

# Richard Tetrault

## MID-DAY ALLEY & QUARTET

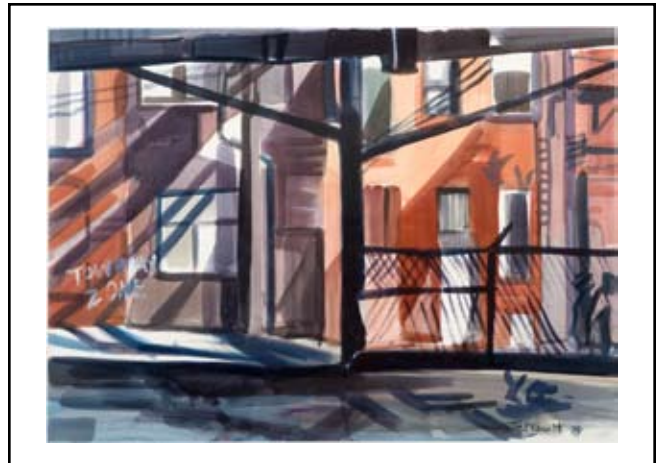
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Richard Tetrault

BY ELIZABETH KIDD

Artist's Statement (2008)

RICHARD TETRAULT



### Richard Tetrault

by Elizabeth Kidd, 2006

Vancouver-based artist, Richard Tetrault is a painter, printmaker, muralist and teacher whose art making is inspired by the urban landscape and the lives that inhabit it. Having lived and worked in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver for over 30 years, Tetrault has become a creative thread in the social fabric of a district that is too often dismissed as being the “poorest postal code in Canada.”

Tetrault was socially engaged from an early age. He spent his childhood in the town of White Rock on the southern coast of British Columbia where his mother introduced him to the world of the theatre

Richard Tetrault  
*Mid-day Alley*, 1979

acrylic on paper  
(55.5 x 75.5 cm)  
SAG 1988.03.01

p 2 - Photograph by Cameron Heryet  
p 4-5 - Photographs by Esther Rausenberg

and art making. Tetrault remembers helping her make posters for a local theatre production at the age of five. Also from the beginning he brought an observant eye to his subject matter and took his subjects from the world around him. Working directly from nature, he would go outside with some paint and paper, observe what was around him, and reproduce what he saw without the filter of academic theory and current artistic style. Tetrault did receive formal art training in the early 1970s at the Vancouver School of Art where he began to explore the creative potential of drawing and printmaking. The school provided him with live models to draw from and printing equipment

with which to experiment. In the early 1980s Tetrault spent some time at the Art Students' League in New York where he practiced the academic, more realistic approach to figure drawing. Since then, he has constantly expanded his range of creative expression, familiarizing himself with art making in countries around the world such as Germany, Mexico, Cuba, Argentina and Thailand.

Richard Tetrault's artwork can be found in a number of local, Canadian and international collections. His paintings, prints and drawings have been included in numerous solo and group exhibitions over the past 20 years, many of which have travelled across Canada



Richard Tetrault, *Mid-day Alley*, 1979, acrylic on paper (55.5 x 75.5 cm) SAG 1988.03.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

and around the world including Africa, Argentina, Mexico, Germany, Poland and the Netherlands. In 2003, a twenty-five year retrospective of his work, *Painted Stories, Visualizing the Downtown Eastside* was mounted at the Interurban Gallery in Vancouver.

### Artist as muralist

Pedestrians throughout Vancouver and beyond can enjoy the large public outdoor murals that Tetrault has painted. Community centres, schools, banks, bridges, overpasses and housing developments bear testament to his productivity. The Mexican artists Diego Rivera, Jose Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros have influenced his colourful, energetic, graphic style. Their large-scale public murals, made throughout Mexico in the early 20th century, tell stories of the common people's struggle for dignity and respect. Community murals that were made in collaboration with people from the neighbourhoods of San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles have also influenced Tetrault. "These murals," he says, "are about people reclaiming their community."<sup>1</sup> Slums have been changed into liveable communities and residents have reclaimed and transformed sites once allocated for demolition or redevelopment. Tetrault's public murals are therefore driven by local social concerns and "are statements of action over resignation and inaction."<sup>2</sup>

The Downtown Eastside, where many of his murals are located, is "a microcosm of social problems present in every city in North America."<sup>3</sup> Like the Mexican murals, the large, bold, colourful paintings throughout this part of Vancouver tell the story of the lives of the people who painted them, their struggles and their hopes. The power and value of these community murals lie not in the singular vision and skills of one artist but in collective creation. Richard's

most frequent role has been to teach and facilitate others in creating paintings. For instance, in 1998, over a six-month period, Tetrault was artist-coordinator for the project *Walls of Change* that engaged the hearts and hands of people from the Downtown Eastside who worked together describing their experiences and concerns in the form of narrative murals.<sup>4</sup> The result was not only the series of powerful wall and canvas paintings,<sup>5</sup> but also the enduring sense of pride and confidence within the community of people who participated in or watched their creation.

Tetrault also regularly works with local and international professional muralists and studio artists. Through the 1990s, he worked with the Vancouver-based public art group *Arts in Action* on local and international public art initiatives. In 2006, Tetrault and members of a local public art group *La Raza*, completed a three-week mural project in Argentina, part of a cultural exchange and collaboration with a number of artists groups in South America. In 2007, *La Raza* exhibited their work in Mexico City giving the collective opportunities to connect with other international sympathetic artists and art collectors.

### Artist as printmaker

Not only a talented muralist, Richard Tetrault has also become an accomplished printmaker, working in woodcuts, linocuts and monotypes. His simple, expressive images of urban landscapes, crowds, and the human figure are influenced by the work of the German Expressionists who were making raw, emotion-filled images at the beginning of the 20th century. The energetic simplicity of work by other international print artists such as Naoko Matsubara, Jose Posada, Antonio Frasconi and Rufino Tamayo has also influenced his stylistic approach. He employs the method of relief printing whereby the medium (usually wood or linoleum) is cut into, revealing the



desired image in relief. The result of this process lends itself well to the subject matter of Tetrault's work. By scratching, gouging, and etching out the negative spaces of the images, all non-essential elements are removed and simple but powerful images remain.

Tetrault has exhibited his prints extensively, particularly with artist collectives like the Malaspina Printmakers Society and *La Raza* Group. Tetrault's prints also extend to book illustration. In 1998 and 2005 he produced a body of relief prints to accompany



Richard Tetrault, *Quartet #1 & #2*, 1990, acrylic and sand on carved plywood (122 x 61 cm, each panel) SAG 2007.07.01-02 Gift, from the Collection of Esther Rausenberg. Photographs by Esther Rausenberg, courtesy of the artist.

the poetry of Downtown Eastside poet and activist, Bud Osborn in the publications *Oppenheimer Park* and *Signs of The Times*.<sup>6</sup> According to reviewer, Sandy Cameron, “Bud’s poems and Richard’s prints make visible what those in power try to cover up –

the despair, poverty and homelessness of our times, and the courage, endurance and dignity of those who resist an unjust system.”<sup>7</sup>



Richard Tetrault, *Quartet #3 & #4*, 1990, acrylic and sand on carved plywood (122 x 61 cm, each panel) SAG 2007.07.03-04 Gift, from the Collection of Esther Rausenberg. Photographs by Esther Rausenberg, courtesy of the artist.



### Artist as teacher and community worker

Tetrault taught portrait and life drawing classes at the Carnegie Centre, from the time of its reconstruction as a community centre in 1980 until 1989. The models were people who frequented the centre, residents of the area. He got to know them well while working in what is called “The Downtown Eastside’s Living room” that serves the poorest and most vulnerable members of Vancouver’s citizens. Tetrault became highly politicized, particularly during the preparations for *Expo '86* when so many poor residents of the area were displaced to make way for the World Fair. Driven by a strong belief in the value of his role as teacher and social activist, Tetrault has worked extensively with community groups and schools, developing communication and art making skills within adult communities as well as with school children and urban youth. His numerous workshops in mural painting include *Walls of Change* (1998) and *Community Walls/Community Voices* (2003.) Recent school projects include the Canada-wide arts initiative, *Learning through the Arts*, administered through the Vancouver School Board and ArtStarts In Schools program.

The acrylic painting on paper, *Mid-day Alley*, made in 1979 and acquired by the Surrey Art Gallery in 1988, is typical of much of the work that Tetrault was making in the late seventies and early eighties. In 1978 he was living on Powell Street in the heart of the Downtown Eastside area, and would spend his days sketching its streets and back alleys. He loves the gritty toughness of these places – a toughness that also characterizes the people who make these streets their home.

In this and many of his paint sketches, we see some images that will become recurrent motifs in his work: graffiti on crumbled brick walls, anonymous doorways

and windows, the truss of a bridge or overpass, shadows of a fire escape ladder, the shadow of a street lamp, and rough silhouettes of couples moving out of the picture. Cutting across the surface of the image are energetic patches of light and dark, gestures of both hope and despair. Conveyed with a limited colour palette, the city’s oppressive heat of mid-day is broken up by blue and black shadows that carve the hot red brick walls into shapes that offer cool respite.

Tetrault observes that these back-street locations (that he refers to as “my territory”) are not usually visually represented in the promotional literature that claims Vancouver as the world’s most liveable city.

The more recent *Quartet*, acquired by the Gallery in 2007, is a work made up of four rectangular painted plywood panels into which the artist has intermittently gouged patterns and shapes into the wood and applied sand and sawdust to its surface. Initially, these panels were not conceived as part of a single integrated piece but were made separately between 1995 and 1996 as stand-alone paintings. The artist assembled them later because he felt they work well together as a grouping, each panel a variation on a common theme, each sharing a similarity of images, gestures, textures and colours.

By the 1990s Tetrault had developed a wide range of images, shapes and gestures that had become his own visual vocabulary. Crows, feathers, graffiti, fire-escape ladders, trusses, building elements and industrial equipment, human heads and torsos - each has significance; each tells a story. His crows, for instance, are substitutes for Downtown Eastside residents: tough, persistent survivors standing their ground, maintaining their space, working together and fighting an epic battle despite the odds. Each crow has its story to tell as it stands in the threshold

between darkness and light. In *Quartet*, a different version of the bird appears on each of the four panels; the ones on left and right panels look inward towards the centre of the grouping, containing it with their intense gaze.

Using acrylic paint, Tetrault's colours are usually limited to an expressive few: red ochre, yellow ochre, white, black and blue. They appear in various combinations in all his work – painting, printmaking and drawing – as they do here in *Quartet*. Light and shadow play across the surface of each panel and reinforce the content and meaning of the grouping. Like many of his panels they are empty of a human presence but are filled with an expectant sense that someone might appear at any moment.

In the centre two panels, the rectangles of white appear to be patches of light coming from above, while strongly contrasting shadows made by the sun on balconies and the fire escape ladder reaching to the top of the picture are intended to be symbols of hope, and escape from the despair of the back alley floor, gritty with sawdust, sand and old memories. The painted feather on the right hand panel, familiar in First Nations iconography, alludes to wings and flying and is a symbol of spirit, transcendence and power.

In each of the four panels, Tetrault has gouged into the surface of the plywood, adding expressive elements to the painted images. It is almost as if you can hear the dry croaking and cawing of the crows as you read each jagged marking. Tetrault likens the process of gouging into these panels to the process of carving woodblocks. This work is a fusion, he says, between painting, printmaking and sculpture.

Richard Tetrault is an urban artist who approaches his work both creatively and compassionately using public murals, painting and printmaking, and publishing as means of connecting with others. Richard Tetrault is a socially engaged artist who cares as much about his subject matter as the way he presents it. His form and content combine to form powerful transformative images that stay in the soul long after they meet the eye.

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Notes:

- 1 Conversation with the artist, September 4, 2007.
- 2 Richard Tetrault, artist web site: <http://www.richard-tetrault.ca/mural.html> Accessed September 5, 2008.
- 3 Pivot Legal Society, <http://www.pivotlegal.org/dtes.htm>, Accessed September 5, 2008.
- 4 Other mural locations include The Jim Green Residence, Carnegie Centre, The Four Corners Bank, Ray Cam, Strathcona and Britannia Community Centres, The Four Sisters Co-operative, Keefer Street Overpass, and the *Community Walls, Community Voices* murals on Commercial Drive between 14th and 17th Avenues, Vancouver.
- 5 Some of these pieces are now destroyed.
- 6 Bud Osborn and Richard Tetrault, *Signs of the Times* (Vancouver: Paneficio Studios and Anvil Press, 2005).
- 7 Sandy Cameron, *The Rain* 4:1 (Winter 2006): 7.

## Artist's Statement (2008)

### *Mid-day Alley and Quartet*

August 2008

In my paintings and prints, I aim to reconstruct observed reality to present images that fuse the allegorical and mythical with the commonplace. I hope to project a parallel world that draws the viewer into a dialogue with this imagery. Viewers can establish their own responses and interpretations, and when the work resonates, it has succeeded.

The two pieces in the collection of the Surrey Art Gallery, *Mid-day Alley* and *Quartet*, are both derived from my neighbourhood of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, where I have lived and worked for over thirty years. This part of the city is rich with dynamics and layers of decay, a vital inner-city community that is, at the same time, infused with various forms of abuse and deterioration. It vacillates between hope and despair, light and dark, redemption and hopelessness. These characteristics pervade much of my work, and I embrace the duality in my paintings, prints and murals.

*Mid-day Alley* is an acrylic on paper work that was done on location, looking from an empty lot onto a façade in the hundred block of Hastings. It is one of many *ala prima* works that I continue to paint in an ongoing series of the area. I wanted to reflect both transience, and a subtle sense of human presence.

Relief prints, in particular, woodcuts, provided the technical impetus for *Quartet*. This four-panelled work on plywood is one of a large series based on the urban crow that I developed in the early 1990's. Crows activate the urban environment with a presence that is both mythic and mundane. Omnipresent in my part of the city, the crow has a tenacity, adaptability and social quality that demand both respect and space.

I have given crows a special place in my work, in particular, as communicators and symbols of survivors of displacement and urbanization. They provide a link with their raven cousins of the west coast rainforests, and as urban survivors, they possess a tenacity that parallels that of human inhabitants of the Downtown Eastside.

Using carved elements combined with a textured ground, *Quartet* unites elements of both my painting approaches of gesture and highly contrasted form, with the layering inspired by inked and stained woodblocks. I was interested in taking the effect found in a relief-block matrix to a grand scale. The struggle inherent in the act of carving into rough plywood became integral to the final image, which only took on the format of a four-panel piece when close to completion. The inter-relation to all aspects of form, and the abstract integrity of the piece is important, where the connection between each panel becomes a play that can suggest the relationship between the subjects, as well as a metaphorical puzzle of existence.



Richard Tetrault, *Mid-day Alley*, detail



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