

going out

EXHIBIT A BLOSSOMS DEAREST

Plum Blossoms
Reviewed by
Gary Michael Dault

Chad Gerth's exhibition runs at the Corkin Shopland Gallery until May 7, 55 Mill St., 416-979-1980.

I don't normally like to point my camera at people," says Chad Gerth, who admits to being uncharacteristically shy for a photographer. "But in this case," he points out, on the phone from his Chicago studio, "I was just as invisible as they thought they were."

The "they" he is referring to are the thousands of Japanese men and women who, though ostensibly normal in every other way, drop everything about this time each year and, armed with cameras and picnic provisions, head to downtown parks in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and other centres to capture the outrageous beauty of the freshly opened cherry and plum blossoms.

"Blossoms seem to symbolize not only the separation between winter and spring, but between our normal lives and nature," Gerth says in an artist statement accompanying Plum Blossoms, his exhibition celebrating these joyous and resolute nature photographers opening tomorrow at the Corkin Shopland Gallery, "and we have just a few short days to wander in that narrow space."

That narrow space is literal as well as metaphysical. Gerth was teaching English in Osaka in 2001 when he made these photographs (a stopgap time between graduating from Ryerson University in 1999 and earning his MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2003). During the brief, hallowed hours of this botanical extravaganza, he says, Japan's blossom fanciers possess the *sakura zensen* (or plum-blossom front), an almost maniacal ability to focus, if you will



CHAD GERTH/CORKIN SHOPLAND GALLERY

Chad Gerth's picture *Untitled #21 (The Duel)*: Two photographers appear to be engaged in a relentless standoff.

The subjects don't appear to notice Gerth and his camera because they are all lost in their own picture-making.

permit the pun, on the task at hand: to search out and photograph the perfect blossom, to isolate the finest, most exquisite, most transcendently, heartbreakingly beautiful flower and immortalize it — at least until next year's even more splendid flower takes its place.

This takes concentration, regardless of the gaiety of the *hanami* (flower-viewing parties) all around, during which the sake apparently flows with unshakable ease — see his *Untitled #13 (Drinking Buddies)*. And this concentration generates a certain carapace-like sphere of isolation around each photographer. The reason nobody appears to notice Gerth and his camera is that they are all lost in the imperatives of their own picture-making. "I was isolated by their in-

tensity," he tells me.

His resulting photographs — C-prints mounted in light boxes — are a witty and endearing twist on the convention whereby photographers seem to love photographing each other at work. In Gerth's works in this exhibit, the photographers are almost as plentiful as the fruit trees, their tripods sprouting up all over like another kind of plant, their lenses probing, searching, hanging in the air before that ineffable something or other.

Gerth says he was delighted by the degree to which the individual plum-blossom reveller thus becomes "transparent." For, as he notes in his gallery statement, "even though the next photographer may be only one tree over in this dense, man-made garden, there is no reason to be self-consci-

ous. They don't see you and their presence is nothing more than a breeze against your ear."

Perhaps my favourite among the Plum Blossoms photos is Gerth's *Untitled #21 (The Duel)*. Here, deep in a sea of magenta plum blossoms, and cross-hatched by tree branches, are two photographers who appear to be engaged in a relentless standoff. It takes a moment or two to see that their sightlines, which may be as close as trains passing on adjacent tracks, are nevertheless not locked onto one another's lenses. Rather, each of them lives in the cell of himself, the relationship between his camera lens and the bright, fragrant object of his quest being inviolate and lifted above the moment, a photo intimacy as profound, if as momentary, as the coming of spring itself.