

Ilene Sova brings Missing Women Project to Creative Blueprint Gallery

Portraits show happy and beautiful pictures of women who have gone missing in Ontario

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The issue of violence against women in Canada often flies under the radar, but downtown Toronto painter Ilene Sova's upcoming exhibit hopes to shine a light on the problem.

Sova will be displaying 18 of a total of 30 large portraits of women who have gone missing in Ontario when the Missing Women Project comes to Creative Blueprint Gallery in March.

The paintings are interpretations of photos of women taken from missing persons databases.

"I wanted to show the problem (of violence against women) but I was having trouble with it because I didn't want gruesome paintings of women with black eyes," she said. "The paintings in the exhibit are more pleasant – they're smiling yearbook photos or wedding photos where the women look happy and beautiful."

Sova has long been attuned to the issue of violence against women, particularly after she discovered that friends of hers and one of her cousins had been in abusive situations.

"These were educated, strong women," she said. "When I first moved to Toronto (12 years ago), my roommate had just left a guy who was abusing her."

The Missing Women Project depicts a variety of women who have gone missing from across Ontario. Sova researched each individual woman on the Ontario Provincial Police database, the Toronto Reference Library and other sources. She had difficulty tracking down women who had gone missing in Toronto because the Toronto Police Service does not have a readily accessible missing persons database.

Through the volunteer-run Doe Network website, she was able to find some women who disappeared from the city, including Amber Potts, Holly Painter and Nancy Liou, who went missing from downtown Toronto in 1988, 1995 and 1999, respectively.

"We think this is something that happens in other countries and that we're civilized here and treat women (well)



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but this is happening here and nobody's talking about it," Sova said.

The artist was also distraught to find what she believes is real bias in terms of the media attention given to certain cases. She noted cases in which young white women who lived what society would deem a traditional lifestyle went missing were given more attention than other cases.

"If it's a sex worker or a woman who's at risk or homeless, there's not much media attention and they're typically only on the missing persons database and not in the papers," she said. "There's a real absence of attention for aboriginal women and women of colour who have gone missing, too."

Even the missing persons database does not include some women, so Sova relied on Sisters in Spirit for information on aboriginal women who have disappeared.

"I thought, 'Wow, there are missing women who are even missing from the missing persons database,'" she said.

Sova enlisted the help of a researcher and the pair have been trying to track down the families of the women profiled in the exhibit. Some of those they have reached plan on attending the March 2 opening and only one family member has expressed the least hesitation over Sova painting a portrait of his missing sister.

"One brother was concerned that I would be making money off of this, but he was more OK with it once he found out the paintings weren't for sale and there's no commercial value attached," Sova said. "This is a passion project of mine."

Most of the families were happy to hear the artist was going to paint a portrait of their missing loved one, particularly in cases where the case has gone cold.

"These families are trying to reinvigorate attention to these cases and I want this exhibit to get people talking about them," she said.

Sova, who lives in the King and Bathurst area and teaches at the Ontario College of Art and Design, has previously exhibited series on women artists and women dealing with depression among her other works.

"My studio's right across the street from where I live and there are 45 artists in there, so I have an amazing community I get to access every day," she said. "There are a ton of arts events in this area – I can go to MOCCA and it's a 10-minute walk away."

The Missing Women Project will kick off with an opening reception at Creative Blueprint Gallery, 376 Bathurst St., from 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday, March 2. The exhibit will run through Saturday, March 16.



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