

## Unmasked at Last

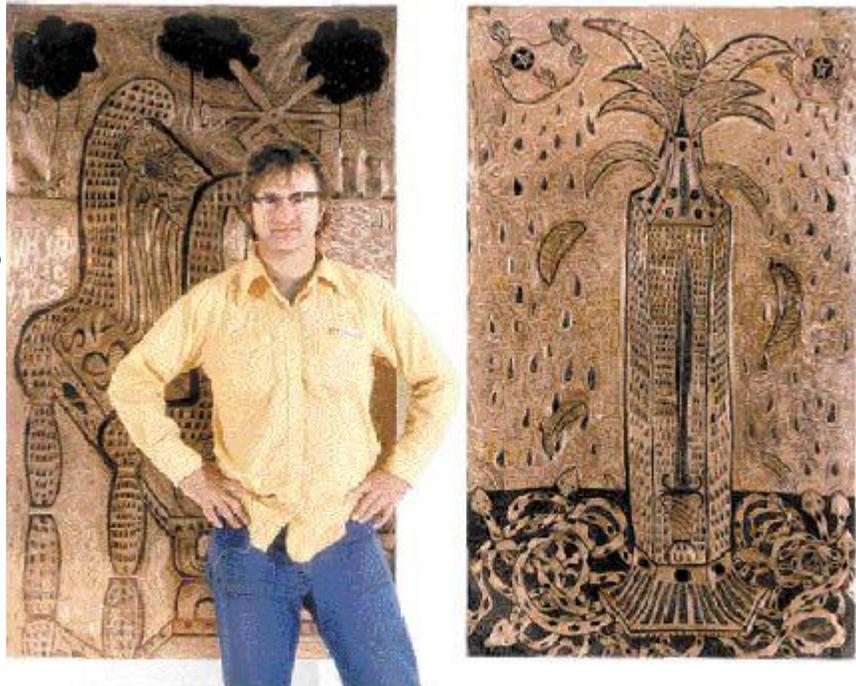
### Meet the inspirational man of mystery whose art is all over Toronto

#### FOUR TORONTO BUILDINGS

Works by Rocky Darrell Dobey. To Dec 7. Daily 10am-7pm. A Space Windows gallery, 401 Richmond W. 416-979-9633.

By Edward Keenan

You may not have heard of Rocky Darrell Dobey. You wouldn't be the only one. Though critics during the early '90s were fascinated by his work, they knew almost nothing about the artist. A short *Toronto Life* story in May, 1992 said his decorated, shellacked books bolted to utility poles around the city were "rich reliquaries of idealism covered in faux-naïf pictures and ironic words." *Toronto Star* art critic Christopher Hume said "he deserves a civic medal, the unknown hero artist." And until very recently, though his work has been seen by, arguably, millions over a career that spans



Rocky Darrell Dobey's art is usually found on the street, but now the elusive artist has a gallery show of his copper engravings.

25 years, he was, personally, utterly unknown. An eye story by Andrew Clark from January, 1992 entitled "In search of Darryl" detailed how Toronto's art press had searched in vain for "That damned elusive Darryl."

"This is my first interview ever," Dobey/Darryl says matter-of-factly in a sit-down interview with eye at his 401 Richmond Street West studio.

Chances are you've walked right by some of his work: an aged brass plaque bolted, like his books, to a utility pole, this one at the northeast corner of Bathurst and Queen, with the words "Be blatant Be emotional Risk everything," that's been hanging for more than 10 years, for example; or one of several metal memorials ("Victor born nineteen forty died nineteen eighty five I loved you") bolted to a post

next to St. Stephen-in-the-Fields Church on College near Augusta; or a beat-up copy of what may be the Bible, bound in copper and shellacked stiff, that hangs open on another pole on Baldwin near Kensington.

Dobey (a.k.a Darryl, Durrell, Rocky Tobey, among other things) has been creating anonymous street art in Toronto for 25 years. In that time, he figures, he has installed thousands of art pieces around the city. And once you start looking for them, they seem to be everywhere, along Queen and College, in Kensington Market -- there are so many of his pieces around, it would be odd if you haven't noticed them before.

Those who have missed his work on the street can check out Four Toronto Buildings, an exhibition of Dobey's copper etchings showing in the A Space Windows gallery until Dec. 7. The show consists of four copper plates engraved with Dobey's vision of four new or about-to-be renovated public buildings: the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Ontario College of Art and Design, and the opera house. The show explores a contradiction in architecture -- "while the buildings function as secular space, they are assigned a nearly divine reverence," the program notes explain.

"I'm interested in space," Dobey says, sitting in his cluttered basement storage locker/studio. He says he's trying to "create a contemplative space" in a city that has been overtaken by advertising and commerce, in a culture that is becoming less free and more mediated. "I'm not trying to create art anymore. I'm looking for authenticity."

The idea of space, especially as it relates to freedom, runs through much of Dobey's street art. Literal and metaphorical prisons are illustrated in many of his engravings, and in the political posters he's created for activists as far afield as Quebec City, Berlin and Athens. Buildings breaking in half figure prominently in much of his work, as does the number 13 1/2. "That's a prison thing," he says, "Twelve jurors, one judge, half a chance."

The numeral is a prominent feature of many of the engraved metal memorials to people he's known who are now dead that make up his current street-art project. The plaques, many shaped like letters of the alphabet and engraved with serpentine figures, knives and guns in addition to names and dates of birth and death, can be found on utility posts around the city.

A blue metal "K" on a wooden post on the north side of Dundas between Augusta and Kensington reads "Ed born 1940 died 1984 / Do not call I repeat do not call police or civil defence." A capital "H" on the northeast corner of College and Bathurst memorializes "Ronald Born 1959 Died 1978." A square plaque atop a waist-high concrete post on the southeast corner of Augusta at Kensington bears one of four tributes to Victor I found in different places around downtown.

Dobey began creating street art around 1977, though in the beginning he wasn't conscious of it as art. "I was just a street kid on Yonge," he says. His early photocopied posters were motivated by rage. One series contained instructions on how to shoplift, including seven ways to spot store security at Eaton's.

After a while, he realized "people read these things" and he began experimenting with other forms of public art. In the '80s, unaware of anything called "culture jamming," he created large anti-billboards on the sides of buildings that took aim at such corporate targets as Calvin Klein. He says he stopped because the style was co-opted by large corporations, and because he finds culture jamming pretentious. He began installing other types of art around the city: concrete busts of Lenin, which he says were stolen quickly; brass plaques such as the one at Bathurst and Queen; and decorated, shellacked books bolted to poles around the city.

The books "attracted the most attention but were the least successful artistically," he says. "That was one [project] where I was consciously trying to create art."

He says he's become more pragmatic about his art -- granting an interview, showing his work in galleries, posing for photographs. He points to a photo of his five-year-old daughter in explanation (he sees her for half of every week at a one-room cabin, where he lives on a commune "up north.") "I think I'm beyond anonymous."

Dobey, once the mysterious Darryl to the Toronto art media, says his publicity-shyness was more a matter of low self-esteem than of any theoretical anti-capitalist rhetoric he might have talked about in the past, had he given interviews. "I'm more pragmatic now," and besides, he says, anonymity may be "as pretentious as culture jamming."

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