

Bringing back the disappeared

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Portraits remember those who disappeared in Argentina's Dirty War

What started as an art project in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to call attention to violence against women worldwide has turned into a passion for Port Washington artist Brian Carlson, whose mission now is to provide a voice for the 30,000 Argentinians who disappeared between 1976 and 1983 during what has been called the Dirty War and Desaparecidos (the disappeared).

Carlson's project, Aparecidos, which means appeared, is his effort to have the victims reappear and tell their stories through haunting portraits of once vibrant, mostly young people, sometimes entire families, who vanished at the hands of the military junta when it overthrew the government in 1976.

Carlson learned about the atrocities while preparing for a trip to Argentina in 2007 to participate in a New York University Hemisphere Institute exhibition on human rights issues.



He and artist Fahimah Vahdat collaborated on the "Writing On the Wall" project, which invited women to write about the violence they experienced on a wall surrounded by Vahdat's large drawings depicting female bodies as battlefields.

While doing research for that project, Carlson learned about Desaparecidos.

"When in Buenos Aires, I started meeting family members of victims and survivors of the prison camps and toured one of the infamous detention centers," he said.

"It was completely sadistic. These people — 30,000 — were abducted, tortured and executed by their government, who called it a war on terror. Nobody knew why people were being arrested. If there is no rhyme or reason, nobody feels safe and people stop talking to each other."

After the reign of terror ended, a report by the Argentina National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, which was appointed in 1983, confirmed the abductions of men, women and children, the existence of about 340 secret detention centers and the methodical use of torture and murder. The report recommended the perpetrators be prosecuted.

Thirty years later, that is happening. While people in the United States may not know much about the Dirty War, it is front-page news in Argentina as trials are held and publicized.

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That has prompted Carlson to become even more dedicated to his project.

When he returned to the U.S. in 2007, Carlson said he couldn't forget the people he had met and their stories.

"I found a small book by poet-activist Alicia Partnoy, a survivor of a secret detention center. Her book, 'The Little Schoolhouse,' is an account of some of her experiences there. That book cemented my resolve," he said.

Photographs of about 1,000 victims are in "The Vanished Gallery" on the website www.yendor.com/vanished. There are also stories by survivors of the detention centers, as well as victims' friends and family members.

A year ago, Carlson started to create 9-by-12-inch portraits of those who disappeared by enhancing their photographs and adding color to them, sometimes using lots of bold color and texture and other times choosing muted, almost veiled, shades. He said he senses the colors he should use when he looks at the photographs.

As people heard about his efforts, Carlson received phone calls, letters and photographs from Argentinians asking him to do portraits of their husbands, wives, children, brothers, sisters, parents or lovers who disappeared.

"Some of the photographs are small or in pieces," Carlson said. "I try to enhance them digitally before painting them. I want it clear that these are indeed images of real people with specific names who were documented as victims of this genocide."

He's completed 250 portraits so far that hang in his downtown Port Washington studio. He would like to find places to exhibit them. The portraits can be configured to fit almost any space, he said.

Because of the large number of victims, Carlson said, this is a project that will probably never end.

"There are so many stories here, from 15-year-olds to priests to older people. Look at how vibrant and photographic this young man was," he said showing a photo of young man laughing into the camera.

"I feel like I know them. I tell them that I'm sorry about what happened to them. A lot of them were in their 20s, and their lives were cut short in such a horrific way."

In addition to those who were tortured and killed, women who were pregnant or became pregnant through rape were often killed after giving birth and their babies given to soldiers and guards who raised them as their own.

"These adult children are now learning that the people they thought were their parents actually killed their real parents. It's mind-boggling," Carlson said.

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His goal for the project is three-fold — memorialize the victims, provide an educational tool for teachers and warn that what happened in Argentina is happening in other places.

“It has happened before and has happened since,” Carlson said. “Understanding the dynamic, in all the guises it may appear, is vital toward the goal of ‘Nunca Mas,’ ‘Never More,’ heralded by contemporary Argentines.”

Carlson, who teaches art at the University of Wisconsin-Manitowoc and occasionally at the Milwaukee School of Art and Design, is seeking sponsors for the project. For \$150, he will do a portrait from a photograph for the benefactor.

More information is on www.aparecidospainting.com.

PORTRAITS OF Marcelo Ariel Gelmanelo and his wife Maria Claudia Garcia Irureta-Goyena de Gelmanelo are among 250 that Carlson has completed so far for his work “Aparecidos,” a memorial to the 30,000 Argentinians who were abducted, tortured and killed between 1976 and 1983.