

A Chronology of the Ants 1984 -2011

In 1984 I was squatting at 44 Dovercourt Av. home of early Fastwurm movie era, Fauves Get Land Legs 1984 and Wurms on the Lamb, 1985 .

44 is located below Queen West, on some nights when I couldn' t make it into my building, I would go to my room.

I had been introduced to Paul Sanella the owner of the Cameron by Rebecca Baird, the first installation was the Alien Lounge, it was a large lounge bar on the second floor that I remodeled in exchange for free rent, it was used as a screening bar for local film and video artists.

My first room at the Cameron was on the top floor at the back of the building, and seven years later, it would become part of my kitchen area. It was a 7 by ten room; it had a sink in it that had cold running water and a small window that overlooked the Toronto downtown core. Not many people knew I had this room, so I could disappear when I wanted to be on my own. There where still a few original old guys living in the building, but Herb and Paul had been able to relocate most of the others.

In 1985 I moved into a 10 x 10 room where I installed an industrial colorful tile floor, still there. At that time all the tenants still had to hide the fact they lived in the building from the city inspectors so I came up with the notion of an office. I bought myself the largest steel desk I could find, I had a futon made for the top of it. By day, I sat writing at my desk and at night, it was my bed. The inspectors would open the door see this huge desk with only three feet of walking space around it and would never think of looking in the closet.

The front of the building needed some reno work so discussion began to do a complete remake of the main entrance. They could only afford materials and so the labor came as free rent. Many times, we would work overnight, so it was not so hard to find people to work free for drinks.

I had started on the idea for the upper part of the building, something that would transform the view of the building, objectify it with a unifying element. I came up with the idea of an insect invasion on the outside of the building; I realized that because of the prevalence of ants in so many artworks it became the obvious choice for an art hotel. the Cameron had no budget for so all the materials were found and collected from the basement of the hotel and in allies around the bar.

The original ants were made of recycled half-inch ply, coat hangers, duct tape and spray paint. I had decided to cover some of them in resin and fiberglass that was donated by Jacob's hardware, but only 6 of the ten got the fiberglass layer.

I was working as a guard at the ROM by day and at night I was on Queen Street, putting up the corrugated steel front, with the corrugated pillar and a cave texture entrance. The colors were Papal purple in an automotive acrylic paint finish on galvanized steel and accompanied by a metallic gold pillar.

The concrete cave relief had antelope horn imprints in it and painted to look like stone and lichen.

Paul Sanella and I put up the ants the first time using a thirty-foot extension ladder from Jacobs, it was a wily thing to manage around all the power lines, and we did come within inches of almost crushing a older woman walking by. I did all the climbing and screwing in of the ants. Within weeks, someone had snagged one of the lower ants and was spotted fixed to a car as a hood ornament, driving along Queen Street.

Paul and I during a long night working on the front came up with the Ten-Ant pun at the peak of exhaustion, and it went from there. I tend to work blind, and so the choice of ten ants was the only number of ants that seemed right, Paul had asked why ten, and I answered "because there are ten ants" , and we laughed realizing the pun. It was funny because it was an admission by the Cameron that there were indeed ten tenants at the time and despite all the surprise inspections, the building inspectors could not discover the tenants illegally living there.

In the summer of 1985 I moved to New York, while I was there I worked at Area, every eight weeks we would scrap the interior of the club and build something entirely new. On one of the changeovers, with a Surrealist theme the opportunity to make ants came up. Ants are a main course of Surrealism; I made over 60 ants for the club. They' re out there somewhere, because at the end of the show everything was scrapped, and our apartment of Ludlow was too small for any ants, so people carried them off.

Paul Sanella mentions that when the Pope was in Toronto in 1984, his motorcade was going to go by the bar and was hoping the Holy See could stop and bless the Cameron.

In 1987 while in Rome after a Fastwurm install in Sicily at an international art fair curated by Achille Bonito Oliva , we stayed in Rome and decided to view the art collection at the Vatican and also take the opportunity to shoot a new Fastwurms movie of me straightening out and going on the wagon, etc,

While there, I got a Papal blessing, which you can buy. I bought a blessing by the Pope for my mom and dad; I also got one for the Cameron House. It was a scroll with the official Papal Seal and blessed by His Holiness John Paul II, it mysteriously disappeared from behind the bar at the Cameron, Paul was proud of it.

By the February 1988 I moved back to Toronto, that is when a new group of ants where constructed for AA Bronson and a show he was curating at the Powerplant. We hoped to create a new breed of ants to include on the outside of the Cameron, so it was agreed the ants would be donated to the Cameron afterwards. The "Sea to Sea" ants where made in the Powerplant shop with help from Reid Diamond and where placed on the smoke stack at the Powerplant. Afterwards I installed the ants a the Cameron by repelling down the side of the building, it was quite a rush doing it and I was able to refresh some of the older ants with spray paint and install the new ones in more remote areas on the building.

In 1989 I asked for two rooms on the top floor, one had been used for storage and the other was my original room which no one had ever used because I had left it in it' s original skid row motif.

I went in there and using a chain saw, I did a bit of remodeling and was able to carve out a great apartment out of two rooms and a hallway. I had to sleep on hills of rubble for a month while I slowly filled the remaining walls with plaster and wood bits and cans of food from our Fastwurms show Perspective 88 at the AGO.

By the end of 1991 things had changed a lot, I no longer was running with the Wurms, and I was off to India, I moved out the Cameron in 1992 after nine years of free rent.

In 1994 for the Tenth Anniversary of the Cameron, Cindy Williams and Sharmaine Bedoe got me to redo the ants, so I repelled once again to remove them to the boos of people going by on the street. I had to keep shouting down to people that they where being repaired and would be back within a week.

So the ants got another ten years, and over time In total I believe there must be close to a hundred ants since I made the first articulated recycled memento.

In 2008, after having many people mention to me in emails and phone messages that the ants where slowly disintegrating and I should possibly consider fixing them I offered the Cameron a new breed of ants. With help from long time friend Sean Wakfer we made new ants. We decided to install them during Nuit Blanche 2009, where we set up a MASH Unit for recovery makeover and re-installation of the ants. This time I was able to get Jamie Osborne to do the repelling while I stayed on the ground to oversee the operation and documentation. We had tents, tables, generators, lights, and a full crew of people working, with thousands of spectators witnessing the operation. Three of the present ants on the Cameron are original ants mummified in shrink-wrap plastic.

Again in 2011 for the "This is Paradise Show" at the MOCCA, a second group of ten ants clung to the outside of the building, and remained for three years past the closing of the show.

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