

ARTS & LIFE

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LOOKALIKES have become a favourite subject for photographer François Brunelle. And he has found when he brings them together, the couples often greet each other as though they have something in common

Buddy double

DONNA NEBENZAHL
THE GAZETTE

Doppelgänger: 19th-century German, from *doppel*, meaning "double," and *gänger*, translated as "goer." The term has, in the vernacular, come to refer to any double of a person.

François Brunelle's doppelgänger is a television character named Mr. Bean. Since he was a young man, clients had commented on how much he looked like the British funnyman (and the actor who played him, Rowan Atkinson).

Then Brunelle, an advertising and portrait photographer who rarely watches television, caught a British TV show featuring a bumbling character doing odd things. Not making the connection, he said to himself, "This guy looks just like me!"

Once he admitted to himself that he didn't look at all like the man he most felt like — James Dean — Brunelle embraced the Mr. Bean resemblance.

And an idea began to take hold. "I started to fantasize about doing photographs of people I knew who weren't related but looked alike," he says.

So five years ago, the 55-year-old father of six began photographing lookalikes, in black and white against simple backdrops. Since then, he has travelled to Switzerland, England, France, Spain, Germany and across Canada to take shots of lookalikes.

"The criteria," Brunelle says, "is if someone meets you on the street and calls you someone else's name. My goal is to make that resemblance appear in a natural way."

When he started the project, the biggest thrill was to see what the lookalikes would think when they met. "I thought they might be in a state of shock, but it never quite happened like that," he says.

Instead, people often greet each other with the feeling that they have something in common. "Most of them got along well," he says.

These lookalikes — he has photographed about 130 pairs of them — are mostly imperfect matches. And Brunelle does little to change that. "I could make them up or dress them," he says, "but that would be a lie. I want the real them in the photographs."

Sometimes it's the way they walk, carry themselves, that bring the two people together.

Like the case of the young woman, an operatic student, who came in with her teacher. As he spent time with them, Brunelle realized the student was unconsciously mimicking the teacher. "In their real lives they were like that, big women wearing theatrical makeup. I photographed them looking at me, like Valkyries."

Other times the members of the duo are so alike it's possible to mistake them, even up close. This was the case with Quebec photographer Jean Vachon, a friend of Brunelle's, and a man named Jacques-Dominique Landry. Brunelle introduced someone to Landry at a party, thinking he was Vachon. Even after the man spoke, he couldn't tell the difference.

"What fascinates me is that without their knowledge, they look alike," he says.

And how, quite spontaneously, they can both arrive in similar clothes, as these two did, wearing similarly retro buttoned shirts.

A small man with a trim pepper-and-salt beard and long hair tied back in a knot, Brunelle speaks quickly and animatedly. He came to photography, and to the style he prefers, when he was about 16 and found a book of photographs by the American portrait photographer Richard Avedon.

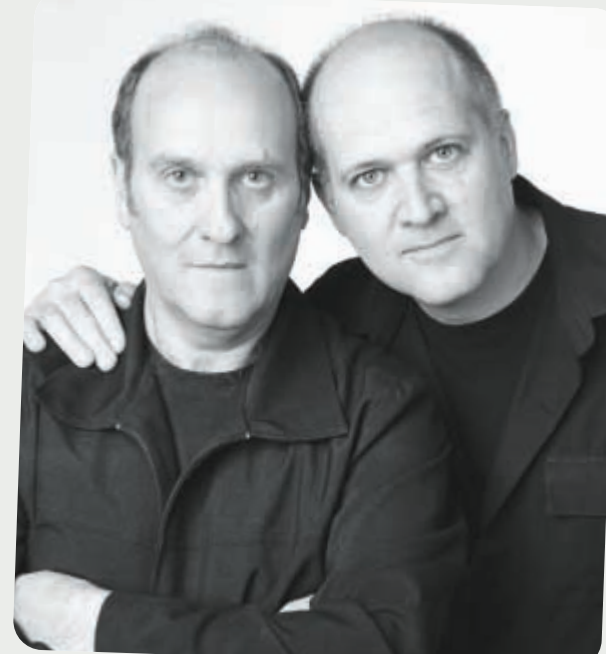
"He took strong black-and-white photographs and they showed his interpretation of life," Brunelle says. "I wanted to express myself in this way."

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PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE

François Brunelle with one of his pairs of lookalikes.



PHOTOS: FRANÇOIS BRUNELLE

Paired up: (from the top in the panel at left) Izabel Zimmer (left) and Diane Fortin in Montreal; Jean Vachon and Jacques-Dominique Landry in Montreal; Edith Préfontaine and Stefanie Tremblay in Montreal; Ian Perrault and Alain Roberge in Montreal. From the top in the panel above: Yves Mégevet and Rémi Bacon in Geneva, Switzerland; Normand Lévesque and Claude Mauffette in Montreal; Nina Singh and Anna Rubin in Montreal; and Maude Baril and Jo-Anne Donoghue, in Montreal.