

## 'IT'S A SIMPLE SYMBOLISM'



KELLY EGAN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

When he saw the 15-metre-wide mural on the side of Le Patro d'Ottawa on Cobourg Street, area resident Sam Rizzotto wondered how such a thing could be justified in a neighbourhood where violence is too common. Read artist Alejandro Hugo Dorda Mevs' response on page A2.

# Mural under fire

Neighbours question the wisdom, no matter how well-intentioned, of painting what looks to be a giant gun on a community building



KELLY EGAN

In a neighbourhood with its share of trouble, where blood was spilled just this weekend, it was supposed to be a mural that condemned violence.

Too bad about the giant gun. Officials at Le Patro d'Ottawa were doing some rapid backtracking Tuesday morning after

complaints began to surface about a 15-metre-wide mural that, from a distance, looks like a large automatic weapon.

Tuesday morning, a City of Ottawa crew arrived with a massive blue tarp and began covering up the outdoor work, done by an artist who signs his work Axel Void. Little day-campers pattered by, eyes fixed on the painting. Looking on was Patro's executive director, Denis Bédard, a little exasperated.

Neighbour Susan Lorch, a drug-store supervisor, strolled by.

"Why did they have to paint a gun on the side of a public space where children go swimming?" she asked, on her way to work.

"It's perverse."

Sam Rizzotto, 19, often walks by the side of the building. He was stunned when he saw it last week, calling the city to report an outbreak of graffiti. When he discovered it was a sanctioned work of art, he began complaining to Patro staff and elected officials.

How, he asks, in a neighbourhood where stabbings and gun incidents are too common, could the city possibly justify a large weapon on the side of a building used by five-year-olds?

"I just think it's stupidity."

Not only that, said neighbour Paul Riech, 44, it's not professional-calibre. "Cover it, paint it. Get

## IN CITY



### Lambasting Lambert

Country star's tweet stirs up a tempest over gun culture, C1

rid of it. It's offensive."

Bédard tried to explain.

The images on the painting grew out of a workshop for young people held last week on the theme of love.

See EGAN on page A2

# Egan: Provocative, yes. But as a first impression?

Continued from page A1

Home, mothers, flowers, birds, music were some of the ideas tossed about.

Bédard said the artist, who was working with a parent volunteer, used those images as a way to "dis-arm" the gun and open a dialogue on violence.

In the mural, the trigger is actually part of a trombone-like instrument; the gun scope is a crayon; the barrel spews birds and delicate flowers and the word "MOMMY" is painted across the casing. The bullet clip is a chocolate bar. A candy cane seems to form the lower bottom part of the barrel.

Bédard says he did not see a sketch before the work was completed over a two-day period ending Friday. Reaction was quick. He said many viewers liked the painting, but three or four objected.

At that point, questions were raised about whether the mural was a bylaw infraction and who at Le Patro had approved the provocative picture.

Bédard consulted with the city and his board at midday Tuesday and by mid-afternoon, the painting was being removed.

He said he wanted to maintain good relations with the neighbours. He, too, was not entirely comfortable with the imagery.

According to a handout from Le Patro:

"The artist incorporated these (love) symbols and drawings in-



KELLY EGAN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Children from a day camp file past as city workers hang a tarp up to cover the mural at Le Patro d'Ottawa on Monday. Later in the day, work began on removing the mural, a gun composed of crayons, birds and candy.

to the silhouette of a weapon in order to render the weapon unusable, non-functional.

"It is therefore the imagination, hope, creativity and love of the children that 'destroyed' the violence, and in turn gives us hope for the future."

Le Patro is a recreation centre on Cobourg Street, off upper Rideau Street, that primarily serves francophone youth, though it has programs for adults and the disabled. It was founded in 1957.

It has a gymnasium and is attached to a city-owned building, which contains a swimming pool. It has a wide variety of programs, including day camps.

According to a handout biography, the artist's real name is Alejandro Hugo Dorda Mevs and he was born in Miami in 1986, but lives in Spain.

He had a show in Ottawa in June at La Petite Mort Gallery on Cumberland Street. Bédard was unsure how the artist came to become involved with Le Patro.

The work, for which he was apparently not paid, was both brushed on and sprayed.

Well. It rather unfolds like a comedy of errors, does it not?

Art is supposed to be provocative, even revolutionary, and there is certainly nothing really offensive about a gun that has been modified into a collection of peaceful symbols.

The problem is two-fold: location, and a lack of consultation.

It just seems like a bad idea for an organization that works with chil-

## From the artist

Artist Alejandro Hugo Dorda Mevs' reaction to the outraged response to the mural he created after a workshop for young people:

"I am sad to hear this. I did present the idea of the project beforehand and it was accepted, and not only that, but had a meeting with the staff from the community centre.

"I explained several times the concept and I think it is clear to anyone that gives it more than a minute to realize that crayons, birds and candy can't do any harm and that it's a simple symbolism, like the sculpture of a gun with a note on the barrel.

"Nevertheless, I can see how this is to some degree an exciting moment to be upset about something, even if it's not given a second thought."

dren to have, as a signature public image, anything that can be misconstrued as a giant weapon. And this is the first impression.

It was rather imprudent, too, that the Le Patro executives and directors were not fully apprised of the plan. The city should have been consulted, the ward's councillor, and even the neighbours who need to stare out at the image 24/7.

All in all, a little quick on the draw, you might say.

To contact **Kelly Egan**, please call 613-726-5896, or e-mail [kegan@ottawacitizen.com](mailto:kegan@ottawacitizen.com)