

DAY OUT) VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Main Street, Not Mainstream

By BARBARA KOH

MAIN STREET is the metaphorical railroad track in Vancouver, British Columbia, dividing its seedier east side from its better-off west. Starting in Skid Row, it squeezes through congested Chinatown, then unfolds past vacant lots, the train station, warehouses, car dealerships and burger drive-throughs.

Continue south a few blocks, though, and the thoroughfare pulls a Jekyll and Hyde act, transforming into a fashion-forward, relaxed destination with a Think Globally, Act Locally vibe.

The South Main area's rise to hipdom began about eight years ago, when designers and artists moved in for the cheap rent, replacing auto body shops, immigrant families, corner groceries and junkyards. Some coffeehouses and vintage-wear stores followed.

Now Main between Broadway and 30th Avenue is a hub of indie flair, creative boutiques, galleries, antiques dealers and restaurants, with the occasional hold-out butcher shop or dentist's office. Nearly every block has a java joint; only one is a Starbucks.

Along Main Street are places like Twigg & Hottie (No. 3671, at 21st Avenue; 604-879-8595; www.twiggandhottie.com), which highlights clothes of bamboo, hemp and soy fabrics. It's a showcase for 50 Canadian designers.

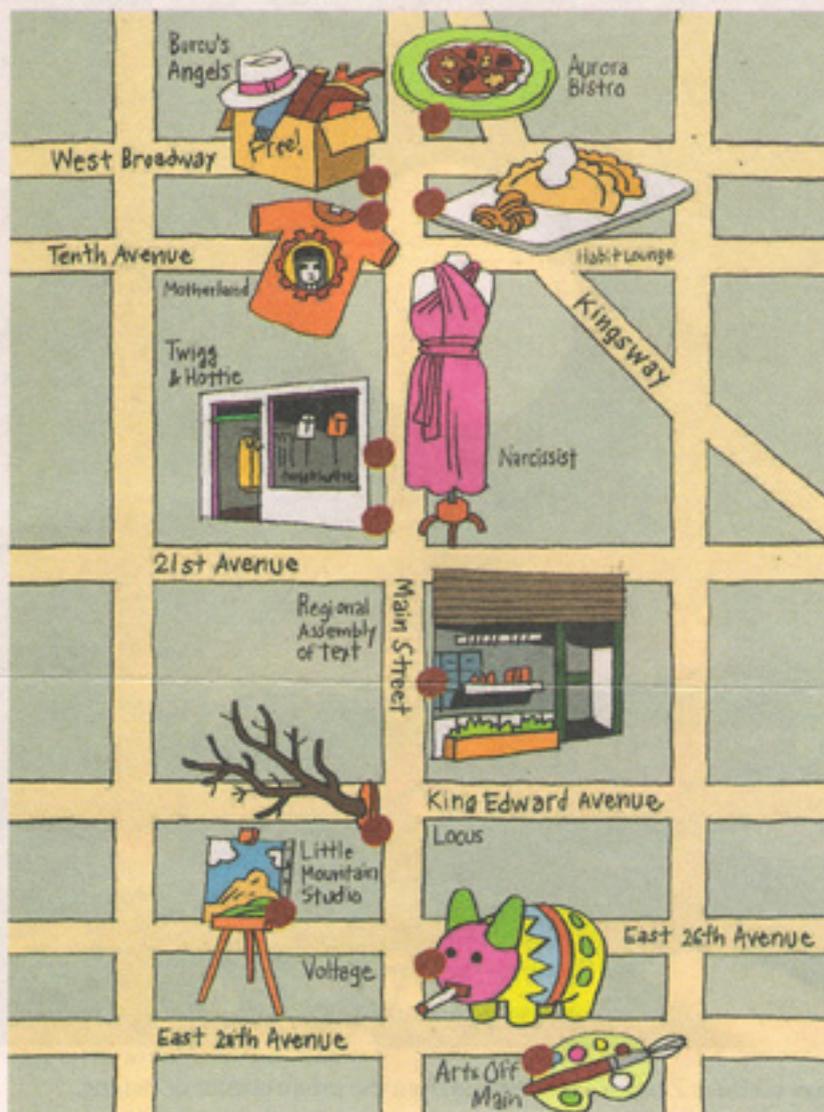
Nearby, Narcissist (No. 3659; 604-877-1555; www.narcissist.com) has women's classics, like crisp jackets and little black numbers. The Narcissist's owner, Sara Francoeur, has created the ultimate dress: it can be worn eight ways (185 Canadian dollars, or about \$175 at 1.07 Canadian dollars to the United States dollar).

South Main's grande dame of vintage is Burcu's Angels (No. 2535, near Broadway; 604-874-9773). Outside is its Free Box of clothing up for grabs. Inside is a tornado of tutus, red velvet hats, cowboy boots and tamer garb.

Left-wing politics is the fashion statement at Motherland (No. 2539; 604-876-3426; www.motherlandclothing.com), where some T-shirts sport Marx and Lenin, Soviet tractors and thick-muscled comrades (25 Canadian dollars). The jewelry, though, is mostly apolitical, like brass pterodactyl earrings (24 dollars) by an itinerant named Keith Long.

One-of-a-kind finds aren't only in fashion. Regional Assembly of Text (No. 3934, near 23rd Street; 604-877-2247; www.assemblyoftext.com) offers A to Z in magnets, candles and patchwork and lettered tchotchkes.

Photos, sculptures and pottery by local artists are affordably priced at Arts



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Off Main (216 East 28th Avenue; 604-876-2785; www.artsoffmain.ca). Around the corner at Voltage (4346 Main Street; 604-709-8214; www.voltageand.com), an anarchist Toys "R" Us, the urban toys have attitudes (bears bear arms, cherubs wear spiked armor). The Smokin' Labbit, a vinyl mutant rabbit, dangles a cigarette (54 Canadian dollars).

Noodles, bagels and coffeehouse fare are quick-bite options, but lots of South Main cuisine is worth lingering over. Aurora Bistro's presentations are so photogenic that you hate to shatter them with your fork (2420 Main, at Eighth Avenue; 604-873-9944; www.aurorabistro.ca). The Queen Charlotte halibut, for instance, is expertly roasted and jazzed up with vibrant carrot jus (25 Canadian dollars).

Habit Lounge (No. 2610; 604-877-8582; www.habitlounge.ca) glows with

persimmon shades and autumnal décor, and its carrot and brie pirogis (11 Canadian dollars) and other small plates are for sharing. Hefty portions and petrified branches erupting from the walls are Locus Cafe signatures (No. 4121, at King Edward Avenue; 604-709-4121; www.locusonmain.com).

Some fear that South Main's cool creativity could be its undoing. Developers and big retailers will swoop in, predicts Ehren Salazar, 28, an illustrator. Rents will skyrocket, he says, forcing out small operations like Little Mountain Studios (195 East 26th Avenue; 604-629-8711; www.littlemountainstudios.ca), a gallery he helped start in 2005, near his childhood house.

"It could become the new Robson Street," Vancouver's version of Fifth Avenue, Mr. Salazar said. "That's not good for us independent artists." ■