

Life

Portraits of missing women raise their status through art

Painter Ilene Sova is putting on a display of 18 portraits of women who have gone missing in Ontario with hopes of creating debate on violence.



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Ilene Sova stands with a portrait of Elizabeth Bain, who has been missing since 1990.

By: Paul Irish Living reporter, Published on Thu Feb 28 2013

Though she's never met them — and likely never will — painter Ilene Sova has connected with the subjects who embody her latest exhibit.

The Toronto artist has spent the past three years creating [The Missing Women Project](#), 30 large portraits of women who have vanished.

She knows their birthdays, the days they went missing and the details, as scant as they are, about each disappearance.

And she can't help but ponder the fate of the women — all from Ontario — and if they, or their remains will ever be found.

The show runs at the [Creative Blueprint Gallery](#), 376 Bathurst St., from March 2 to 16, including International Women's Day on March 8.

On a utilitarian level, Sova hopes it might spark a memory, un-pry a clue to break at least one case.

On a higher level, the show focuses on violence toward women.

“Traditionally, portraits represent the wealthy, the influential, the religious and the historically significant,” says Sova, who bases much of her work — all portraits — on anti-oppression themes.

“I aim to have my viewer interpret these missing women (as just) as monumental and relevant ... my hope is to shine a light on what is hidden, or not openly spoke about: [violence against women](#), mental health, homelessness and sexual violence.”

She said the idea came after watching a cold case show on television featuring a missing woman, then visiting an Ontario Provincial Police site that had a photograph and particulars of the individual and the case.

Some of her friends at university had become involved in violent relationships, and she could see how women could become at risk, she added.

But instead of creating “victim positioning” images of women cut and bruised, she chose the pictures that were supplied to the police and media by families, shots of happier times, originally from yearbooks and snapshots.

Sova used library research databases and online newspaper microfiches for research. She stayed at arm’s length from the police and family for artistic reasons, because she wanted to view the woman as most people would through the media.

She describes the work itself as “painterly and gestural” with vivid colours. Eighteen of the pieces will be on display at the gallery.

Broad brush strokes fill the canvasses, demanding the viewer look at the subjects as real people, strain to hear their collective voices and, more importantly, ask themselves, what happened to these women?

And she quickly made an unsettling discovery through her work.

“I quickly learned that women who are mentally ill, sex workers or runaways hold little or no currency in both the sphere of the media and its official state investigation, as are women of colour,” she says. “By showing this project, I hope to create a broader discussion about these issues.”

She says most people are familiar with the case of Elizabeth Bain, a well-educated, middle class woman who has been missing since June 1990 and is presumed dead.

But she points out that few remember Nancy Liou, 15, who disappeared from her Regent Park apartment in January 1999, and had run away before, or aboriginal Holly Painter, who was last seen June 26, 1995, after being involved in a fight with her friends.

Sova contacted as many families of the missing as possible to tell them about the exhibit. Many will attend the show’s opening from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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