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NEW YORK—On a narrow block south of Canal Street in what must be one of the last bastions of urban grit in an ever-glossifying Lower Manhattan, Luis Jacob was in his element recently, greeting a growing throng of admirers with a gentle touch of the hand, a hug, a smile.

For Jacob, a Toronto-based artist who is 39, but with his lithe frame, olive skin and almond eyes, seems much younger, it was a moment to savour.

It was the September opening of his show *Without Persons* at Art in General, one of New York's vanguard independent galleries, and a comfort zone for an artist whose commitment to ground-level art making has been a hallmark of his career.

In recent years, though, things have changed for Jacob, and quickly. A few days earlier, he had just finished showing in the distinctly less gritty, gracefully curling rotunda of the fabled Guggenheim Museum uptown. One of his *Album* series — carefully arrayed selections of found images grouped to build what appear to be highly personal narratives using mass media — was shown there in a sprawling, superstar-laden show called *Haunted*, alongside work by such icons as Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol.

It was just the most recent signal that, in the fast-paced churn of the international art world, Jacob has become perhaps Toronto's most notable export. In 2007, he was invited to show at Documenta 12, a sprawling, prestige-laden international exhibition in Kassel, Germany that takes place only once every five years.

Some 750,000 people saw his work there, a video piece and *Album III*, including an elite of international curators; since then, Jacob's rise has been steadily stratospheric, from solo shows in European museums to his work being acquired by important museum collections — like the Guggenheim — all over the world. "It changed everything," Jacob says, still a little incredulous.

For Andria Hickey, the curator of Art in General, it wasn't so much a watershed as a culmination. "I've been watching his work for a long time, and I knew he was someone to keep an eye on," she said. "The last few years, you could really see him showing up on the radar at a whole new level."

In New York, *Without Persons* is a compact cross-section of Jacob's diverse practice. A new *Album* lines a long corridor leading into the main room, where a hauntingly imposing video work waits. In a darkened room, two huge video screens face each other, each a field of thick, milky liquid. A flat, robotic voice speaks, and the liquid leaps to life, contorting in disturbingly fluid, visceral waves. The voice stops and the liquid calms, only to have a new voice prod the opposing screen into motion again.

It's immersive, hypnotic and provokes a gut-level response, and it's as good a case as any for why Jacob's work continues to travel. In the new year, the Guggenheim show, about the obsessive urge to capture and claim passing moments through photography and video, moves to its Frank Gehry-built branch in Bilbao, Spain, taking Jacob's work back to Europe again.

For a change, Jacob himself will be logging no such miles. Instead, he'll be in Toronto, enjoying a homecoming that will finally make him as visible to his hometown as he has been everywhere else in recent years. It starts in November, when the much-delayed Dufferin St. extension opens at Queen St. W. A series of Jacob's psychedelic, sentinel-like paintings called *They Sleep With One Eye Open*, will line the underpass, the result of winning the public art competition last year.

Then in February, the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art will open *Pictures in an Exhibition*, a show that truly brings it all home: In it, Jacob will include the very first pieces he ever made, as a 20-year-old still in school, against the recent work that's made his international reputation.



Luis Jacob outside Art in General in Lower Manhattan in September. His show there, "Without Persons," is the most recent in a string of international laurels for the Toronto artist, who will be getting a big homecoming in the coming year.

Murray Whyte/Toronto Star

"It will be very personal for me," says Jacob, who is contemplative and soft spoken, pausing at length to assemble lengthy, lucid, penetrating thoughts. "What was I making when I first identified myself as an artist here, in this place, and do they have any relevance today?"

Searching for that link requires the excavation of a complex personal history that, in some ways, is a quintessentially Toronto trajectory. In 1980, when Jacob was 10, his father accepted a transfer from his employer, IBM, to leave the family's home in Lima, Peru, for the frigid suburbanscape of Scarborough.

Jacob fell headlong into a world of difference. He arrived speaking no English; he still speaks with a faint hint of an accent, 30 years later. As a kid in multicultural Toronto, Jacob fell into the new-immigrant experience of identity building in this strange, new place, and the early necessity of searching for a place to belong stuck.

It helped impress on Jacob how much the onus would be on him to make the life he wanted for himself here. Jacob is famous as a community-builder both in art and in the city's expansive queer community, as an urban activist, and just for generosity of spirit (he co-founded a community school, among many other such gestures).

Even art came to him as an indirect product of his do-it-yourself ethos. Growing up, Jacob was drawn to art early on, which concerned his no-nonsense professional father.

"My family wasn't one to go to museums," he said. "When I was going to high school, my dad had a conversation with me: 'I know you like art, but soon you're going to have to make a decision about what you're going to do to make a living, and art's not going to cut it.' That made sense to me."

At the University of Toronto, he studied philosophy and semiotics. Then, in second year, for an essay project for a religion class, he turned in an intricately constructed, handmade book. "The experience of producing that made me realize: I'm an artist," he said. "It really wasn't a choice for me at all. It was a recognition."

Graduating in 1992, Jacob set out into a local art scene teeming with a communal, us-against-the-world vibe. The city brimmed with artist collectives; art shows blossomed in abandoned warehouse spaces and disappeared overnight. "It was so full of possibility," he recalled. "You felt like art could be anything."

In 1996, a conversation with the painter Nestor Kruger, about an ideal gallery where they could show whatever they wanted, sparked passion, but also frustration. "I went home that night vibrating. I knew I couldn't afford to do that, but I knew there was something about this experience to hold on to."

Within days, it had gelled: Jacob sent a letter to 70 artists across the country, some senior, some still in school, inviting them to show in his new space, Galerie Largeness World of Art. It was a 5-inch-square cardboard box. "But it had real estate," he said. The gallery would be reproduced, by hand and by Jacob alone, as a periodical, which he sold at Toronto's Art Metropole.

It became a modest phenomenon. From 1996 to 2002, Jacob produced 30 editions of Galerie Largeness, working with 85 different artists. "It was exhausting," he says. "But it performed for me what it's like to be the artist I imagined: Having a community of other people to work with, and creating a public gesture that conveys a sense of enthusiasm."

Suffice to say it's been a long road from Galerie Largeness to the Guggenheims of the world, but Jacob remains rooted, wherever his path may lead.

"Honestly, the idea of making art elsewhere seems like such an abstraction to me," he says. "The idea that I can go to Berlin — or anywhere, really — and make art seems like a joke. I feel myself defined by Toronto. I really do."