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## Leo Kamen: Gambling on art and the dice

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It might seem remarkably self-defeating for Leo Kamen to put a gambling spin on his self-published memoir, *Rolling the Bones* (General Karma, 248 pages, \$22) and to insist on using the image of a pair of worn dice on the cover's carrot orange background.

For 25 years Kamen has been a highly regarded Toronto art dealer with an A list of artists, which includes Alain Païement and Karilee Fuglem. His acumen is respected even by those least inclined to do so – his competitors. “And on top of that he’s a good guy,” says one rival dealer. “How square can that be?”

Those close to him realize how true the book title is to the Las Vegas side of Kamen’s life and to the complex set of feelings and calculations — he’s a big fan of complexity — that motivate him to play high-stakes craps eight hours at a time and to coddle artists for decades.

“I’m much more interested in gambling than in art,” Kamen tells me. “Art to me is a subset of the whole thing.”

Ah, yes. The “whole thing.” Art’s connection to gambling — and to craps, the nerve-wracking dice game Kamen favours — is closer and runs deeper than is often understood. I’m not just talking about artists’ love of gambling as a subject such as the five different versions of *The Card Players* that Paul Cézanne was driven to paint in the early 1890s.

Art, like gambling, is about risk that comes playing against unknown factors in order to facilitate a rapid redistribution of wealth in your favour. That’s where the “whole thing” comes in. It has to do with the combination of all these factors. It has to do with timing — a craps table suddenly getting hot the way a painter’s career unexpectedly gets hot — and with patience, knowing the odds, morality and mortality.

Mortality is a major force in Kamen’s life. (“Gambling is a hand to hand encounter with fate,” wrote early 20th French novelist Anatole France.) He hates players who try to cheat it, by spreading their money around just to avoid losing. He has little time for the international star art dealers who select artists only for their buck-making ability. Risk means losing. Only through real risk do you understand your own mortality.

“There is this mythic element, something that comes to you in gambling and in art,” he says over a beer at Le Select. “This is supposed to be a rational world, with everything constrained and narrow. It’s supposed to be about going from ‘A’ to ‘Z’ and then to bed. But most people don’t have the luxury to do that because they’re swamped by the swarming possibilities in life. And there are so many ridiculous possibilities.

“But at the craps table you know the possibilities, the odds and the probabilities. Being an art dealer is this complicated too. There are a lot of things to balance. Craps. Art. You do both in a calculated sort of way.”

“Leo’s gambling is essentially a metaphor for his life,” says John Kissick, one of Kamen’s artists and the director of the University of Guelph’s School of Fine Art and Music. “He plays craps because in reality he knows the odds and understands the premise behind the game. It is in essence risk management rather than outright risk with all the ego investment, doubt and a certain attitude that you are somehow just a bit more aligned with the gods than the other guy.”

Olga Korper, whose gallery was once at 80 Spadina Ave., where the Leo Kamen Gallery continues to this day, understands this gambling-art dealer connection. For Korper (a “suave and dark Cruella de Vil,” writes Kamen in his book), Las Vegas is also a destination of choice, a shocking revelation for a good many of the more serious art folks.



Leo Kamen's self-published memoir examines a life that began in a hardscrabble part of Ottawa for a boy then named Vladis Ilgacs.

Aaron Harris/special to the star

"But tell me you're not going to Las Vegas to gamble?" once asked a stunned Pierre Th  berge, then director of the National Gallery of Canada

"I gamble every day," said Korper, whose game is blackjack. "Being an art dealer is being a gambler."

In truth, *Rolling the Bones* has very little to say about Kamen's own gambling, and then only in its final pages. (He's now working on a gambling novel.) Sex plays a much bigger role, as when the author introduces a girl exhibitionist exposing herself happily "to the warm evening breeze" or to the "seriously brainy" woman "with an excitable clitoris."

Like many men with an overbearing mother, Kamen likes strong women. "Strong" barely begins to describe Victoria Nikolskaya, the Russian-German matriarch in his family, an outsized character more likely to appear in an outsized 19th novel. "My mother was a large woman, or she seemed large to me," he writes, "partly because she had a massive temper that erupted at the slightest provocation."

Vitolds Ilgacs, Kamen's Latvian father — his miserable, alcohol-crippled final days are treated with great compassion by the author — is first introduced in the book as the object of mother's unbridled temper, fury ignited "most often when my father was drunk," Kamen writes.

Kamen grew up in a hardscrabble, mostly Qu  b  cois part of Ottawa, "full of kids with brown teeth," where he first started gambling playing cards (Acey Deucey) in a friend's basement. His introduction to art came during a visit to a Diane Arbus photography show at the National Gallery of Canada. "I'd never seen anything remotely like it at the pool hall," he writes.

Vladis Ilgacs, as he was born 58 years ago, became Leo Kamen in 1982 — a Jewish-sounding name chosen randomly, although he's not Jewish — three years before opening his first gallery.

The convergence of art and craps began in 1995, after Kamen met Ivan Karp, the legendary New York dealer — and novelist — in SoHo, who turned him on to the Las Vegas tables. The conversion was completed when a hit, everything-sold show at the Kamen gallery by Edmonton artist Jane Ash Poitras saved Kamen's financial bacon after he'd been busted flat broke in Las Vegas.

"When that sort of thing happens to you, it tells you something," he says. "But what? I tried to pull the meaning of it all apart. I realized, it had to do with gambling. But what? At first I thought it'd never gambled like this before. Then I realized I'd always gambled."

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