



ARTIST ILENE SOVA CAPTURES THE FACE OF MISSING, MARGINALIZED ONTARIO WOMEN IN HER HAUNTING SERIES MISSING WOMEN

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Artist Ilene Sova paints the portraits of women reported missing in Ontario between the years 1970 and 2000 in her ongoing series, *Missing Women*. It is an incredibly haunting project and her art forces us to consider the tragic stories of these forgotten women, many of whom struggled with mental illness or dangerously worked the streets as prostitutes. “In my choice of subject; I choose to paint the women that I do, to bring importance to what our society has deemed unimportant,” Sova outlines in her artist statement.

On the phone, she tells us that she “wanted to do something about violence against women but didn’t want to show violence in [her] painting.” The idea of painting missing women came after watching a crime show led her to a disturbing hunt on Google. Sova ended up on the OPP database that chronicles missing persons since the 1920s. She knew then that her work would focus on local missing women, specifically those in their twenties and thirties, or the vulnerable and high risk demographic.

“I researched each of them extensively and spent hours at The Toronto Library going through newspaper databases...usually a glimmer of their personality would come through quotes from friends or family members.” But Ilene also discovered that there was little or no coverage for women who were considered to have at-risk lifestyles.

Not surprisingly, Sova admits that this research, and her creative process, was immensely depressing. However, while she worked on her paintings she also found inspiration through [Eva Ensler’s Ted Talks](#). “I went from being depressed to feeling like a vagina warrior,” says Sova with a laugh and explains that, “...telling untold stories brings happiness.”

Her fixation of painting women (not just the missing ones) began back in college while taking a course in Feminist Art History. Sova was influenced by the teachings on Second Wave Feminists and how they rejected painting in their practice, because it was such a male dominated medium that focused on the female subject as form of titillation. As a Third Wave Feminist, Sova wanted to reclaim the female point of view in art and thus has made it her mission to paint women and tell their stories through the female gaze. *Missing Women* now takes that to a deeper level by telling the stories of women who have no voice.

Eerie and affecting: while some may start to dramatize cold cases in their minds, others will think of their loved ones or a drunken Saturday night where a bad turn could so easily have happened. No doubt *Missing Women* will make all consider, who were these women? How did they fall between the cracks? What happened? How could their fate have been changed?

On [Sova’s website](#), each painting links to a page outlining the details of the missing women with distressing descriptions that mark the end of their life. Here is an example of a last report as told by police records: **Nancy Liou** Liou was last seen departing her apartment building, located at Dundas Street E, near Parliament Street, at 4:50 p.m. on January 27, 1999. She was caught on her apartment building’s security video; she was lingering inside the rear door for 10 seconds before apparently seeing someone in the direction of the parking lot, at which point she ran out the door with a smile on her face.