

BY GUDRUN WILL

**S**een with today's eyes, Michael de Courcy's 1976 photograph of Granville Street at Broadway presents a forceful contrast between the strange and the familiar. The North Shore mountains and Royal Bank building remain unchanged, but the rounded trolley bus, prosaic corner shoe store, and a few retro muscle cars clearly characterize another era. Contemplating photos of everyday street scenes from past decades is always intriguing, especially when the pictures include personal turf. These random glimpses of history can cause surprise or unease, provoking thoughts about how quickly cities change. A new photo exhibit of Vancouver's postwar, pre-Expo 86 incarnations eschews special events and local celebrities in favour of chance places and folks, images that whisper truths about the development of this burg before it ever tried to be world-class.

Given their incremental value as time goes on, it's amazing how few people think to capture images of quotidian surroundings. However, despite Vancouver's relative insignificance in the mid-20th century, some individuals did have the foresight to immortalize average days and scenes. Presentation



Michael de Courcy's 1976 photo of Granville Street at Broadway (right) triggers a surge of memory, while Bruce Stewart captures a couple at Denman and Davie streets in '71.

# SHOT ON THE STREET

IMAGES FROM VANCOUVER'S RECENT PAST SHOW A DRAMATICALLY DIFFERENT CITY

House Gallery director Bill Jeffries always took an interest in people who, on impulse, walked the city and snapped artfully timed and composed pictures of the commonplace. Saturday (January 11) marks the gallery's launch of *Unfinished Business: Vancouver Street Photographs 1955 to 1985*, the first comprehensive display of hundreds of works by 18 artists that make up a fascinatingly mundane record of our growing town.

Jeffries, a former cabbie, was inspired to mount the show after coming across a historic film clip in Ken Burns's jazz-history television series a few years ago. It depicted a nighttime scene of Kansas City in about 1928, taken from a car roof. "I came away feeling as if I'd been there in some funny way. You didn't need the smells and sounds, just the image of what the place was like," he recalled during an interview in his office. "I thought, 'God, this is so irritating,' because I know that if we tried to find footage as good of Granville Mall in the 1980s, we probably wouldn't be able to."

He may not have had access to a wealth of moving pictures, but felt it was time to pay tribute to locals like Fred Herzog, who had amassed a huge personal archive of street stills since the '50s—the kind of collection

that Jeffries believes would have long been celebrated in any other city. The show's promo postcard highlights Herzog's arresting, telephoto-compressed 1958 daytime view up a Hastings Street sidewalk. A crowd of men in beige or grey fedoras and overcoats stroll under a canopy of neon signs, including that of the famous Smilin' Buddha Cabaret, while the foreground freezes three sharply dressed guys squinting into the sunshine, one dragging on a cigarette. The splashes of colour are so perfect they appear carefully positioned, with red signage and clothing contrasting the neutrals.

While he also shot in black-and-white, Herzog may be the only photographer to have captured local '50s and '60s public life in colour—although his collection now mostly languishes in his home, uncatalogued and unprinted. He believes that his years of hoofing through the city in his spare time, training his lens on subjects (such as poverty or the everyman) considered off-limits by conventional camera clubs, are grounded in a tough childhood in wartime Germany. "I was sort of at the mercy of teachers and not-so-kind relatives," the 72-year-old recalled in his Arbutus Heights living room, "and that immediately puts you in touch with a realism

which most people avoid until old age."

In a two-hour conversation that touched on everything from *New Yorker* cartoons to the worldwide distribution of wealth, Herzog outlined his artistic philosophy. Simply put, it's an appreciation of the "lyricism of daily occurrences", and a desire to acknowledge humble people whose honest endeavours truly knit the fabric of society. "I'm still a bit of a missionary," he admitted. "I'm carrying all this into my picture-taking, and that includes my sense of a just society."

Like several of the show's other contributors, Herzog was often drawn to the oldest parts of town, especially the Downtown Eastside. In fact, Jeffries had trouble finding images representing other neighbourhoods, such as the '60s hippie locus along West 4th. "Unfinished" as it is, the exhibit does offer a wide temporal and geographic range. Standouts include Dick Bellamy's 1961 snap of sparse traffic crossing Lions Gate Bridge; the late Curt Lang's 1972 image of a small child mounting the East Side's Earles Corner Grocery steps; Henri Robideau's moody 1970 mid-city view, showing False Creek log booms and a downtown almost devoid of major buildings; and Bruce Stewart's 1971 portrait of a young couple waiting to cross Davie at Denman.

It also incorporates quirky projects that weren't necessarily made with posterity in mind but fit the exhibit's mandate. One is Sven-Erik Eriksen's meticulous documentation, one early Sunday morning in 1973, of both sides of Hastings Street between Cambie

and Main streets. Taken as background for an animated film that was never made, the images have been Photoshopped into a seamless linear façade. Another is Jeff Wall's "Landscape Manual", a series of 120 shots of the West Side taken from a moving car around 1968, from which Jeffries chose several.

Since the newly elevated genre of street photography raises so many questions and begs interpretation, the gallery has organized six talks in January and February. Besides introducing contributing artists, they will include discussions of the genre's link to the photo-conceptualist art movement, the lack of female street photographers locally, and whether any aspects of pre-Expo 86 Vancouver are worth saving. Participants will also throw around the question of how to judge street photography. "It's sort of a cliché within photographic theory that, with the passage of time, all photographs become interesting," Jeffries mused. "There's no such thing as a truly bad photo from 1845 anymore."

The fact is that the value often lies in the eyes of the beholder. For a native Vancouverite like myself, de Courcy's Granville-and-Broadway intersection shot may not be aesthetically remarkable, but it triggers a strong surge of memory. In my mind's eye, I'm a fifth-grader in just such an old-style trolley bus, but looking south to the now-vanished Welch's candy store and the Aristocrat Restaurant. And I can still taste the lemon-lime Lifesaver that I'm trying to make last the whole, eternal Broadway bus ride to school. ■

**WHAT**  
Unfinished Business:  
Vancouver Street  
Photographs 1955 to 1985

**WHERE**  
Presentation House Gallery

**WHEN**  
January 11 to March 2

**INFO**  
604-986-1351