

Ottawa Citizen

Street photographer puts stamp on Ottawa; He was confined to his apartment for years by an anxiety disorder, but Michael Gericke's hobby has opened doors, reports Andrew Duffy.

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Michael Gericke's Ottawa is a place where gleaming motorcycles, vibrant graffiti and snow-covered walkways combine to reveal an intensely colourful city hidden in plain sight.

Gericke, known widely as Mikey G, is a self-described street photographer whose work was recently featured in a Royal Ontario Museum exhibit called, "Touched by Fire: the art show you have to be crazy to enter." The event was organized by the Mood Disorders Association of Ontario.

Gericke, 52, suffers from an anxiety disorder which was once so acute that, for two decades, he left his apartment only out of necessity.

It was a painful experience for someone so creative and sociable. However, with his social phobia now under control thanks to the drug, Paxil, Gericke now regularly takes to this city's streets in search of inspiration.

He carries his Nikon D40 everywhere, even to a local soup kitchen.

"I want to show everyone what a great place Ottawa is to live," says Gericke, who likes to photograph cars, motorcycles, back alleys, street-scapes and people.



Photo: Michael Gericke

He wants each photo to freeze a scene so it can be properly considered. He spends at least an hour a day stalking downtown Ottawa with his lens, hunting for uncommon views.

"That's part of the thrill: If I can spotlight some unknown, beautiful spot, that turns my crank."

Gericke concentrates on scenes with fine detail that he can intensify in editing. He uses Adobe Lightroom software to add colour, stretch scenes, shade and crop.

"I like to put my own special stamp on it, to take an ordinary scene and make it something extraordinary ... I want those pictures to jump off the screen," he says.

Gericke took up photography in Montreal, where he was born and raised. He liked to take snapshots on family vacations.

Late in high school, he began to experience serious panic attacks and he was forced to repeat his final year. He later dropped out of Concordia University because the problem had grown so pronounced. Even riding a bus left him sweating and breathing hard. He went to work as a security guard.

Social anxiety disorder is usually characterized by an unrealistic fear of social situations and can trigger symptoms that include an increased heart rate, sweating, trembling and panic. The disorder often emerges in adolescence and is frequently accompanied by other problems such as depression, agoraphobia, or substance abuse.

Paxil, which is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), brought Gericke's symptoms under control. The

anti-depressant came on the market in Canada in 1993 and was later approved as a treatment for social anxiety disorder.

"It has changed my life: I can get outdoors now and I don't have to sorry about anxiety attacks and stuff," he says. "Anxiety kept me a loner for a lot of years, and so, when it started getting better, I wanted to get out more."

Gericke moved to Ottawa in 1997. He sold insurance until a brain hemorrhage landed him on permanent disability in 2005. His mother died that same year, leaving him a little money. He used it to buy a new camera.

Gericke, who also has epilepsy and diabetes, hopes his photography will one day offer a source of income to supplement his disability cheque.

He sold his first photograph — for \$125 — at the Royal Ontario Museum show last month.

He couldn't afford to travel to that show, so staff at Centre 507, a Bank Street drop-in centre, organized a reception for him. He gave a slide show of his work, which can also be found on Flickr (www.flickr.com/mikeygottawa).

Photography has already provided him many rewards, Gericke says. He finds a camera can often break down walls and make it easier to meet people.

"And, more than anything," he says, "I love that you can move someone with an image."