

'Blood Campaign' Artist Wins Top Canadian Award

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By Solarina Ho

TORONTO (Reuters) - An artist who uses his own blood as a medium for his work was named this week to receive one of Canada's top artistic awards, the Governor General's Visual and Media Arts Award.

The artist, Hungarian-born Istvan Kantor, is an unlikely choice for the C\$15,000 (\$12,000) award as he has been barred from several of the most prominent art galleries in Canada and the United States.

He is one of seven artists who will be presented with Governor General's awards later this month for their career achievements and was selected by a jury of artists and art experts.

Kantor is founder of the neoist movement and the jury described his work as "the cutting and critical edge of contemporary art. His is an aggressive and unapologetic aesthetic of excess."

In 1988, he was arrested and permanently banned from New York's Museum of Modern Art after he left his legendary "Blood X" -- a giant X splashed on the wall using his own blood -- between two Picasso paintings in dedication to the victims of police brutality during the Tompkins Square Park riots that year.

Kantor left another similar "gift" between two Marcel Duchamp paintings at the National Gallery of Canada, in Ottawa, which also resulted in him being barred. Duchamp was one of Kantor's original sources of inspiration.

"I did a piece in the Duchamp room in 1991. That was in connection with the war against Iraq, in which Canada was participating," Kantor told Reuters in an interview.

His "Blood Campaign" began in Montreal in 1979. Asked about his fascination with blood, Kantor responded, "I thought it was a very useful part of my body. I could access it easily. I studied medicine -- I'm a nurse. I do my blood takings myself," he said. "The purpose was to turn my blood into an object of art, and sell it as an object of art, and through selling my blood, finance the neoist movement."

In all, he's done about 500 "Blood Campaign" works around the world, including one in which he contorted himself so that blood from a vial inserted into his anus flowed into his mouth.

Kantor, however, is increasingly broadening his art to use media such as video, computers and robotics to express his vision of technology's place in society.

Despite the National Gallery's lifetime ban, an exception will be made when it exhibits the work of the laureates from March 12 to May 1.

"I will be there for the opening, yes, absolutely. With my kids," Kantor said. "Though there will be two museum guards protecting me."

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