



## ART GALLERY

# Ben McLaughlin & Wendy Wacko

## MOUNTAIN GALLERIES

In 2011 Benjamin McLaughlin was fresh out of art school in Vancouver when he met established gallery owner and fellow artist Wendy Wacko.

She saw something magical in his Ubuntu Sound Resonating Furniture series—a unique musical furniture collection, expertly crafted from rich wood, setting McLaughlin apart as a young industrial designer. Wacko decided to launch his work exclusively at Mountain Galleries and McLaughlin stepped into the role of communications director for the company. At the heart of this partnership was also commitment to keep McLaughlin's creative fires burning, with Mountain Galleries releasing him on sabbatical twice a year for six weeks at a time, where he could work with freedom and without everyday constraints in his Vancouver studio. "It's paid off in spades," says Wacko, with a nod to McLaughlin's success and the Mountain Galleries ethos of supporting artists. "If you're a creative soul, you need time where you don't have to worry about paying rent."

That has been the mission at Mountain Galleries since it was established: to support and promote artists, particularly Canadian artists, nurturing their work and providing space for others to see it. The company continues its "artist in residence" program every year, providing studio and accommodation for the artists represented in its spaces.

Wacko recalls how it all began 29 years

ago as she started winding down her filmmaking career and looking for another creative outlet. She found it in a small retail space at the Fairmont's Jasper Park Lodge. That space has tripled in size over the years as Mountain Galleries expanded in Jasper and to other Fairmont properties, at the Banff Springs Hotel and also in Whistler. "That move really opened us up to the talent in British Columbia," says Wacko.

Fairmont, she adds, has been integral to the success of Mountain Galleries, treating them more as partners than leaseholders. Today, Mountain Galleries is one of the largest fine art commercial operations in Western Canada, expanding east this year with a new location in Stratford.

Mountain landscapes have found a particular home in the galleries and are close to Wacko's heart, as an artist and an outdoor enthusiast.

"Mountain culture has always been a part of my life," says Wacko, who was also a former ski racer in her teenage years, training for a period of time in Whistler.

She always knew she wanted to live in the mountains, breathing fresh air and marvelling at the world around her as she recreated it on canvas. She has taken that love and passion, that deep connection with the mountains, and helped others feel and experience it through art.

McLaughlin echoes that sentiment in his own work.

"I get a lot of inspiration from being up in the mountains," he says. "It's no

accident that I'm working with wood and living in British Columbia."

Mountain Galleries now has its eye to the future.

"We like to think about what we will be 40 years from now," says Wacko, 68. "We have the strongest team in the history of the company however, there is an opportunity within the organization for a silent partner, someone with an MBA in business, someone young and passionate about Canadian art, and someone who will embrace our mission to support living Canadian artists. We are looking for someone who will help our team of creative professionals steer the ship and be one of the architects of our future."



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◀ **Main photo:** Artists Benjamin McLaughlin and Wendy Wacko (communications director and owner of Mountain Galleries) have an eye to the future as the company grows and solidifies its role in the Canadian art scene.

▶ **Right inset:** McLaughlin and Wacko with Liz Peacock, Co-Director and Manager of the Whistler Gallery. The team at Mountain galleries, with locations in the Fairmont Chateau Whistler, the Banff Springs Hotel, the Jasper Park Lodge, and now in Stratford, is the strongest it has ever been.

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