

JUSTICE

The Strange Case of Monsieur Perron

*A Montreal teacher was accused of selling student artwork online.
What came next was even weirder*

BY SARAH TRELEAVEN
ILLUSTRATION BY PETE RYAN

IN EARLY FEBRUARY 2024, Edith Liard's young son came home from school and announced that a teacher had been stealing student art projects. Liard brushed it off. "I kind of ignored him," she says. "He always has these stories." But then her daughter, thirteen, and presumably a more reliable source, walked through the door, breathless with news: a teacher had been stealing student art projects—*her* art teacher. He was new to the school and some of the students had been curious about his work, so they decided to look him up online. Liard's daughter told her to google it.

The two of them went to Liard's computer and searched for signs of the pilfered artwork. What they saw was bizarre. There, facilitated by an online shop called Fine Art America, was a page managed by Monsieur Mario Perron, the art teacher at Westwood Junior High School in the small anglophone suburb of Saint-Lazare,

just west of Montreal. The page was entitled "Creepy Portrait Art," and the pictures were, as promised, incredibly creepy. Dozens of student portraits, mostly in crayon, depicted a grab bag of nightmarish externalization: twelve- and thirteen-year-olds with bleeding wounds, sutured mouths, and dangling eyeballs. There were human-skeleton hybrids and hollowed-out eye cavities. One portrait showed a shrieking bald demon, his eyes glowing yellow and mouth spitting blood.

These were not the kind of portraits that might, say, tie a room together. They looked, instead, like artwork a school psychologist might elicit to justify urgent parental intervention. But Liard's daughter told her that Perron had specifically encouraged this style. When Perron issued the assignment, he told the students to create a portrait—of him or herself, or of a friend—in the provocative, riotous aesthetic of Jean-Michel Basquiat. He wanted them to imitate but not

copy the great artist. "I am very familiar with Basquiat's work and will return copied work because it is considered plagiarism," Perron wrote in his note to students. As they worked, reported Liard's daughter, Perron kept telling the students to make their portraits more deranged, extra provocative, even darker.

On the website, they were labelled with each student's first name as the title and listed at a price of \$151. Buyers could have their favourite nightmare image imprinted on a mug, T-shirt, or tote bag. Under each work, the artist was identified as "Mario MJ Perron"; this was later changed to "MP."

As dozens of other Westwood parents discovered that their children's work was for sale, they began communicating with each other, trying to wrap their collective heads around what had happened. Was it possible that a teacher had stolen their kids' work and was attempting to profit off it? If so, the breach of trust was enormous.



Joel DeBellefeuille, one of the parents in the group, posted about the incident on Facebook and other social media platforms—and quickly received a torrent of attention. Mostly, it was a WTF echo chamber of comments and likes. But occasionally another perspective would break through. “What if he is trying to pay student bills or has a sick parent,” asked one woman on Facebook, about Perron. “Have you looked into his history? He’s selling art and not child porn.” On X, one poster sarcastically noted that it was surely one of the worst events of 2024. “People complain about wars, starvation, misery, rapes, robberies.... But this is totally insane! Poor kids. Lives ruined. For ever.”

On February 13, DeBellefeuille’s brother, Martin, who is a lawyer, sent a letter to Mario Perron and to the Lester B. Pearson School Board on behalf of DeBellefeuille and Liard. “Nothing authorized Mr. Perron to appropriate the work of his students for personal gain,” read the letter. “This act is even more egregious as it stems from the use of material created by students in a school setting, under authority, and sold with impunity at high prices.... This situation is unprecedented in our judicial system and cannot be tolerated.” It was unclear exactly how Perron breached the specific terms of his employment, but the letter cited the school’s responsibility for the conduct of its employees. In addition to seeking an apology and removal of the artworks from all platforms, the letter asked for \$350,000 for “moral damages.”

At some point, DeBellefeuille reached out to the principal and the school board, asking them to explain Perron’s actions and what was being done about them. A week later, Westwood’s principal gathered affected students in her office to prod them for information about Perron and exactly what had transpired. DeBellefeuille’s son, who was there, recalled that the principal had been taking notes, and DeBellefeuille worried that his son was being enlisted to help the school mount its defence. The principal wouldn’t tell the parents whether Perron, notably absent from campus, had been

dismissed. In declining to provide more information, she told DeBellefeuille that it was a personnel matter and there were privacy considerations.

Liard says she was eventually informed that Perron had been fired, though not from the school board; she learned of his dismissal from a lawyer. The school board sent out a letter indicating that there was an ongoing investigation. Parents were told the board wasn’t prepared to provide additional comment, but one key question was answered: Perron hadn’t sold any of the student

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artwork he posted online; the buy links hadn’t been activated. In some ways, this information seemed to be a relief—the clarity that there had been no financial exploitation. But in others, it simply compounded the mystery. Why would someone do something like this, if not to make a little cash? (The school board declined to provide comment.)

The media couldn’t resist the story. DeBellefeuille, an entrepreneur, author, and founder of a public relations company, says he did about ten interviews a day for two weeks—with the CBC, CTV, *HuffPost*, and the *Washington Post*, the last of which quoted DeBellefeuille saying that Perron was operating “a sweatshop of students.” The coverage largely framed the story as one teacher’s craven opportunism and clearly premeditated. The *New York Times* referred to how Perron “secretly sold” student artwork. Another parent, Michael Bennett, told CTV that he was “extremely disgusted” by Perron’s actions.

As the story became increasingly public, the very inscrutability of the crime seemed to amplify the sense of injury. It was just weird, right? It was such an unusual form of duplicity, the posting and selling of a child’s work, not just unattributed but without their knowledge or consent. And some parents were confused about just how to move forward in the absence of an understanding of the terms of their children’s violation. The school board had not offered anything satisfactory in the way of an explanation or, from the parents’ perspective, taken responsibility for the incident. “We didn’t even get, ‘we’re sorry your kids went through this, and we apologize,’” says Liard.

And so, they decided to sue.

FOR A MAN WHO was quickly cast as an enigma, Mario Perron has an unusually revealing online persona. (I reached out to Perron multiple times by email and never received a reply.) His LinkedIn account meticulously details his every move since he graduated from high school in Dollard-des-Ormeaux, a predominantly English-speaking suburb of Montreal, in 1984. He indicates that he attended CEGEP at John Abbott College, majored in child studies at Concordia University, and then, about twenty years later, did another bachelor’s at Concordia in fine arts and picked up a certificate to teach English as a foreign language.

But even as Perron built his teaching credentials, he also had stars in his eyes. During his first undergrad at Concordia, he was a CKUT disc jockey and a member of CUTV (the campus TV station), serving as a producer, director, writer, and actor. In 2012, he created a profile on Stage 32, a social networking site for entertainment professionals. There, he described himself as “marketing/pr, agent, manager, concept artist, talent scout, crafty and business development/sales” and posted a headshot of himself, looking serious in an angled black fedora against the backdrop of a modest living room.

Perron claimed to be co-owner of a talent agency called R.A.P.R., Inc., which was focused on film, TV, and

stage, representing “a community of creatives by showcasing professionals whose skills and knowledge equal only their professionalism and devotion.” The company has little online presence. The domain now belongs to a California health care compliance company. An Indeed profile for the talent agency has two five-star reviews, written by persons identifying themselves as “CEO & Talent Manager” and “President and Talent Manager,” at least one of whom was likely Perron.

DeBellefeuille pointed me to a blog, *renminds.org*, where Perron has for years pontificated on all manner of subjects and also appears to sell upcycled furniture and offer custom writing services, including ghostwriting. Perron reviews books and espouses positions on philosophical themes—rethinking colonialism, Japanese design theory, pedagogical paradigms, lessons from *The Wealthy Barber*. On a page entitled “My Great Why?” Perron describes himself as both artist and educator. “I believe the purest expressions are those of our children,” he writes. “They show you the world as it is in their hearts: authentic, whimsical, joyful, and amazing. They’ve taught me to strive for that purity of expression in my art practice.”

Over a period of around six months, I found myself increasingly obsessing about Perron’s motivations and I combed his blog for evidence of his state of mind. In a very long post on December 25, 2023, entitled “A Bittersweet X-Mas—A very personal message,” Perron referenced his discontent with his career, with “the insecurity built into the hiring process for teachers here in Quebec.” He referred to a job he had recently taken at a school—Westwood, presumably—“with a clientele that doesn’t make my heart happy.” He had left the elementary school he loved out of worry that his role as art teacher might be shuffled. After exploring other options in England and Abu Dhabi, he “made a pragmatic choice” to take the job, in all likelihood the one at Westwood, and compromise “my happiness with a self-directed argument that it’s only for one year and I can return to what I love later on.”

In the same post, Perron reveals a turbulent few months in the life of his family. His wife’s father had recently passed away in Damascus; she was devastated that she had been unable to travel to see him. In a bid to help her feel better, Perron finally agreed they could get a Maltipoo puppy, “Whiskey.” This upset his daughter, who “felt resentment that we’d welcome another being into our home and hearts.” His wife, Sawsan, is Palestinian, and the awful war following the shocking events of October 7 had hit the entire family hard. Perron’s own

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father had recently died in the hospital after weeks of “daily horror.”

On December 30, Perron posted a link to an article he had written in *La Métropole*, an independent online magazine. He explained that many teachers across Quebec are struggling. Salaries in the province are the lowest in Canada, he wrote, resources are scant, classes too large. Students who require extra assistance, including for disruptive behavioural issues, aren’t receiving it. And teachers often have to put in unpaid hours for activities outside of the classroom. “Spending personal funds on materials and essentials for the classroom, ensuring students have basic needs met” has become commonplace. “While monetary compensation isn’t a union demand, at their own expense, teachers won’t allow students to go without essential resources,” Perron wrote.

Less than three weeks later, in January 2024, Perron gave his students the Bas-

quiat assignment. Did he know, when he asked the students to make these works, that the plan was to post them online? Were these horrific portraits more compelling than he had expected, art he was desperate to share with the world that might even earn him, an underpaid teacher who in all likelihood did not have a permanent position, a little extra cash? Or was this yet another thing that Perron—failed artist, failed talent agent—simply threw at the wall to see if it might stick?

AFTER THE INITIAL letter to the school board and Perron went unanswered, several parents joined DeBellefeuille and Liard in filing a lawsuit. Liard felt like the damage had been brushed under the rug, and she wanted accountability more than any potential cash settlement. The claim for damages would later rise to almost \$1.6 million, \$155,000 per family. “It was more of, *please apologize and if you did make any money, please give the money to the students who actually did the work*,” says Liard. She was also concerned about her daughter’s reaction. Her daughter had always loved art and talked about becoming an architect, but she now told her mother that there was something tainted about putting brush or crayon or pastel to paper in response to a teacher’s instructions. She could no longer just assume good intent.

Liard’s daughter felt like Perron had been punished enough—he was out of his job and facing public humiliation. But there was still something deeply unnerving to Liard about what had happened. She tried to make sense of it, hoping there was a reasonable explanation. “Let’s say he was doing this to raise money for the school or art supplies or something like that,” she says. “Maybe he could have said, *I went about it in the wrong way, and I apologize, and I meant to do it in good faith*.” But there was nothing, in the coming days and weeks, that suggested a motive, altruistic or otherwise.

In the end, it was reported that the parents of ten students signed on to sue, DeBellefeuille among them. He zeroed in on copyright infringement for commercial use. He told me that an

individual whose copyright has been infringed upon has the right to claim between \$500 and \$20,000 per work. DeBellefeuille determined that ninety-six students had their copyright violated by Perron for a total of 2,976 works posted without consent. If the suit claimed the maximum value for each work, the total value of the claim would be almost \$60 million.

Curious, DeBellefeuille opened an account on Fine Art America and uploaded five images. The whole exercise—taking pictures of the items, adding them to the site, and using them to create purchasable T-shirts and mugs—took him almost two hours. Perron had done this dozens of times, DeBellefeuille noted, all while looking at his students each day in his classroom. “Our kids are at school more than they’re actually at home during the week,” DeBellefeuille told me. “The trust is that we drop them at the front door and we’re not expecting them to be violated.”

DeBellefeuille underscored that Perron’s transgressions were committed

against “underage kids,” that phrase lingering in the air. He seemed determined that there was a way to win back something, even if he couldn’t exactly pinpoint what had been lost. “Some of the comments were, *oh, well, his career is over,*” says DeBellefeuille. “But you know what, he chose to do that. He made his bed. And he really has to lie in it.”

IN EARLY APRIL, I headed to Montreal. I wanted to see what else I could dig up about Perron. He wasn’t responding to my messages, and I’d had very little success getting people in his orbit (fellow teachers, former colleagues, ex-clients) to talk. On the plane, waiting for de-icing to finish, I refreshed my email and got a Google Alert. A series of just-published articles reported that, more than a year after it was filed, the lawsuit had been dropped. The school board determined that the entire thing had been a misunderstanding. Perron had uploaded his students’ work to the Fine Art America site as an attempted pedagogical exercise; he had been planning to teach

them photo-editing techniques. He hadn’t realized that the site’s marketing presets were activated, and that the site populated and priced the student artwork without his knowledge. “The School Board and the teacher apologize for the situation experienced by the students and their parents, while reiterating that this was an error committed in good faith as part of an educational activity, with no ill intent,” noted the release sent out by the school board.

I felt an involuntary sense of deflation that the truth was so mundane. According to the school board, Mario Perron wasn’t exorcising his demons, nor was he breaking bad. He wasn’t taking out his frustrations with teaching, or with life in general, on his students. He wasn’t so bitter or desperate for cash that he was willing to betray teens to maybe sell some cheap mugs. The reality was much more straightforward: He was just a guy pushing sixty who was bad at the internet.

After I landed in Montreal, I rented a car and drove to Saint-Lazare. As Montreal’s nightmarish maze of urban highways gave way to wide open spaces and

a handful of barns, I found a relatively affluent exurban community with a disproportionate number of horse farms. From the outside, Westwood was tidy, modern, and seemingly orderly—the kind of school that suggests local resources, attentive adults, successful kids. A Westwood parent I connected with on Facebook told me that the community had moved on from L’affaire Perron.

But I struggled to let go of the narrative drama that had been building in my mind for months as the harm suggested by parents and onlookers hardened into my own conviction that Perron was a mystery to be cracked. Now, as I drove around bucolic Saint-Lazare, I found myself wondering about how Perron had survived the previous year, the besmirching of his character and possibly the loss of a vocation he seems genuinely devoted to.

If this was all an accident, a clumsy but well-meaning attempt at a novel teaching exercise, would Perron come back to Westwood? Would *he* receive an apology from the school? From the parents? The media reports characterized

the lawsuit as “dropped,” but one source told me it was in fact a cash settlement with a non-disclosure agreement. If the whole event was simply a misunderstanding, why was the school board paying out cash to parents?

A person close to the Lester B. Pearson School Board—though not empowered to speak on its behalf—declined to answer questions but left me with one thought: “You kind of have to look at this now and wonder which way the harm ran.” The person was alluding to the lawsuit and the parents who jumped to the worst conclusions, leaping to vilify a teacher rather than offer him the benefit of the doubt. But I wondered if it was the school board that was chiefly responsible for the lack of transparency, for creating a vacuum in which rumours, conjecture, and the presumption of ill intent eagerly flourished.

When I reached out to Liard for her take, she told me that the official explanation didn’t make a lot of sense to her, and that she was prohibited by the terms of the settlement from commenting further. When I visited

the Fine Art America website, I couldn’t find any photo-editing tools that went beyond resizing and centring images on such items as cellphone cases and beach towels. And it wasn’t clear to me why, if these were skills Perron wanted the students to acquire, he had gone ahead and uploaded their works himself.

Perron has yet to comment publicly and has still not responded to my emails. He has continued to update his LinkedIn and post on his blog almost daily, giving the impression of both confident teacher and eager student, enthusiastically grappling with the world and his place in it. He recently reviewed both Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* and Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*. He praises the latter for “granting her audience permission to examine their own messiness” and the former for inviting us “to reconsider causality, not as a straight line but as a series of feedback loops, chance encounters, and moments that nearly weren’t.”

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SARAH TRELEAVEN is a freelance journalist.

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