

An even bigger Sugar rush

Vancouver's party scene gets a boost with relaunch of chic art gallery/nightspot

BY JOHN LEE

When Vancouver's municipal bureaucracy forced the closure of the popular nightspot Sugar and Sugar a year ago, it was widely seen as proof that the city didn't know how to have fun. Tonight, the *cause célèbre* takes out a second lease on life with the gala relaunch of the art gallery and cocktail lounge.

But while the former Sugar and Sugar studio was a tiny, checkered-floor space that specialized in showcasing local artists, the new venue takes the idea in a riskier direction with five times more space to fill. Embracing the licensing regulations that formerly scuppered them, sibling owners Damon and Jason Sugar are hoping locals will once again support their combination of ever-changing exhibition space and chic party spot.

"We've taken the concept to a new level, but it's still all about celebrating art and creativity. I want this to be considered as a serious art gallery," said Damon Sugar, a graphic designer who remains disappointed at the demise of the former venue.

When they opened their downtown studio in 2000 and encouraged artists to exhibit for free, the Sugars profited from ticket and liquor sales at the private parties they staged. The studio was zoned for retail use only, so the City granted them special-occasion liquor licences for events ranging from receptions to book readings to CD launch parties. But as Sugar and Sugar quickly became one of Vancouver's leading small-event venues, the number of licenses re-

quired increased exponentially.

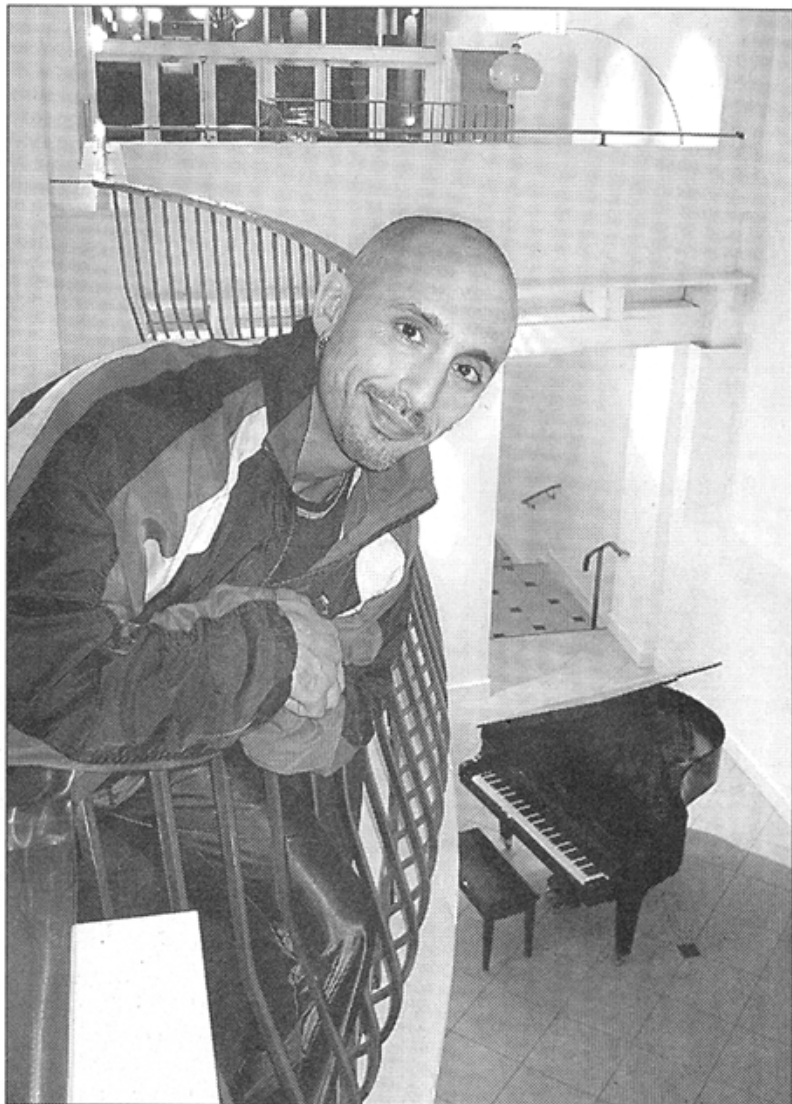
"We were doing eight to 10 events a month but apparently the unwritten rule is that you are only supposed to apply for about two special licences a month. Eventually, the City said we were abusing the system and they refused to grant us any more," said Sugar.

Caught by surprise, the Sugars nevertheless felt obligated to fulfill their next party booking, despite the absence of a licence. But as the planned wedding reception got underway, eight City officials, police officers and fire department enforcers pulled up, terminated the event and confiscated \$2,500 in alcohol and takings. Without liquor sales, the venue was not financially viable and the Sugars closed down, even though they had parties and artist shows lined up for the next 12 months.

Rather than throwing in the towel, the brothers immediately began looking at how to resurrect a business plan that had proved its potential — although this time, they aimed to play by the book. "We considered moving to Toronto, and Calgary grants the kind of permanent licence we needed in around two days, but Vancouver is a young, new city that's hungry for something like this," said Sugar.

Discovering a vacant, rundown nightclub venue on the edge of the city's bohemian Gastown district, the Sugars began jumping through the necessary bureaucratic hoops in January, 2002.

With significant venture financing, the cavernous 6,000-square-foot two-storey interior has been completely renovated to include a trendy circular bar, modernist furniture, open-plan dining area and the obligatory white walls and wood floors. The idea is to open the bar with a light menu throughout the week, while reserving Friday and Saturday for the private parties that were the previous venue's signature, this time with catering from an on-site commercial kitchen.



MALCOLM PARRY / VANCOUVER SUN

Jason Sugar in the brand-new Sugar and Sugar in Vancouver's Gastown.

With improved facilities and the necessary permits — not leaving anything to chance, they have both a permanent liquor licence and a restaurant licence — the new gallery space underlines the Sugars' renewed commitment to the art community. There are revolving monthly exhibitions booked for the coming year, and the brothers are looking to showcase the kind of painting, photography, sculpture, mixed media and experimental film that rarely hits the mainstream.

Toronto-based artist Robert Kraus kicks off the exhibition roster with a striking opening show of large-format screen prints that combine formalistic Korean motifs with patterns of unlikely objects ranging from soldiers to toasters. He was attracted by the opportunity to exhibit to a non-traditional gallery crowd.

"This venue will have a different audience and there will be huge exposure to people during

the week and at the private parties. There's also a different approach to showing art here: They don't prevent you from being represented by someone else and they are open and supportive of artists because they don't have to sell the work. Their main interest is in gathering up talent," said Kraus.

Coquitlam photographer Albert Normandin, who will be exhibiting his Africa series along with other work at Sugar and Sugar in September, is excited to have a new venue for artists in the city. But he cautions that Vancouverites still need to show greater enthusiasm for the kind of approach the Sugars are pioneering. "We definitely need a unique outlet like this in Vancouver but we also need people to strongly support it. It will work if enough people come out to it — and that can always be a big problem here," said Normandin.

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