

# 'The French feel that to paint for a living means that you'll starve'



Youri Leroux: used to sneak out

I was in my late twenties when I changed career. My best friend from schooldays and best man at my wedding had just died at 28 in an avalanche while skiing, and I discovered that he thought I'd been wasting my life.

I'd been working as an interior architect and he thought I should be a painter. It was one of those life-defining revelations and it was the catalyst that helped me find the courage to make the change.

Without that I don't think I would've dared make that move because the French feel that to paint for a living means you'll starve. I remember at some point my mother saying if I painted, I should work part-time because it'd put food on the table.



## YOURI LEROUX

When I look back, I was always artistic. I grew up in the 1970s near Lille in the north-east France by the border with Belgium and from a young age I'd paint and draw. I'd create these comic strips about everyday life.

My primary school was private, Catholic and regimented. It was run by nuns and we wore blue cotton gowns – like laboratory coats – which was a way of making everyone feel on the same level.

I remember one form teacher playing the guitar and teaching us songs. Another one taught us writing and we had to finish it all before we were allowed to cross our "t"s.

Secondary school was also private and religious, and very focused on academic achievement.

In France you're graded from one to 20, but if you get 19.5 you'd be chastised for not getting 20. It didn't suit my personality because I liked teachers who supported me.

As a result, my mother would say during my secondary years I was depressed. I think my only bright moment was when a cat strayed into the school grounds. That made me smile.

I do remember, though, when I was 12 being presented with a

paintbox by Dad, who was a successful interior architect. I was the third generation to have received it and there was this magical and very emotional attachment to it – it meant I had the freedom to paint what I liked. Overall, I wasn't an easy boy. I'd sneak out to meet friends, stay out all night and come home before dawn. My mother used to wonder why I'd be tired.

I ended up changing schools at 16 and things became better. I had a teacher who helped me think for myself. I found when we were asked questions I'd be the first to answer.

For my baccalaureate I chose to major in drawing and as a result, I gravitated towards being an interior architect although there was no

pressure from Dad. I then went on to St Luc Institute at Tournai just across the border in Belgium to study interior architecture for four years. St Luc was very prestigious within Europe.

For the first three years, it concentrated on developing the personality and creativity of a student rather than pushing them professionally. The fourth year was then spent on the technical side.

I did interior architecture for three years and for a while I liked the interaction with clients. But deep inside I knew my heart lay elsewhere – I'd learned that painting was my forte. I'd say to any student that nothing is pre-set. Everyone has something to offer though you might not know that at the time

– you just have to be patient and wait for it to unfold.

I don't regret my life before I became an artist although now I wake up each morning with a passion inside me. In any case, I had all these wonderful experiences before my life as an artist and specifically I started going out with this girl called Celine at the age of 17.

We'd met when we were 15 and were best friends for two years before stepping out, but somehow I knew even at that young age the first day we met that we'd marry, and we did.

*Youri Leroux is exhibiting his work at Chouinard Gallery/Sin Sin Fine Art, Mid-levels, as part of Le French May. He was talking to David Phair.*

Public perception is a problem but Paul Morris sa