

Members

[Register](#) | [Login](#)

Notice to our readers

News

[Ontario](#)
[Canada](#)
[World](#)
[Opinion/Editorials](#)
[Editorial Board](#)
[Letters](#)
[National Report](#)
[World Report](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Editorial Cartoon](#)
[Corrections](#)
[Today's Paper](#)
[Star Columnists](#)



Special Reports

[Cecilia Zhang](#)
[Conflict in Iraq](#)
[Matter of Interest](#)
[Athens 2004](#)
[\[More Specials\]](#)

My Email Newsletters

[My Scoreboard](#)
[My Stock List](#)
[My Subscription](#)

Features

[Brand New Planet](#)
[Contests/Events](#)
[Crosswords](#)
[Ellie](#)
[Horoscopes](#)
[Lottery Results](#)
[Traffic Cams](#)
[TV Listings](#)

Initiatives

[Classroom Connection](#)
[Fresh Air Fund](#)
[Santa Claus Fund](#)

The Star

[About Us](#)
[Advertising Sales](#)
[Affiliates](#)
[Archives](#)
[Careers @ the Star](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[FAQ](#)
[Internships](#)
[News Releases](#)
[Pages of the Past](#)
[Photo Sales](#)
[Subscribe](#)

Search the Web



[Print Story](#)

[E-mail Story](#)

Jul. 11, 2004. 09:02 AM

A curator of people

Tyler Clark Burke has established herself as the bellwether of Toronto's indie cultural scene

Tyler Clark Burke stabs delicately at the dainty salad in front of her, half-interested, distracted.

"Really, I'm just so exhausted right now," she says, an apologetic smile pinching the edge of her mouth. "I'd feel the

most successful if I could sleep well at night, always, wake up in the morning and had time to go for a run, do some drawing, and have some calm. But when I start working on projects, I can't stop thinking about it. I can't sleep."

Burke, 30, whose constantly full hands always welcome more, is in fact in her natural state: Fully engaged, mind whirring, and far, far too busy. And having just begun a six-week stint as the Drake Hotel's artist in residence, that's not about to change.

Exhausted though she may be, the diminutive Burke's deep green eyes are alive, electric. "I'm always running around like a maniac, and part of that is just my energy. And I don't think that's going to go away."

Anyone who has come to know her would expect no less: Since 1999, when she founded Three Gut Records, the indie label that launched local acts including The Constantines and Royal City to international acclaim, Burke has gone on to establish herself as the bellwether of Toronto's independent cultural scene.

Burke's drawings, a playful, eccentric oeuvre that achieves an uneasy balance of naiveté and menace, make her a visual artist by description. And she is that, but so much more: At a group show of work by Burke and her former roommates from Borden Street, an impromptu art collective ("Everyone's room was this amazing, unintentional creative installation," Burke recalls), she took the opening at Queen St.'s Luft Gallery a step further.

"I was up until 4 in the morning one night, and I just had this idea. I just started making it. I don't even remember doing it," she says. The result: nine zebra heads, fitted with flashing eyes and paraded by friends through the streets of Toronto last Halloween night, drumming a dirge to the gallery's front door. "The stories they told me, of people's interaction with them on the street, was amazing," she said. "It made the opening an event."

An orchestrator of social spaces and situations — a cultural cruise director, of sorts — Burke's greatest gift may be her ability to project her own natural warmth and guilelessness onto the worlds she creates.

Take Santa Cruz, an event she launched last fall. Calling it a party isn't even the beginning. Attendees are encouraged to wear numbers pinned to their shirts, which then have corresponding envelopes, ready to receive notes from others. Santa Cruz (the next is this Friday at Lee's Palace) is



STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

Tyler Clark Burke, an orchestrator of social spaces and situations, is a kind of cultural cruise director for the city. She has also just begun a six-week stint as the artist in residence at the Drake Hotel.

> ADVERTISEMENT <

FROM AN
AUTOMATIC
\$1,000
CREDIT



part snowball dance, part dare — to drop the facades and detachment, and to greet a stranger as a friend.

At the Drake, her project is Midnight Masquerade (A Reception Of Deception) on July 24. Burke is making 150 masks, one for each participant. When it's over, they'll serve as keepsakes, a personal artefact of a moment shared.

"Anyone who comes is going to walk away with their own mask, supporting this project — i.e. my living expenses," she says, laughing. "The project really is my life right now," in more ways than one — both as a collective experience of her design, and a sole means of income."

But the sacrifice is a willing one. Shared moments and collective emotion are, in fact, what Burke's art, and life, are all about. She remembers a childhood experience, watching a high school basketball game with her father, when their team came from behind to win in the game's dying moments. "That feeling was so overwhelming, I've been working to replicate that feeling in almost everything I do — that feeling of being in a group of people who are involved in a shared thrill, with a common desire."

Burke's father, Frank, is an Italian cinema scholar who has written books on the Italian master, Federico Fellini. As a child, she was constantly exposed to the director's idiosyncratic dreamscapes, projected in the living room as she played nearby.

"I became obsessed with Fellini as a child," she says. *The Clowns* in particular, gripped her. "I just started drawing clowns, hundreds of them, for my dad to give to Fellini," she says. The old master signed them with his phone number for the little girl.

Fellini's conjured realities, part real, part fantasy, stuck with her. "I just loved the circus-like, chaotic environment," she says. "It's not so much specific as it is an imprint of this very colourful chaos, but in an organized fashion."

Which, of course, could describe Burke's own creations, at Santa Cruz, the Midnight Masquerade and a host of other events, where the creation is an emotional environment — ephemeral dream worlds, really — where the participants become her artistic palette.

"She's a curator of interesting people, and interesting ideas," says John Turner, a producer at CBC television who knew Burke at Guelph University, where she was an eccentric, creative force. As art director for the student newspaper, Burke was unafraid to experiment with a staid form. But her most experimental medium was herself.

"Back then, she was known for her interesting and interpretive fashion sense," says Turner with a laugh. "She was hard to miss on campus. She's always been a rabid individualist, both artistically and personally, and that's really evolved. She's really become a much more serious, mature artist, but she still has that playfulness that doesn't allow herself to take herself too seriously."

Burke pauses, speechless and flustered. Turner's notion, of being a curator of people, has never crossed her mind. "Oh, gosh, of course not. That's why I'm so embarrassed right now. That's such a nice thing to say," she says, brushing back her dark curls, blushing. The embarrassment, like everything else about Burke, is completely genuine.

"People laugh when I tell them that I actually am shy, but I am," she says. Through all her social convening, Burke is content in the background, not the star of the show, but just one among the many who take part in her liberating spectacles.

"Her art is a way for her to be with people, maybe a way to deal with shyness," says her father, "and maybe a way of putting people in an environment where they can do the same."

Burke knows how emotional that collective experience can be. At a dinner for 40 last fall, the group sat around a long table, their spoons connected by string. The entire table had to eat in unison, or no one would

eat at all. "There was this incredible electricity that really meant a lot to me," she says. "It was a sense of joy."

She spoke recently at the Trampoline Hall lecture series, created by Sheila Heti. She was asked to speak on her family history, in which her grandfather and great-grandfather were U.S. Supreme Court judges. Burke embraced it with the same depth and sincerity that she does everything and everyone. "Tyler is a very exotic, plain-spoken gal," Heti says. "She's a hard worker and a really thrilling person who is honest and self-effacing and full of feelings."

The depth of her feelings has never been hidden, her father says. "She is totally guileless and open. That's led to her being hurt terribly a number of times, but she's always able to pick herself up and keep going," he says. "She just has this incredible sense of possibility that she carries with her all the time."

Her resilience has been strained over the years. Burke spent her childhood in Winnipeg with her father and mother, who was involved in Winnipeg's theatre scene (Clark is her mother's maiden name). Her parents divorced, and she went to high school in Kingston, after her father took a position at Queen's University.

At Guelph University, Burke embraced the local culture scene, becoming involved in art and music. But she was derailed by mononucleosis and then chronic fatigue syndrome, which sent her back to Kingston to convalesce.

When she arrived in Toronto, nine years ago at age 21, she was still battling the illness, and working as a graphic designer to get by. But she was again thrown off track by mercury poisoning that stole even more of her time. "It totally changed my life," she says quietly. "I became really comfortable with being sick. I didn't know what it was like to be well anymore.

"I also started to realize that getting better, for some reason, was a scary process. I would be able to do things again, and I had to really start thinking about things in a different way. And I think what has caused me to be so hectic — I work best in situations where I feel overwhelmed — is because, for four or five years, I really didn't do anything at all. There really is this sense that I'm making up for lost time."

Leslie Feist, a musician and close confidante of Burke's, can attest. "The only time I've ever seen her down was when she's not in the middle of something all-consuming. That's what she lives for."

In 1999, Burke started Three Gut with Lisa Moran. The business model was unconventional. "We had no bands and no distribution. It was just so ridiculous, it was fun," she says. Burke busied herself with postering and public interventions, like Project Envelope, where she strung thousands of envelopes all over town, bearing an edict: "Open Me." Inside was an invitation to an event. "It was so much fun to sit in the hedges and watch people interact with them. They were so suspicious, like it might explode. But when they opened them, they would just smile."

As Three Gut become a more serious concern, Burke edged away. "No one cared about a dorky envelope anymore. I would literally be there for 17 hours, trying to book a tour. And I realized: I can't do this anymore. I didn't want to," she says. She had also split with her boyfriend of three years, Aaron Riches of Royal City.

So when Burke left Three Gut last year, it was without looking back. "I started to develop confidence as an artist, and in doing things on my own. I had to learn to not be afraid of that," she says.

Of course, in Burke's world and art, she's never alone. In her living tableaux, of masks and numbers and envelopes and notes passed, of common experiences and collective emotion, no one is. "I know that fear, not wanting to be involved," she says. "But once you're up there, and they're sawing you in half — or whatever is going on — you realize: 'Wow, that was worth it.'"

 [Print Story](#)

 [E-mail Story](#)

[FAQs](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [My Subscription](#)

[Home](#) | [GTA](#) | [Business](#) | [Waymoresports](#) | [A&E](#) | [Life](#)

Legal Notice: Copyright Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Distribution, transmission or republication of any material from www.thestar.com is strictly prohibited without the prior written permission of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. For information please contact us using our [webmaster form](#). www.thestar.com online since 1996.