

## A public display of melancholy

By Alex Cohen

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**"M**r. Chatterbox was one of those people who couldn't stop talking." This line, the first of a children's story called "Mr. Chatterbox," which Olivier Gervail keeps by his bed, describes the book's owner quite well.

The 32-year-old French artist has a lot to say about life, art and his new exhibit, which recently opened rather unceremoniously at a shopping plaza in Tokyo.

"This exhibit is for people who don't get to see art every day," explained the petite bleach-blond artist who speaks in a rapid-fire blend of Japanese and English heavily tinged with a French accent.

A resident of Japan for the past eight years, Gervail was tired of catering to the same group of art lovers and critics who frequent the Tokyo gallery scene. So he decided to produce his latest exhibit, a collection of 18 sculptures, in the outdoor mall of Yebisu Garden Place.

Now shoppers, tourists and passersby can't help but notice his work. Staging this exhibit saved Gervail the customary cost of gallery-opening festivities, but exposed his work to the unforeseeable forces of weather and the even more unpredictable reactions of the general public.

The artist has seen tourists posing for photos in front of his sculptures and children scampering on them.

Leaning over an illuminated mirror as nine metal men do in a piece called "Rien," Gervail discovered that someone had placed some loose change on it.

Gervail's "metal people," boxy figures with oval heads, create simple but powerful images, especially at night when the small white bulbs of their eyes light up, casting a haunting glow like Christmas lights.

The self-taught artist, whose grandfather was a well-known object artist in France, possesses a natural aptitude for injecting life into stationary figures. This talent helped him land his first jobs doing fashion illustrations for magazines and newspapers when he originally arrived in Tokyo.

Inspired by the literary works of Yasunari Kawabata, the theme of Gervail's most recent work is melancholy. His metal figures' expressive poses and suggestive settings—one sits on a toilet reading Nietzsche—depict the isolation of the human condition.

"Melancholy is not sadness, but the beginning of the end," Gervail explained. "Melancholy is seeing the reality of finality."

Walking through the outdoor exhibit, an evolution in Gervail's work quickly becomes apparent. The raw angst portrayed in his earlier works gives way to themes of overcoming sorrow in his most recent pieces, reflecting transitions in their creator's life.

"I am happy with myself, I like myself now," Gervail said. "But it took a long time to like myself." In "Repli" (1997), a pair of metal figures sit sullenly with their knees drawn tightly to their chests, tucked into huge filigree snail shells embedded with color-

ful translucent stained-glass discs.

In "The Wall," one of his latest pieces, a series of white bodies, featureless with the exception of large rounded buttocks, are frozen in various poses of despair and frustration on either side of an immense wall. Perched atop the wall is another white figure who has managed to overcome what Gervail calls "the wall of communication."

Gervail is well acquainted with the feeling of isolation that his sculptures often invoke. The only child of his mother's marriage to an Indian, his dark complexion made him recognizably different from his fair-skinned stepbrothers and stepsisters.

When he first arrived in Japan, his lack of language skills kept him at a distance from the bustling crowds of Tokyo. "Japan was like a mirror," he said, "because I had no one to talk to."

Now that he can speak Japanese, Gervail finds himself with plenty of people to talk to. And he has made contact with curators in New York, France and China who are interested in exhibiting his work next year. In the meantime, the artist is content to watch the reactions of his newest and most candid critics. "Art doesn't have to be with the museum," he said. "It has to be with the people."

Olivier Gervail's works are on display at Yebisu Garden Place in Ebisu, Tokyo, through Aug. 31. The sculptures are illuminated each evening from 5:30 p.m. until midnight. To reach Yebisu Garden Place, use the "Yebisu Skywalk" from JR Ebisu Station.



Olivier Gervail's artworks, installed at Yebisu Garden Place in Ebisu, Tokyo, are illuminated from the evening.

Photos by Alex Cohen