

There's a genie within the dealer no one knows

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS
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A FEW MONTHS ago, at lunch in Toronto, the visiting Roman art critic Achille Bonito Oliva leaned forward over his plate of melon and prosciutto, nearly dragging his Trussardi tie into it, and said, a bit too loudly for the WASP *ristorante* crowd: "You live here. Tell me. Who is Carmen Lamanna? He speaks Italian like a peasant, he uses old-fashioned words you only find in comic books. He's fantastic! In Europe, he's the only Canadian art dealer anybody's heard of, and everybody's heard of him. But who is he?"

Oliva didn't find out then, and you aren't going to find out now. Not because anyone's being coy, but just because the remarkable genie abiding in Lamanna's rough, rotund bottle is so peculiarly elusive. The minute you think you catch a glimpse of it, it ducks around a corner and out of sight.

The art world is full of over-complicated introverts. Why should dealers be an exception to the rule? Lamanna and his endless squabbles with artists and curators, Lamanna and his smouldering rage of the moment, Lamanna and his hourlong rants on the telephone in the middle of the night — about what, you're never quite certain. At times with this man, you think you're witnessing something more corrosive than mere anger — a kind of withdrawal into a dark, angry cavern of the soul.

Then the genie grins inside the bottle, and Lamanna becomes peacefully translucent, even lit from within. Get him talking about the artists, outside the stable of the

Carmen Lamanna Gallery, whom he deeply admires — Marcel Duchamp, Michael Snow, Betty Goodwin, Joseph Beuys — and you'll see what I mean. Catch sight of that glow, which has perhaps a marvelous conviction in its radiance, and you learn something about the radical inner force that's made Lamanna Canada's outstanding dealer of advanced Canadian art for most of the 30 years he's been in the business.

But then how do you square all that with his bully-boy admiration for Mussolini — who, says the dealer, made only one little bad move, something to do with Hitler? Lamanna's *other* life as traditional Catholic patriarch in Toronto's Italian west end? Or the 1976 Chevy Malibu he drives?

Does any other art dealer on earth drive a *Malibu*? Who is Carmen Lamanna, anyway? And why does he insist on calling artists *artistes*?

When we talked throughout a long evening this week, Lamanna's genie was being angelic and impish by turns. But whatever the dangers of dealing with genies, it was high time to catch up with Lamanna. At the end of June, he started the renovations at 788 King St. W., where he'll be re-opening in mid-October, and at the same time forsook his famous, dumpy, knubbly-walled space in Yorkville, where the gallery had been housed in two locations since opening day, in 1956.

"I remember every single day there, every day was special and unique," Lamanna recalls. "But I am pleased to get out of Yorkville. The environment has been dominated by the cheap commercial element. There's nothing to attract intellectually minded collectors.



THOMAS SZLUKOVENYI/The Globe and Mail

Carmen Lamanna

When I moved into the area, the place was pretty exclusive. The only people who walked north of Bloor Street were people who were intellectually interested in art, exclusive fashion and furniture — something special. Now, nobody can take Yorkville seriously because it's so shallow."

Exactly what the light-industrial

area around King and Bathurst has got that Yorkville hasn't got, in terms of intellectual drawing power, Lamanna declines to make clear. What it definitely has got is big space and relatively cheap rent: the gallery area open to the public jumps from a long, narrow 850 square feet in Yorkville, to a spacious 1,800 square foot main gallery and a 500 square foot little one downtown. In addition, the boss will have his own office, a library, viewing room, kitchen and suite of offices for the help — and the rent drops by about \$5 per square foot. The downtown location offers company. Since the neighboring Isaacs Gallery moved south from Yorkville's Yonge Street edge last year, one jump ahead of a mammoth rent hike, Lamanna has been alone on Yonge. He'll be sharing 788 King St. W. with Art Metropole, the archive and bookshop founded in the 1970s by the General Idea artists' group, whom Lamanna represents.

"I'm 60 this year. When the move came, my family thought I should resign, I'm an old man. So what am I going to do with the rest of my life? I am never going to resign. It's the art that makes me young. I'm opening with (gallery veteran) Paterson Ewen in October, then new artists — Magdalen Celestino, then Peter Casto maybe next season, a sculptor."

Lamanna's enthusiasm for his fledglings quickly fades when the conversation turns to the Canadian art-world system surrounding 788 King St. W. — the public galleries, the museums, grant-giving agencies. Exit the angel, enter the imp, brandishing his pitchfork at the very words *National Gallery of Canada*.

"Twenty years ago, the National

Gallery was a model to the country for exciting contemporary art. The time Jean (Sutherland) Boggs was there (as director) were the most memorable years the National Gallery ever had. She had great ideas and she picked up great people — Brydon Smith, Pierre Théberge. Now the gallery is about to have a large new building. But a great building needs a great mind. Where is the mind there now? The curators of contemporary art have no vision, no understanding of art . . .

"It takes a profound professional commitment to make a star, to put art in the highest possible position. The big problem (in Canada) is that we never see art with a long life. We look for some kind of fashion, movement . . ."

Lamanna also frowns on the cronism of Canada Council juries, and the apparent shut-out of senior artists who are well-respected by critics and curators, but who still don't have the sales to make them financially independent of the grant system. "The Canada Council has a very serious problem. The juries do not give grants to people who deserve them. The council doesn't care who gets the grants. They have so many thousands to give away, and they want to be diplomatic. Anyone who is too critical of the system will never be appointed (to a jury), will never get the grant. They want people who don't take the system seriously."

That word *serious* comes up a lot in Lamanna's rambling criticisms and gripes, functioning as a kind of trademark. The litting word *anyways*, with which he ends most sentences (as in "It's time you became serious about being an art critic, anyways") is another one.

Maybe seriousness just runs in

the family. Papa Frank Lamanna, now 80 and living in Naples, was a woodcarver and a private dealer in paintings by such artists as Mondrian and Picasso; Carmen grew up in a household that took modern art seriously, and expert handcraft just as seriously. During the Second World War, Carmen and the other Lamanna kids had no toys; so they found scraps of wood, and carved toys for themselves. Carmen made a serviceable bicycle entirely from wood, except for the chain.

He arrived in Toronto in 1951 with serious skills, as woodcarver and restorer. "But I used to restore only cow-scapes. They used to bring them by the boatload from England. So I decided to challenge myself and create my own possibility. That's when I opened a gallery with \$300."

He acknowledges two abiding influences on his understanding of art: the critical sculpture of Marcel Duchamp, and the family tradition of woodcarving. From the outset, the Lamanna stable has been weighted toward the makers of tough, truth-telling *things*, with emphasis on both brains and craft.

"Now I'm worth many millions," he laughs, and the studious imp turns back into a bright angel. "That's why I keep remortgaging the house to go for the art. (When choosing an artist,) I look at art, question it, establish a dialogue with it. And I take a long time with the artist, because I am thinking in terms of 15 or 20 years. I am serious about art because it recharges me, and gives me a better understanding of society, people. Because art is salvation, a great thing, like religion and law. Because art is the best, most challenging medicine for the mind."