

SOUND



Meet
**Viz and
Mikael**

Cover Photo by John White

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The Unsellable & Unforgettable

Meaford's Newest Gallery Is Here to Make You Think

By Gabrielle Clermont
Photos by John White,
Viz Saraby, Mikael Sandblom,
and Tanya Read



There is a hair salon tucked into the back of Meaford's newest gallery. Clients waiting for their appointments find themselves wandering through installations, pausing in front of photographs, and asking questions they did not expect to be asking on a Tuesday afternoon. For Viz Saraby and Mikael Sandblom, the couple behind the Gallery of Unsellable Masterpieces, or GUM Gallery, that accidental encounter is pretty much the whole point.

"We're hoping to shake up conversations about art a bit with something more thought provoking and conceptual," says Viz, who co-owns the gallery with her husband Mikael. The two are architects by training who graduated in the early 1990s into a real estate recession that left little room for new architects. They took different paths from there, Viz earning a degree in interior design and then a master's in the History of Art at the University of Toronto, eventually becoming a professor and programming coordinator of the interior design program at George Brown Polytechnic. Mikael built a company managing information for owners of real estate. Along the way, both kept making art.

GUM opened on April 30th in a building the couple already own on Meaford's main street. A hair salon had occupied the whole space for years. When that tenant's lease was up, Viz and Mikael saw their moment, though they did not chase the hairdresser out entirely. One of her chair renters asked if she could stay on, and a partnership was born. The salon now operates in the back, the gallery serves as its waiting room, and the arrangement suits everyone beautifully.

"Because we own the building, we're not under the same commercial pressure to sell artwork in the same way other galleries might," Mikael explains. "It gives us the freedom to have art as a vehicle for thought." The gallery's full name says as much. Selling would be lovely, Viz adds, but it is not the primary intention. Educating, provoking conversation, and getting people to question what art can do, that is what GUM is after.

Grey-Bruce already has galleries, good ones, that offer lovingly crafted landscapes and beautiful decorative pieces. GUM is after something different. The plan is to bring in conceptual and site-specific work, eventually hosting visiting artists from Toronto and further away, pairing shows with artist talks so that people leave with some understanding of what the artist was actually trying to



do. Their exhibition openings will do exactly that, half an hour to take in the work, then up to an hour of conversation with the artist.

Both Viz and Mikael have been making their own work for years, quietly and seriously, on the side of their professional lives. Mikael has been involved with various artist collectives. He's been on the board of Gallery 1313 in Toronto, and is currently on the board of Collective City, a non-profit documenting Toronto's visual artist collectives. His current body of work plays with perception and landscape in ways that stop well short of simply depicting a pretty view.



"My work is really based in and inspired by landscape, but it's not representational of landscape so much," he says. What he is after is something closer to the experience of being in nature, the way water moves before you can fix your eyes on it, the way clouds shift just as you try to capture them. Some of his pieces are multiple images, two skies interlaced with a water pattern, so that depending on where your eye lands, the image shifts entirely. Others are three-dimensional sculptures embedded in resin, abstracting water so that from far away you see surface waves, but up close the underlying structure takes over. At some point, no matter who you are, the image flips.

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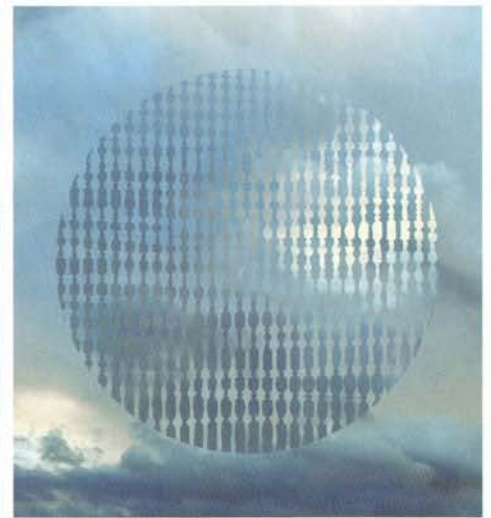
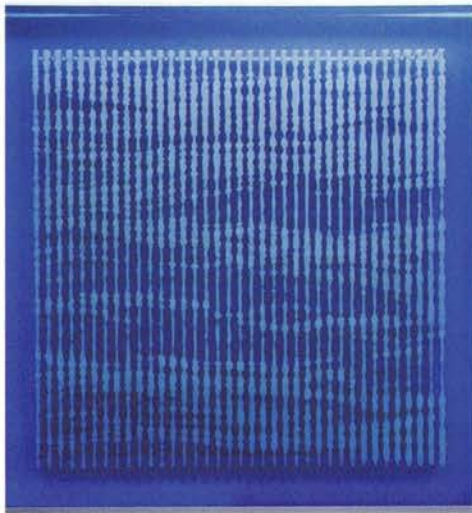
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"That's kind of a test for me," Mikael says, "whether it really works." He wants that moment, the one where a viewer suddenly becomes aware that what they were seeing was something they were constructing in their own mind. It is a small, quiet revelation, and he builds it into the work deliberately.

Viz, who also works in photography and mixed media including laser-burned wood and painted pieces, is drawn to a similar impulse from a different angle. At the heart of her practice is an invitation to look again at ordinary things. One of her ongoing projects does this through an unlikely ambassador: Cone, a character made of a traffic cone who has been thinking very hard about safety.

Cone began where two parts of Viz's professional life intersected. As an educator, she has watched the definition of safety expand in recent years to include psychological and emotional safety in the classroom, shifting the expectations on teachers in ways that raise genuinely complicated questions. As someone embedded in the world of construction and design, she has always worked alongside the physical safety measures that protect workers and buildings. Cone, she realised, stood right at that intersection. "The road cone has always been there to stop people from hurting themselves," she says. "Now it has to understand how to navigate psychological safety too."

So Cone goes on adventures, encountering the new landscape of what safety means and not always getting it right. Viz takes Cone out into the world, photographs him, and builds narratives around his attempts to understand where the line falls between genuine protection and overcaution. "Each person has actually determined for themselves what they think is over the top

versus acceptable," she says. The conversations those images generate, where her lines and the viewer's lines do not match, are exactly what she is looking for. The gallery's show even includes a waiver for visitors, which Viz describes as "ridiculously over the top," and which is, of course, the joke and the point at the same time.

Joining Viz in GUM's upcoming July show is Toronto-based artist Tanya Read, whose character Mr. Nobody has been on his own existential adventures since 1998. Read studied at the Ontario College of Art in the early 1990s and came up through a generation of artists who self-organised shows, rented spaces as collectives, and figured it out together. Mr. Nobody first appeared at one of those shows and has never really left.

The character is deliberately simple, a series of circles that anyone could draw, visually ambiguous as to species, gender, or identity. He is modelled on the early cartoon characters of the 20th century, Betty Boop, Felix the Cat, early Disney, though Read is clear-eyed about the complicated history those characters carry, rooted as they were in minstrel shows and blackface. She considers that history part of what Mr. Nobody holds.

"I kind of think of Mr. Nobody as carrying that history with him," she says, "as a little bit of a tension in the character." What he does with that weight is something else entirely. He is an everyman in the Charlie Chaplin tradition, perpetually caught in existential loops, getting flattened and bouncing back, encountering the void with a certain resilient absurdity. The themes Read returns to are nothingness, transformation, tragic comedy, and humour sitting right next to sadness. Hence the name.

Read has expressed the character through super 8 animation,





drawings, sculptures in cardboard and garbage bags, video work, self-published books, and appearances at comic arts festivals and zine fairs. In one memorable piece, she placed a life-sized sculpture of Mr. Nobody in the middle of a busy shopping mall at Christmas and filmed not only the sculpture, but everyone around it. Shoppers navigated around this still, strange presence and their reactions became the work.

For the GUM show, running July 17th through September 1st with an opening on August 1st, Read will be showing primarily drawings, small framed black and white works first sketched out and then finished on her iPad Pro and printed as archival digital prints. These are thematically connected around the ideas she has always worked with.

"It's been fun to bring these two artists together that share that thread of narrative around a character," says Mikael of

the pairing. "Both Viz and Tanya have built entire mythologies around fictional figures and used those figures to ask questions about how the rest of us are living. Cone worries about whether we have become too careful. Mr. Nobody shrugs at the void and gets back up. Between them, they cover a lot of ground."

Something genuinely new has arrived in Meaford, and it lives at the corner of art and curiosity. GUM Gallery is not here to sell you a painting, though it might. It is here to make you pause, look again, and maybe leave with a question you did not walk in with. In a town that has always punched above its weight culturally, Viz and Mikael have added something the region did not have before: a space where art is allowed to be strange, ambitious, and a little bit funny, where a traffic cone and a cartoon nobody can walk you right up to the edge of something profound. If that sounds like your kind of afternoon, the door is open. Maybe get a haircut while you're there.

GUM Gallery is located in downtown Meaford. Find out more at www.gumgallery.ca, and visit www.conefusionism.com and www.mrnobody.org to spend some time with the characters before the opening.

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