

The artist, the scientist, and the bears

BY SHELLEY ARNUSCH

Gambier Island painter Gloria Masse will be the first person to tell you she isn't much of a scientist.

Whistler bear researcher Michael Allen freely admits to not knowing the first thing about art.

Nevertheless, the two have found each other to be kindred spirits after collaborat-

tion issues and her innate appreciation for his life's work.

"I've had lots of wildlife photographers and the occasional artist that's approached me before," he commented, "but I never got the sense they were sincere. Gloria seemed more seasoned. Her connection to the environment seemed a lot more real. She seemed more down to earth."

The outing was fruitful for Masse. When she returned to Gambier the Whistler bears came with her in spirit.

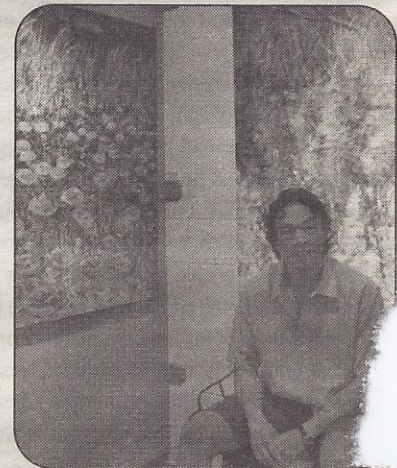
Inspired by Allen's personal attachment to each animal and a sense of urgency that the Whistler bears be protected, Masse decided to paint a series based on Allen's research with the intention of donating a portion of sales to further bear research and conservation initiatives.

"It just seemed the bears were so immediate, so relevant, and if I could influence anyone to care about them or to think about them or even just to share my love for them then it seemed something worthwhile," Masse explained.

With samples of her previous work in tow Masse reconnected with Allen over the winter and requested access to his photo archives.

Despite the initial gelling of their person-

Art Junction to celebrate ownership change



WHAT:
Reopening party

WHERE:
Art Junction@Function
Gallery & Frame Studio

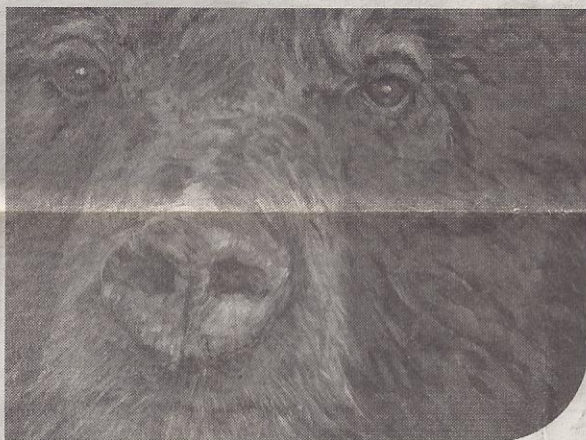
WHEN:
Saturday,
July 3, 4-7 p.m.

After assuming primary ownership of the funky Art Junction@Function Gallery & Frame Studio a couple months ago, Harvey Lim is finally ready to celebrate with a public reception in the gallery

this Saturday from 4 to 7 p.m.

Eleven of Art Junction's feature artist are expected to be in attendance, including new additions Lorraine Surcouf and Sandra Sugimoto.

The occasion will also mark the unveiling of Gambier Island painter Gloria Masse's Whistler Bears collection, a series of bear portraits done in collaboration with local bear researcher Michael Allen. Ten per cent of the collection's sales will be donated to local bear research and conservation initiatives.



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ing on a unique project, the first results of which will be unveiled this Saturday at Art Junction@Function Gallery and Frame Studio's grand reopening reception.

Seasoned wildlife painter Masse's Whistler Bears collection is based directly on the extensive research Allen has conducted in the Whistler area for the past decade. Her expressionist-style pieces are not just images of the ursine form, but actual portraits of the bears on which Allen keeps tabs and knows by affectionate pet names: Jeanie, Alice, the list goes on.

The result is an intriguing blurring of the lines between art and science. Masse eschews realism, yet Allen commends her accuracy in anatomy. And Allen has begun to realize that art can capture what the scientific method can not, the soul and essence of each of the animals he studies, loves and strives to protect.

The desire to do some general research on the ursine form led Masse to Allen last summer when she first joined him on a bear-observation outing.

Though unfamiliar with Masse's work, Allen was impressed with the artist's sensibilities — her strong convictions on conser-

Despite the initial gelling of their personalities and ideals, it was in no way an easy pitch. Allen was discerning based on prior dissatisfaction with other bear artwork.

"My feeling was that he really wanted somebody who painted real bears. Not Walt Disney or cutesy things, but real bears," she said. "I showed him a bunch of my past paintings and he agreed to do it."

With Allen's endorsement and guidance Masse has so far produced a series of five acrylic 30-inch square paintings of Whistler bears, which are to be showcased at Art Junction. As planned, 10 per cent of sales of the existing works and those to come will be donated to bear research in the Whistler area.

Naturally, Allen is appreciative of the project's fundraising potential. But his true appreciation of Masse's work has been on a deeper level — one that has caught the researcher slightly off guard.

"They're beautiful," said Allen. "The bears come alive in a different way. I knew she did good work. I wasn't surprised by that, I was surprised that somebody could add so much life."

"When I looked at them, the very first thing I noticed was the accuracy of the iden-

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research and conservation initiatives. Both Masse and Allen are expected to be in attendance.

Lim may be the new primary owner, but he is hardly new to Art Junction, having run the in-house framing studio for the past five years for previous owner Jan Holmberg.

An ex-footballer (soccer player) from the U.K., Lim played professionally for 12 years in England, Scandinavia and Hong Kong before moving to Ontario with his Canadian wife. The duo settled in Whistler nine years ago — another familiar case of coming on a holiday and deciding to stay permanently.

Since taking over Art Junction Lim has changed the look of the gallery slightly, but will continue the vision to showcase contemporary B.C. artists. His biggest challenge, he says, will continue to be finding ways to draw the Whistler Village gallery-touring crowd out to his Function Junction location.

For more information on the gallery call 604-938-9000 or go to www.artjunction.ca

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tity of the bear. Facial images of bears — that's something I've been a real critic on. A lot of facial images I've seen are really bad. They try to add too much human emotion to the bear: the ears are off, the skull's not right, the snout's too narrow and it looks like a dog.

"The first thing I saw was the accuracy. She got the identity right and the characteristics of the bear. And the next thing was the life."

For Masse, the collection is an extension of her established philosophy on painting the natural world.

"I'm always trying to get at the secret soul of the animal. That might sound corny," she said, "but it's what's in the wolf's eyes and what's in the bear's eyes, their wildness, the otherness of them, their mysteries. I'm

ing to find in them will come out."

Allen says the collection has opened his eyes to how the arts can be another effective way to educate people on the Whistler bears and forge those crucial feelings of connection that promote conservation initiatives.

At his request Masse will be featuring Slim, a bear that recently died in a highway accident, in a future work.

And since the scientist has no intention of leaving his life's work, nor the artist hers, this looks to be the start of a beautiful friendship.

Gloria Masse's Whistler Bears collection will be unveiled at Art Junction@Function's reopening reception this Saturday, July 3 from 4 to 7 p.m. Both Masse and Allen are expected to be in attendance.

For more information on the reception call 604-938-9000