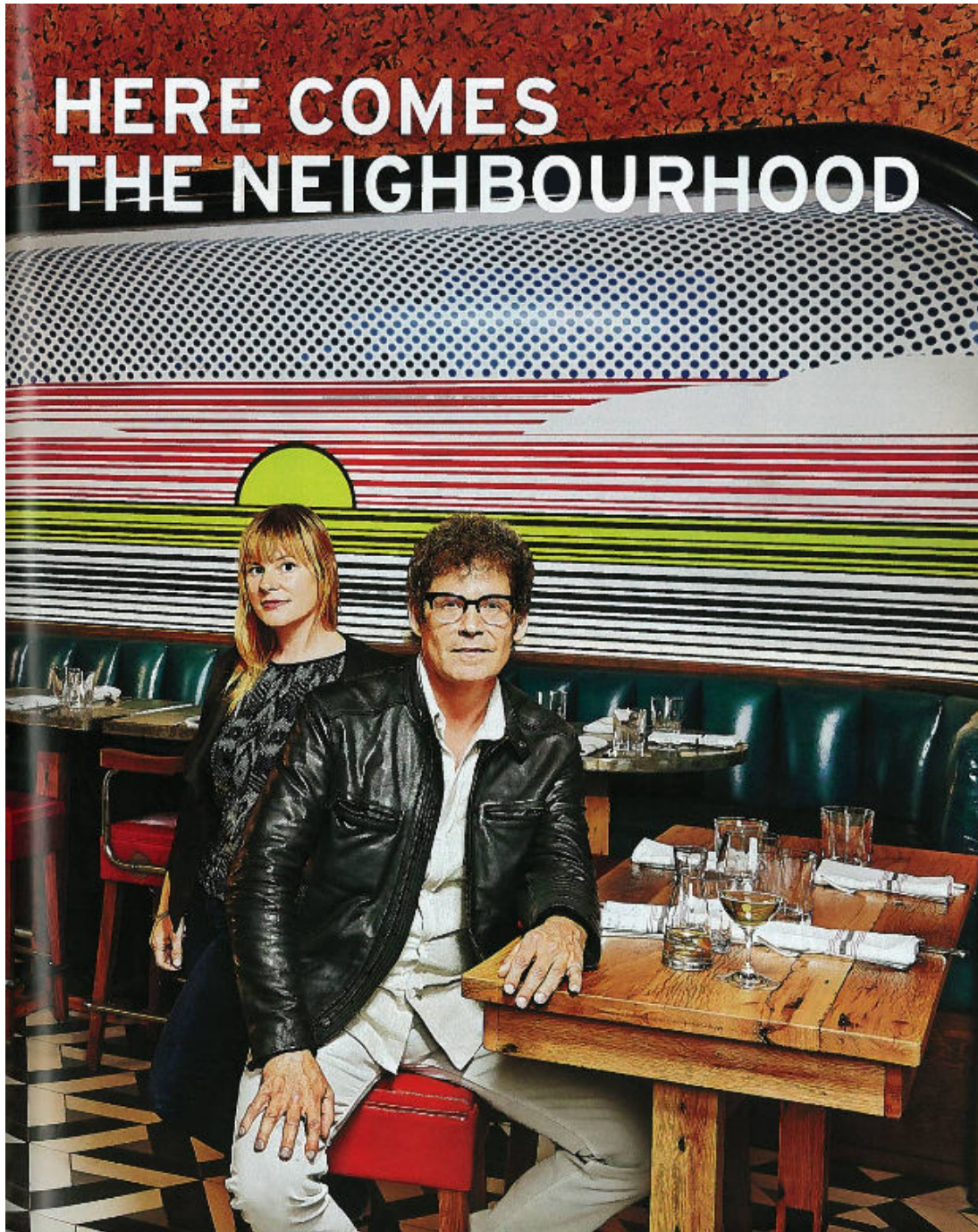


CANADIANART

Drake One Fifty: Here Comes the Neighbourhood

By David Balzer

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TORONTO The time has come. "Queen West"—like "Montmartre," "Palm Springs" and "Soho" before it—is no longer just a community but a movable, exportable brand-cum-aesthetic. At least that's what Jeff Stober thinks—and, indeed, is proving.

Best known as the proprietor of Toronto's Drake Hotel—which muscled its way into the city's rapidly gentrifying Queen West in the mid-2000s, using the area's shabby chic and artist denizens as inspiration—Stober has any number of tricks up his sleeve. In recent years, he initiated a "general store" boutique selling designer and artist fare; the yet-to-be-opened Drake Devonshire Inn in Prince Edward County (a.k.a. "Drake by the Lake"); and the just-opened Drake One Fifty at 150 York Street in Toronto's Financial District.

What makes a space patently "Drake" and, in turn, Queen West-y? For Stober, the first and most important answer is art. "With a traditional gallery, people go to the art. In our case, we're dealing with an unsuspecting audience, and visual art commissions that allow us to educate, titillate and expose people to an understanding they might not have had previously." He adds, emphatically: "We don't hang art as window dressing."

At Drake One Fifty, artist commissions are seamlessly blended into the burnished, handcrafted, funky environment. They come from high-profile figures across the country. In the front vestibule vitrine, Halifax-based Eleanor King provides *Cuppa Cups* (2013), a coiling caterpillar of used coffee cups (the perfect medium for Bay Street's over-caFFEinated traders). Inside, the 58-foot-long bar displays the cheeky text-based vinyl adhesive work *Eeeaaacchh Identical* (2013) by Toronto's Micah Lexier; *Universal Luggage Bar Code Sunset: Vancouver to Toronto* (2013), a wall-mounted vinyl adhesive artwork from Vancouver's Douglas Coupland; and a painted wallwork, *Quid Pro Quo* (2013), by Halifax's Garry Neill Kennedy. Inset screens in the washrooms play films by Winnipeg's Guy Maddin. All works, says Drake curator Mia Nielsen, will be replaced by new commissions in half a year to a year's time.

"We're attracted to history, perspective, a notion of timelessness," explains Stober. Drake One Fifty provides an interesting case: at the foot of a fairly soulless contemporary office tower, it had no original, retro decor elements to draw out—so Stober, Nielsen and their team, in concert with Martin Brudnizki, famed designer of a number of international Soho Houses, "Drake-ified" it. Vintage lighting fixtures, iron window mullions, green leather, cork, marble and old-growth wood from Georgian Bay—shaped into a beautiful pergola by local designers Brothers Dressler—bring that Queen West feel to this very non-Queen West venue.

"Downtown is changing so much," says Nielsen. "It's growing, and part of that growth is through major international brands like Momofuku. It's awesome, but this is our town. There are some great things that have been happening here, for a long time."

"We are a Toronto brand," concludes Stober, "and we know the artists we are working with. We are interested. And we are in it for the long haul." ■

Owner Jeff Stober and curator Mia Nielsen
at Drake One Fifty, September 2013

