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Gone but not forgotten



By Harold Carmichael, Postmedia
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Toronto artist Ilene Sova stands next to her portrait of Melanie Ethier, one of the 18 paintings in her The Missing Women Project now in display at the 276 Cedar studio. HAROLD CARMICHAEL/SUDBURY STAR/QMI AGENCY

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Among the 18 portraits of missing Ontario women now on display at 276 Cedar is one of a young teen from New Liskeard.

Melanie Ethier was 15 when she left a friend's residence on Sept. 19, 1996 to walk home, but never arrived.

The police investigation into her disappearance has led investigators to believe she is the victim of foul play.

In Ilene Sova's new exhibition entitled The Missing Women, Ethier and the 17 other women, whom Sova chose after researching Ontario Provincial Police missing persons files from 1970 to 2000, the faces are larger than life to help bring them back into the public spotlight after so many years out of it.

"I was thinking about the cases as I was painting them," explained Sova, in an interview Sunday at the launch of her exhibition as part of Mayworks Sudbury 2013, a labour/arts festival.

"When you can find a quote in a newspaper article -- she liked to play lacrosse, wrote poetry -- it gives you something to go with."

It took Sova three years to paint the 18 portraits, as well as 12 others that are not part of the exhibition, which is aimed at getting society to talk about the issue of violence against women, as well as how police and the media treat a woman's disappearance differently than a man's.

"My goal is to create discussion about these cases and violence against women in Canada in general" said Sova. "I think we have a misconception in Canada that women are equal now. But violence against women (shows) we still haven't reached equality yet. That's why I picked women from Ontario. The women come from a variety of backgrounds."

It was no coincidence the paintings are huge and the colours are sharp, almost challenging the viewer to "look at me" upon entering the showing room.

"With the paintings, I want to memorialize them," said Sova. "When you see missing persons painted on such a grand scale, hopefully it will start discussion. When you see them, they are larger than life. You are reminded who they are. You are much more con-fronted."

Sova did a lot of research before she began painting the portraits in 2008.

"I had to read up a lot about missing persons, about the issues and problem solving with missing persons cases," she explained. "One of the things I found was

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women tend to have more close friendships and almost always have a community behind them."

Sova also discovered there are a lot more missing men in Ontario than women and learned that men tend to go missing due to the risky lifestyles they lead. And often few people are aware they are missing.

"There's so many," she said. "You go into the OPP database and see thousands of missing persons you have never heard of. With the Toronto opening of my exhibition, there were 22 missing people that week who were new."

This is the second exhibition for Sova, 37, a Toronto conceptual portrait artist who also teaches art. The Missing Women exhibition debuted at a Toronto gallery in conjunction with International Women's Day in March. The exhibition will be on display at the Greater Sudbury studio from noon-4 p.m. Thursday-Saturday this week, next week and the week of May 20.

Private viewings can also be arranged by calling 705-674-5166.

"I was very interested in learning about the forgotten cases and showing a history of missing women in Ontario," continued Sova. "I think we are used to hearing what happens to women in Saudi Arabia and India. The same thing is happening here, but we don't think about it."

Sova also found the police and media portray missing women differently. While very attractive or single women gain a high profile, ones who are poor, runaways, or involved in the sex trade, for example, get lesser attention or are not even highlighted as missing.

"There was a lot of marginalization," she said.

Unlike a typical exhibition, Sova's 30 oil paintings are not for sale due to their personal nature.

When asked if she might give them to the families involved, Sova said she might if contacted.

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