



# THE EXHIBITIONIST



GAZA STRIP BY LARRY TOWELL, 1994

THE MAN AT THE CENTRE OF CONTACT—THE CITY'S SPECTACULARLY SUCCESSFUL PHOTOGRAPHY FESTIVAL—IS SO LOW KEY AS TO BE ALMOST INVISIBLE, BUT HIS INFLUENCE IS FELT FAR AND WIDE. GALLERY OWNER STEPHEN BULGER IS THE COUNTRY'S MOST IMPORTANT FORCE IN FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY ALEC SCOTT PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHANNON ROSS

**JUST WEST OF THE T-SHAPED INTERSECTION WHERE OSSINGTON COLLIDES WITH QUEEN IS A BLOCK OF OLD PARKDALE:** a retro appliance store, a flophouse, a grungy variety store. But in the middle of the strip, one storefront heralds the area's ongoing transformation from skid row to bastion of bohemia. It's a façade of broad, plate-glass windows covering almost the entire ground floor. If you squint out the glare, you can make out an itty-bitty name: Camera. The complex is the brainchild of filmmaker Atom Egoyan and Mongrel Media president Hussain Amarshi, and it's home to an art-house cinema, a louche bar and the Stephen Bulger photography gallery.

On a winter evening, the divans and faux fur ottomans in the club section are packed with slender post-teens sporting sequined tanks, too-small cardigans and leg warmers (when did they come back?). The same crew spills over into Bulger's gallery (through an interior connecting door) when he's hosting an opening. He sticks out among this hipper-than-thou crowd. His brown hair—Holland flat next to their Himalayan tresses—has no product in it; his height and breadth are both middling; his shirts and sweaters aren't memorable. He isn't, as those around him are, obsessed with making an impression by being giddy or outrageous or gloweringly intense. He just sort of *is*.

If Bulger were a shoe, he'd be a sensible one, a Rockport rubber-soled lace-up. If he were a car, he'd be a Volvo. In his spare time, he golfs and curls. "Standard Canadian middle-class leisure pursuits," he apologizes. His wife, wedding photographer Catherine Lash, bore the couple's first baby last Halloween, a girl named Adelaide. "I'm a slow starter," he comments on his paternity, since he recently passed 40. Modest, low key, bland—almost ostentatiously so.

Earlier this spring, Bulger celebrated his gallery's 10th anniversary. In that decade, an indigenous but interna-



DOÑA CARMEN, SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE BY REVA BROOKS, c. 1955;  
MOUNTAIN BOY, BUSQUEDIA LORENZO BY REVA BROOKS, c. 1955

tionally oriented photography scene has grown up in Toronto. We now have our renowned collectors, including millionaire art dealer—investment banker Bruce Bailey and local connoisseur—slash—curator Ydessa Hendeles, who, in 1993, paid the highest price to that date for a single photograph—\$398,500 (U.S.) for an Alfred Stieglitz portrait of his wife, Georgia O’Keeffe. Lumiere Press, operating on Parkdale’s western fringes, has become one of the top art-photography publishers in North America. We also lionize a few photographers: Ed Burtynsky, most notably, who recently had his AGO close-up, and, to a lesser extent, in the crowded tier below him, the likes of Vid Ingelevics, Barbara Cole, Volker Seding and Ruth Kaplan.

“When I started out,” Bulger says, “you’d go into most galleries and ask, ‘Who are your photographers?’ and you’d get a blank stare, as if you’d just been impolite. Now you’d be hard pressed to find a gallery in the city that doesn’t carry at least some photography.” More than anyone else, Stephen Bulger has been responsible for the shift, helping to incubate our scene to maturity.

**THE PAST FEW MONTHS HAVE BEEN HECTIC FOR BULGER. THE NEW FATHER** has been out of town more than he’d like. In New York, his was the only Canadian gallery to exhibit at the Association of International Photography Art Dealers’ expo—on whose prestigious board he sits. At the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo, he curated a show of photos by the itinerant Canuck George S. Zimbel—most famous for his iconic shots of Marilyn Monroe, white dress billowing in the subway draft. At his own gallery, Bulger has been mounting a show per month. Until May 7, he’s exhibiting a selection of photos by the female members of the elite international collective Magnum; after that, he’ll put up a solo show by Larry Towell, the Canadian who’s spent much of the past two decades documenting the Palestinian intifada. Current-

ly showing at U of T’s Eric Arthur Gallery is a collection of Robert Burley’s photographs of Toronto’s first synagogues, which Bulger helped put together. And as one of two dealers internationally who acts as agent for the estate of the legendary Hungarian-French photographer André Kertész, Bulger is now working with Lumiere Press to publish a compilation of the master’s best work.

There’s also his ongoing contribution to Contact—the spring festival he conceived of and co-founded (with fellow dealers Darren Alexander, Judith Tatar and Linda Book) in 1997. Inspired by festivals in Montreal and Houston, as well as by the pre-eminent Mois de la photo in Paris, the dealers started small, mounting 40 installations in Contact’s first year. But it’s grown every year since, to what Bulger sees as the city’s maximum capacity, just over 150 different shows, making it the largest annual photo fair on the continent. As president of the board, he’s overseeing the programming in venues around the city this month, with prints, slide shows and Polaroids related to this year’s almost endlessly elastic theme: truth. The expo’s full-time staff have filled the Osgoode subway station’s billboard spaces with Englishman James Mollison’s head-and-shoulder shots of anguished primates whose families have been slaughtered by poachers. Across the platform, from Russia with angst, are close-ups of 14 adolescent girls, seven of whom are murderers. For Contact, Bulger has been co-ordinating visits by international luminaries, including the Talking Heads’ former front man, David Byrne, in connection with his cheeky photo-and-text works about sin’s place in the modern world.

Still, on the day of my visit, Bulger was placid, between trips, seated calmly in his doorless office, with one wall occupied by a massive Vid Ingelevics photo of Toronto from across Lake Ontario. Answering all my questions patiently and clearly—save for one about the



BAY & FRONT, TORONTO  
BY VOLKER SEDING, 1999

gallery's finances—his passion for photography was obvious. "On a lot of days," he said, "I think I have the luckiest job in the world."

**STEPHEN BULGER HAS ALWAYS LOVED PHOTOS, HOPING, EVEN AS ONE OF** five kids growing up in Moore Park, that he'd be able to construct a life somehow connected to them. His mother, Jane, is a painter of landscapes and still lifes; his (now deceased) father, Murray, ran an actuarial consulting company. He views his current occupation as a blend of his parents' disparate skill sets. "From watching my mother, I was used to someone making creative objects and also using photographs as references for her paintings, using them for a purpose other than just recording family occasions. And from my dad, I inherited whatever business acumen I have."

At first, Bulger imagined he'd become a photographer, taking artsy shots throughout his youth and developing them in his own darkroom. He remembers a tour, arranged by his father, of the Montreal Olympic grounds before they opened to the public. "I borrowed my mother's camera, because I was recording something that I thought was pretty important," he recalls. "I was 12, and I felt like a real little photographer wandering around and taking shots."

After studying photography at Ryerson, he was torn between starting a gallery and trying his luck as a professional photographer. "He knows enough to know how hard it is to produce great photographs," comments Michael Torosian, the solo act behind Lumiere Press. "The extraordinary work the leading artists were doing humbled him. He's not one of those dealers who are always saying, 'Once I get the chance, I'm going to get out there with a camera.'" On this point, Bulger is unequivocal: "As a photographer, I don't think I would ever have earned a show at a gallery like mine. The art world is not missing out by me not making things."

Before opening his gallery's doors, Bulger visited many exhibition halls abroad, picking the brains of New York's leading photo dealer, Laurence Miller—over pizza. "Only put up photos you like," Miller counselled. "And don't rely on Toronto to support you financially. You'll have to sell at least as much to out-of-towners as to locals—even in New York, that's the way."

That first bit of advice seemed easy enough to follow. Bulger's tastes are conservative but not provincial. He doesn't embrace the work of shock-inducing or avant-garde photographers. "I like texture with my abstraction, so I prefer abstract paintings to abstract photos," he says. "For photos, I tend to like 'information communicating' work—I used to call it documentary, but that word has acquired so many specific meanings." He neither ignores the international trends nor, the opposite side of the same coin, does he dismiss Canadian works. Instead, his gallery has linked the developing local practice to trends abroad.

His shows usually have a theme to them—recent ones have related to space exploration ("I was a NASA junkie growing up") and crime scene photography. They mix Canadian and international work, historic and current photos, and pieces at different price points, from the high hundreds to the low hundred-thousands. And so, at Bulger's gallery over the past decade, we've had the opportunity to view work by the world's leading practitioners—among them André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Candida Höfer, Alfred Stieglitz and the crime scene haunter Weegee—and to compare their work with locally produced photos addressing the same themes. We often come off favourably.

Most dealers simply program individual and group shows on behalf of the artists they represent. But Bulger has always operated more like a museum curator than a traditional dealer. In doing so,



RETREAT, CALIFORNIA BY RUTH KAPLAN, 1992

he has helped to turn the city onto photography, to shape public tastes and to foster the collecting instinct.

He's done three exhibitions with Shelby Lee Adams, the Appalachian-bred photographer who has made a career depicting that region's most impoverished inhabitants as they charm serpents, roast pigs and pluck on threadbare banjos. Bulger shows me one Adams shot in which a slant-eyed son with bad teeth (he looks like an extra from *Deliverance*) hangs off the edge of his mother's gravestone. The stone reads like a haiku of deprivation:

MAUREEN COLLINS BORN JAN 6 19—[here the carver ran out of space]  
39  
DIDE APR 20 19—  
90

Bulger was also responsible for reintroducing the expat Canadian Reva Brooks to her hometown. In 1955, she was paid the signal honour of being included in the New York Museum of Modern Art's *Family of Man* show—the first blockbuster photography exhibition at a top-tier international fine art gallery. Despite her strong reputation abroad, her work had not been displayed for years in Toronto. Bulger tracked her down before her death last year, in the artists' colony of San Miguel de Allende, in order to curate a 2004 show of her once celebrated photos. "She used her camera to get to know the Mexican people, before she learned the language," Bulger explains. After the death of a local child, the mother invited Brooks to take shots of the funeral. In one, the dead boy lies peacefully in his wooden box, his head encircled by a plain steel crown and his body covered in flowers; in another, his father carries the tiny open casket through the streets while the dead child's siblings parade in front of him. Talismans of grief, of the agony and the ecstasy of mortality, the images differ utterly from Adams's on the same theme. Brooks was careful to choose a shot of the peasants bearing their

misfortune stoically, their faces lit with a determination to carry on.

In addition to rescuing images from the art form's golden era—roughly 20 years on either side of 1950—Bulger's shows have also often given us visual snippets of our collective past. For one exhibition, he selected from more than a million photographs in the Canadian Press Picture Archive, unearthing many iconic ones: Trudeau doing a pirouette behind the Queen's back in a reception hall at Buckingham Palace, or decked out in his absurd Mandrake the Magician outfit to take in the Grey Cup; Karen Kain ruminating backstage before her last performance; native protesters nose to nose with the Sûreté du Québec during the Oka crisis.

"Stephen's been doing the work that you'd expect our public museums to do," comments the chair of Ryerson's internationally recognized film and photography school, Brian Demude, who has known Bulger since his student days. "He identifies the talents from another period, finds them if they're still alive and exhibits their stuff. But for him we'd have lost some of our photographic history."

And what about our photographic future? That's where the second half of Miller's advice came into play. Many of the city's leading photographers—including Seding, Kaplan and Ingelevics—have chosen Bulger to sell their work because he relentlessly promotes it abroad. "Stephen has taken my work to New York, Paris, London, Santa Fe," says Seding, the architectural specialist. "If he doesn't always show it on his walls in Toronto—though he has given me three solo shows—he never stops trying to find people who'll like it elsewhere."

Despite his international aspirations, Bulger is also, somehow, very Torontonion. He epitomizes our civic ethos: succeed, we're told, but don't show off. The air at his gallery reflects that philosophy. "In a lot of galleries around the world, you're made to feel uncomfortable," he says. "If you're a big buyer, they're nice to you, but anything short of that and you're really bothering them." You know the drill: a



ERIC BY SHELBY LEE ADAMS, 2001

pristine space with a desk at its rear; you enter, and there's no activity, no sound, just a lone staffer taking discreet sips from an espresso and looking up at you accusingly from time to time. By comparison, Bulger and his staff are eager to evangelize—without being in your face—on behalf of the medium to anyone. “No question is a dumb one with Stephen,” the patrons confide between canapés at the openings. “He never makes you feel like an ass.”

A few years ago, two friends and I toured various galleries, looking for a joint wedding present for a jazz-loving couple. Bulger was showing the work of Toronto resident Paul Hoeffler, taken on the jazz circuit in the 1950s. The shots reeked of the era, with dancers jitterbugging, bands engrossed in their music, smoke getting in everyone's eyes. They made me nostalgic for a time before I'd been born. In addition to showing me works not on the wall, Bulger told me a bit of Hoeffler's story—that he was a university student in Upstate New York, still in his teens, when he fell in love with jazz and became a groupie. After hearing about the photographer, I could feel in the shots a young man finding his first passion, seeking to capture the magic of a great set in a tiny club in some decaying steel town. It was an expensive present (\$400), but the three of us shared the cost, and in return we got hours of staff time, a photo (of a trumpeter blowing his heart out) and a story for the gift card.

**IN 1975, THE PRICE FOR A SET OF CLASSIC PHOTOGRAPHS WAS MATCHED** with the Dow Jones Industrial Average. At the turn of the millennium, the photographs had experienced an average 26-fold increase in value, outperforming the Dow by more than double. The rise of the medium is part of a phenomenon throughout the arts that prefers the real over the fictional. The trend is also illustrated by the growth of the documentary film market, of the literary memoir and, at a lower-brow level, the replacement of sit-

coms by unscripted reality television as our nightly pabulum.

Comparatively speaking, photography is an easy medium. Its practitioners have often prided themselves on its democracy—anyone can take a photo. Because photos play such a central role in our lives—peering out at us from billboards, magazines and newspapers—most of us can parse at least a garden-variety shot with some acuity. In a gallery, photographs tend not to alienate the Philistine, who feels as competent as the next person to comment on them. They're certainly a safer wedding gift than a contemporary painting or sculpture.

But as Bulger's polished exhibitions have shown, there's more to the medium's advance than its easiness. What draws us in large part is the expression of the adventurous principle in the work. We used to rely almost exclusively on novels—those written by the lost generation in 1920s Paris, for instance, or by the Buddhist-inflected texts of the beats hitchhiking through 1950s America—to get our fill of elsewhere. Photographers are now sharing the place writers occupy in the popular consciousness as the quintessential artistic adventurers. And so we've been able to follow Ruth Kaplan on her tour of the world's bathhouses and spas. The photos are so drenched in steam that it seems the moisture might seep off the prints. They elevate their subjects and also emphasize the similarities between racially and culturally disparate peoples. Larry Towell's show (at the gallery this month) transports us to the strife-ridden West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Reva Brooks retrospective took us away to rustic Mexico during its centuries of solitude. Paul Hoeffler's exhibition evoked the last trumpet blasts of the Jazz Age. And Shelby Adams dragged us, kicking and screaming, into a nightmarishly sleepy hollow in Appalachia.

Our tour guide on these journeys is reliable, efficient—as sturdy as a Rockport, as safe as a Volvo. He's so low key that we almost don't notice him.

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