

FROM VAN CITY TO THE CITY OF LIGHTS

Renowned Vancouver photographer Fred Herzog is basking in the glow of a new exhibit in Paris, France

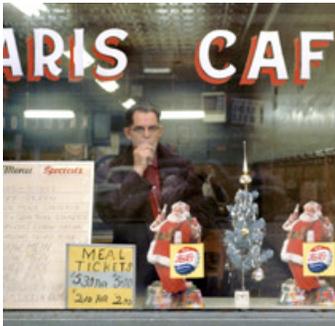
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CREDIT: Courtesy the Equinox Gallery
'Paris Cafe, 1959', one of Vancouver photographer Fred Herzog's pieces being exhibited at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris.



CREDIT: Courtesy the Equinox Gallery
'Hub & Lux, 1958', one of Vancouver photographer Fred Herzog's pieces being exhibited at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris.

PARIS - Canadian photographer Fred Herzog, here enjoying his late-in-life career breakthrough in the international art world, plans to slip out of his hotel with his Canon G9 and head gingerly in the opposite direction of the thousands of camera-wielding tourists rushing frantically each day to sites like the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Louvre.

Herzog, hobbled by a series of ailments including a recurrence of prostate cancer and diabetes-caused blindness in his left eye, will aim for Paris's back streets.

There the self-described "photorealist" will take the kind of unstaged shots that have earned him recognition as one of the world's only photographers who has captured the unpolished life of a city, in colour, over a period of decades.

"I just walk. I see light and I see shops and I see people," Herzog, 78, said in an interview at the Canadian Cultural Centre, where an exhibit showing a small slice of his five decades photographing Vancouver opened Wednesday and will run until September 12.

"I'm looking for things that have a certain twist to them - the contents of a window, a contradiction in signs and fact, something curious, something I've not seen before. People; people who communicate happily, people who communicate unhappily."

Though Herzog's facial expression rarely betrays his feelings, whether happy or sad, his words have no ambiguity in describing his feeling about the Paris exhibit. "It's a triumph."

"Paris to me is the centre of the universe," said Herzog, who was born in Germany and emigrated to Canada as a young man in 1952, starting his new life in Toronto before moving to Vancouver a year later.

Herzog's remarkable life story remains untold in many parts of Canada, outside Vancouver.

Born in Stuttgart, Herzog still has vivid memories of a war scene in his youth when he and other young boys cheered as Messerschmitt fighters shot down a half-dozen of the hated Allied bombers that pounded German cities daily, near the end of the Second World War.

Herzog was orphaned in 1946 at age 16 - his mother died of typhoid during the war, his father of cancer, after it ended. He never finished high school and decided to move to Canada.

He took a job working on ships and began taking pictures, wandering streets and back alleys to document the vitality of a city through store windows, inside barber shops, and along rain-swept, neon-lit city streets.

He directly relates his desire to connect emotionally with Vancouver through photographs to the loss of both parents at a young age.

"This was why I had the sensitivity to do this. It was a question of how I felt, what the city meant to me, and that I wanted to be a part of it."

He chose to take Kodachrome slide colour photographs at a time when the artistic community preferred black-and-white prints. Because it was difficult and expensive to turn his work into quality prints most of his exhibits were slide shows, limiting his gallery exposure.

That all changed recently with advances in digital photography, allowing him to transfer his shots into prints without losing any of the colour or richness. He spent several years and about \$120,000, the sum of his life savings outside of the Vancouver home he and his wife live in, to produce enough prints for a Vancouver Art Gallery exhibit last year.

It was a smash hit, drawing a huge audience and reducing some Vancouverites to tears, as they saw a city they had long forgotten.

While he drew about 90 people on opening night Wednesday, none of the major French media has sent reviewers.

In a society that reveres status and higher education, a self-taught photographer who never finished high school might not be an easy sell.

The famed late Canadian photographer Yousuf Karsh's exhibit here in late 2006-2007 drew crowds and media attention, though most of Karsh's best-known subjects were international statesmen and celebrities, including the late former French president and wartime hero Charles de Gaulle.

Herzog said he'd neither be "giddy" if his work drew raves, nor crestfallen if it was ignored.

He said he never doubted what he was doing as a hobby, while earning his living as a medical photographer, was both unusual and important.

Recognition is flooding in now, with the Canadian art magazine Ciel Variable's latest issue describing him as "an important pioneer in colour photography."

"If people don't come to this gallery it's not because they don't like my pictures, it's because they don't know about it," he said, before invoking the name of Henri Cartier-Bresson (1904-2004), considered by some, to be the greatest photojournalist of all time.

"If Parisians see (the exhibit) they'll say, 'It's like Henri Cartier-Bresson, only in colour.'"

Herzog said he and his wife aren't taking particular advantage of the inflow of cash after years of living modestly - they bought a new dining room table set, while he bought two pairs of shoes and a new camera. And the recognition, while gratifying, brings a certain melancholy.

"I wish I had more energy and a better appetite and a better gift for enjoying what's coming my way now. I'm grateful, I'm not complaining. There's so many people who don't have that kind of pleasure at my age," he said.

"So I would say this is a triumph that is only somewhat dulled" because it came so late in life.