

URBANITY

HE COVERS THE WATERFRONT

Richard Tetrault was one of the masterminds behind Vancouver's largest work of public art, the 28 mosaics that cover a retaining wall along Commercial Drive, between 14th and 17th avenues.

His Peace Mural has been viewed for many years at Simon Fraser University and other murals are at the Britannia, Strathcona and Ray Cam Community Centres, the Keefer Street Overpass, Four Sisters Co-op, Four Corners Bank and the Portland Hotel. When you enter the Carnegie Centre at Main & Hastings, where Tetrault taught art classes in the eighties and early nineties, his *Summer City Street* mural is one of the first things you'll see.

Given the 'street' feel and locale of much of his commissioned art, Tetrault could easily be hyped as a local hero, as the **Diego Rivera** of the Downtown Eastside. That's where the likes of councillor **Jim Green** and MLA **Jenny**



Jim Green extols the virtues of Richard Tetrault's 'art armed for combat.'

Kwan have grown to love and respect his work, and that's where Tetrault has maintained a studio for 25 years, having attended the Vancouver School of Art between 1962 and 1979.

But if viewed collectively in *Painted Lives & Shifting Landscapes* (Anvil \$42), Tetrault's murals and prints—with or without his trademark crows, fire escapes, alleyways and bridges—are evidently cosmopolitan concoctions. His determinedly public style has been forged by his time in Berlin, Bangkok, New York and Havana, as much as by Vancouver's poorest neighborhood.

For six weeks Tetrault also worked in the Mexican studio of muralist **David Alfaro Siqueiros**, a contemporary of Diego Rivera. Back in 1923, Siqueiros had proclaimed that art should not exist for individual expression; instead it must

"become a fighting educative art for all." Along with Rivera, Siqueiros also demanded "art armed for combat, that makes people aware of their history and their civil rights."

The tradition of the Mexican mural is one that preserves history and ennobles a common struggle for dignity. As one of British Columbia's leading progenitors of that tradition, Tetrault has con-



Richard Tetrault

fronted racism, participated in the Arts for Action public art group formed by **Claudine Pommier**, and consistently celebrated the "edgy vitality" of his community in his paintings, prints, woodcuts and murals.

"Overhead, a neon-blue eagle buzzes with repeated wing gestures, never becoming airborne," he writes. "Inside a café, Eastside residents are leaning over coffees. Stories are being told. The inner-city core of Vancouver has a wealth of its own. As an artist, I always felt embraced by the energy of the street here."

Tetrault's new book arose from a 2003 retrospective held at the newly opened Interurban Arts Centre, at the historic intersection of Carrall and Hastings in Vancouver. During the first half of the 20th century, the building was the hub for the BC Electric Interurban Station.

The 'inter-urbanity' of Tetrault's best-known works, such as *Disappearing Alley*, have been characterized by art journalist **Michael Harris**. "Tetrault gives us the Downtown Eastside," he writes, "not from the perspective of a squeamish yuppie who got off at the wrong bus stop, but from an insider's compassionate eye..."

"Can art heal neighbourhoods like Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where survival is an ongoing struggle? Tetrault and his colleagues submit that art in fact facilitates survival; that the Downtown Eastside must revel in its own history; that there is a lively, varied cultural scene; that there is talent and, yes, a future."