



the elements of expression

Photos by Liesa Kortmann



Karen Couillard

By Irene Gentle

all it the clash of the titans. A great room, a gorgeous painting. And together, they are horribly wrong.

So what to do? If you want to have a great-looking painting, trust the artist. If you want something decorative that clicks with your current décor, call an interior designer. But if you want both, call Karen Couillard. Then count your blessings.

Couillard is a Quebec native who, when torn as to whether to pursue a career in art or décor, decided to do both. The result is a big, bold, slashing exclamation mark of a career, breezily melding the disparate elements of fashion, interior design and painting and then glancing back as if to say 'What? Doesn't everyone do this?'

Actually, they don't. But Couillard, 36, who spent time as a childrens wear designer with her husband, Steve, unerringly and joyfully targets the inner diva in every woman. And people are lapping it up.

In a world where art can be considered a very serious thing, she

offers a bright, unpretentious alternative.

Designated by her as groovy art, her work is bright, fun and hip and her use of colour jubilant and unabashed. It wakes up the senses and reacquaints you with a sudden longing for a hot outdoor patio, a cool summer drink and the afternoon free to gossip with your best girlfriends. Or at least swill martinis until nightfall.

Despite this, Couillard is a serious artist, propelled by a love of the lovely.

"Everything that's visual, it attracts me. I love beautiful things," she said. "When you are an artist, you're an artist in every which way. You're going to live and breathe it."

And forget that old idea of an artist locked up in her garret. Couillard is definitively and exuberantly a part of popular culture.

Just take the pages of a fashion magazine, duplicate their zest, flirtatiousness and popular relevance and then stick them on a canvas or furniture.

Voila! A Couillard.

Well, blame it on her roots. Quebec has a special spot in the Canadian landscape as a beacon of the carelessly chic, the mussy-glamorous.

That is Couillard's background. But in 1994, she moved with Steve to Ontario. The duo have been married for 15 years and have two children together, a daughter, Ann-Elizabeth, 10 and a son, Steven-James, 8.

The girl likes to follow in her mother's footsteps, drawing every chance she gets. And that has Couillard, who didn't set out to be an artist, shaking her head.

"You have to have something that's different," she frets, knowing artists rarely survive simply by being good, anymore.

Then again, Couillard is still shaking her head that this is her way of making a living.



"I came out with this style and it's different than what you see in a gallery," she said. "And now, I'm just going with the flow."

So it isn't her fault the flow happens to be funky. Just witness the fashion pages.

"Right now, fashion is about unusual pieces, like a purse that has a fringe on it, a purse that has an usual form on it. Like beads and fringe, a palm tree with a bunch of sequins sewn on it, or an embroidered purse," said Couillard. "These are conversation pieces you use as an accessory."

And those with their eye on a Couillard often have a confident feel for style, compelling enough to pull off a trend and make it look like an original.

"People are looking for unique finds," she said. "I find that people need colour. And I'm very inspired by having wording on paintings. Graffiti inspires me a lot. That's why I call it groovy art."

Because of her eye for the now, she sees her pieces as collector's items in the making.

She's interested in works tracing the fashionable dame from the early 1900s to the turn of the recent millennium.

But that's just now. "I can't tell you what I'm going to be doing in 10 years," she said happily.

But in the meantime, she's one of the few artists who can sell you a painting, take it to your home and brilliantly rearrange the furniture for you before she goes.

"I can take your place and change it," she said. "I can decorate any space without a budget, using what you already have and turn it all around. It's all in the presentation."

And just as in art, it's the details that make the difference.

"I'm a visual artist," shrugged Couillard. "If a flower pot doesn't belong there, I can tell."

Consider yourself warned. ☹