

# URBAN LEGENDS

## A Downtown Eastside artist looks deep for the beauty in his community

**Who:** Richard Tetrault

**What:** Artist, muralist who focuses much of his work on the Downtown Eastside and in the Downtown Eastside. Currently Tetrault is showing *Painted Stories: Visualizing the Downtown Eastside*, a collection of his paintings and drawings celebrating 25 years of working in the area, at the Interurban Gallery, Carrall and Hastings, to Dec. 3.

public art project in western Canada. Other work can be seen at the Four Sisters Housing Co-op, Tom Lee Music Store on Granville, and in schools, community centres, theatres and libraries across B.C.

**This land is my land:** "You can launch a project in the Downtown Eastside and get people involved in the process far more readily than going to another neighbourhood, where they might say, 'well, you're interfering with the landscape.' I think it is an education process. When you get art that is just dropped in, people have no idea who created it, where it came from, it doesn't necessarily reflect them, even though it may be great art, there's a problem."

the importance of visual enhancement."

**Here's your mirror. Now dare to look:** "People who say art is conflicting with the view (as many have in Coal Harbour and English Bay) are not understanding that the idea is not to compete or even reflect with the view. The point is not to reiterate what is already around us. What I feel we need to see is more of what makes that community exciting or vital—even some of the issues or problems around that community. To say 'we have a beautiful landscape, but it's in competition with art' is really misplaced criticism."



**Roots:** Born in White Rock, one of three brothers in a liberal-arts minded family. Has lived in Strathcona, Mexico, Montreal and New York. Studied art at the Vancouver School of Art ("I dropped out on a fairly regular basis") and in New York at the Art Students' League. Coordinated *Walls of Change* in 1998, a six-month mural project with members of the Downtown Eastside. Last year, Tetrault finished working with hundreds of people on *Community Voices*, a community mosaic that stretches for three blocks on a Commercial Drive wall just north of the Croatian Cultural Centre, the largest

**Welcome to the neighbourhood:** "On a mural, I'm always aware that I'm changing someone's urban environment. As much as you're changing that environment, there is a responsibility to make it relevant...when I happen upon a mural, it's like the artists and the community focus their aesthetics and their energies to transform a part of their city, so it shows. So much of the city and so much of our urban landscape is neglect—it's either selling something, like a billboard, poster or sign. There's nice architecture, but we overlook and neglect

**Poles feed creativity:** "I used to do a lot of paintings in the alleys (of the Downtown Eastside) but now I get hassled a lot. It's hard to concentrate on painting when somebody's sticking a needle in their neck right in front of you. I feel sad about it, that people's lives can get so consumed. This is what makes the Downtown Eastside such a dynamic place—the very visible extremes. In neighbourhoods with more money, people can hide away with their activities, but the Downtown Eastside is like an open window."

Mary Frances Hill