

André Desjardins: stepping out of the frame



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La Presse

The New York Art Expo is the world's largest fine art trade show. Each year, approximately 40,000 agencies, art collectors and dealers from all over the world converge towards this contemporary art Mecca.



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In 2008, artist André Desjardins, a former graphic designer, signed a contract with Masterpiece Publishing, a Los Angeles-based agency managing the careers of only a dozen painters and sculptors.

Photo: Bernard Brault, La Presse

Renting the smallest booth (80 square feet) costs US\$4,700. Most of the exhibitors do it through their galleries. Rare are those who tackle this endeavour alone and without any references. Yet, in March of 2008, this is the challenge that Montréal artist André Desjardins chose to take on.

- [Voir les oeuvres de André Desjardins sur Masterpiece Publishing](#)
- See André Desjardins' works on Masterpiece Publishing

With a calling card summing up to his willingness, a reservation number for a 200 square feet booth and 26 freshly finished paintings, he waived goodbye to his three teenagers in Montréal. Accompanied by his girlfriend, film-maker H  l  ne B  langer-Martin, he jumped in his car. Destination: the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center on 34th Street in Manhattan.

His past experience as graphic designer and mostly as owner of the communications agency he sold in 2001 reassured Desjardins on one point: he did know how to count. He worked out that if he sold five or six paintings, he could come back to Montr  al without being ruined.

Once he got to his small booth lost in the middle of the frighteningly gigantic art fair, he started to hang up his paintings. The ochre and terra-cotta hues created by the mix of oil and grinded charcoal powder used to craft human faces captured in various moments of interiority attracted attention. After one hour, he had already sold five paintings. Four days later, all 26 works had vanished. As Desjardins was packing up to leave, a man in his 40's walked up to him. Daniel Winn was the CEO of Masterpiece Publishing, a Los Angeles-based agency, connected to a network of 600 galleries and managing the careers of only a dozen painters and sculptors. The CEO had only one question for Andr   Desjardins. Do you want to join our portfolio of artists?

In the spring of 2008, Andr   Desjardins signed a ten-year contract with Masterpiece Publishing, allowing him to concentrate only on painting without having to take care of the business side, but also to sculpt bronzes using their foundry facilities. In signing, he became the first Canadian artist among a short list of American, Romanian, Mexican and Vietnamese painters and sculptors. As he says so himself: to be chosen by Masterpiece Publishing is like being drafted by the National Hockey League.

A few months later, *Art Business News* magazine named Desjardins as one of the 10 most important new artists.

Sitting in his Mille-End workshop, Desjardins tells me about this crazy adventure in a voice as soft and zen as his paintings. All around us, the walls are strewn with androgynous haze-shrouded portraits. In fact, these figures he creates with the touch of his charcoal-powdered hands without the help of models or photos are enclosed in their inner worlds and liberated from self-consciousness and the prying eyes of others. It's as if the artist had captured them without their knowledge in a moment of profound intimacy. It goes without saying that Desjardins did not acquire this mastery of emotions overnight.

In 2000, Desjardins started painting every day after work, often late into the night. After a year, the call to paint was too strong. He sold his business to devote himself to painting full time .

“In the beginning, I painted like a graphic artist. One day, my friend, stage director Pierre Bernard, told me to step out of the frame, to let myself go freely with all my heart. He sparked off something in me.”

When they discovered his work, the people at Masterpiece Publishing decided to define his style: Emotionism. Desjardins explains: “It sounds quite highbrow, but it simply means that you can touch the reality of the emotions in my paintings.

This morning, Desjardins finishes crating up thirty or so paintings leaving for Laguna Beach, California, for an exhibit in Masterpiece Publishing’s fabulous Fine Art Showroom. Desjardins will join them on December 4th to mingle with private collectors and buyers who’ll be fed, housed and pampered by Masterpiece Publishing with the obvious hope that they’ll commission many works.

Since signing with Masterpiece Publishing, Desjardins cannot help but compare the enormous contrast between the American art market, virtually left untouched by the slow economy, and Quebec’s anemic market. In the former, he’s viewed as a talented up and coming artist whose works sell like hotcakes. In the latter, he’s almost invisible in spite of showings at the Monument National and in the hall of eXcentris. But Desjardins doesn’t take offence. The important thing for him is to have stepped out of the frame. Of all frames, in fact.