

Veterans SHOUT through art

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As an art therapist working with survivors of military sexual trauma, or MST, Jessica Kenyon helps veterans cope with their physical and emotional wounds through self-expression.

But the art making isn't limited to Kenyon's clients, who are men and women from all branches of the military. It extends to Kenyon herself. The 28-year old Army veteran and Los Angeles resident draws and takes photographs to help her heal from her own pain, and to capture the beauty in life she often misses as a result of MST.

Kenyon's art work, along with that of other female veterans, is on display March 17 and 18 in the second annual "SHOUT! Art by Women Veterans" exhibit at Salle Piano and Events in San Francisco. Organized by

San Francisco-based veterans-advocacy organization Swords to Plowshares, the show, says Plowshares spokeswoman Colleen Corliss, is designed to raise awareness about issues that women — veterans and those still in the military — face.

"Women veterans and women serving are still an unrecognized population with obstacles that are different from their male counterparts," Corliss says. They struggle with issues like raising children while serving. They have difficulty filing claims for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with the Veterans Affairs because women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan are still not considered combat soldiers. And some grapple with the lingering and painful effects of military sexual trauma. Honoring women veterans through an art exhibit engages the community, places a spotlight on these issues and paves the way for change.

"We think art is a great opportunity for expression and renewal," Corliss says.

For Berkeley resident Cristi Casas, it's a way to address what she feels is one of the biggest issues in the military: sexual inequality. The 23-year old Marine, who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, says women soldiers have fought long and hard to be recognized as equals. Still, while many women have experienced combat due to the nature of the war, they are not yet officially placed in direct combat positions.

An artist since childhood, Casas has channeled her feelings into the painting "The Guardians," which is in the display. It depicts a group of shadowed soldiers trudging toward some unknown destination.

Casas says she chose to deliberately light the figures from behind so that viewers cannot distinguish whether the soldiers are male or female.

Air Force veteran Angela Knowles' lifelong exposure to the military has left a definite, though less explicit, mark on her art. The 28-year-old Oakland resident and UC Berkeley graduate says the structure and institutional nature of the military helped inspire the imaginary laboratory in which she creates pieces like "Haus Tier," a free-form sculpture made from nylon and discarded animal fur.

"I'm interested in the idea of the power of a body of people," Knowles says. "How does power operate within (an) institution compared to an individual's ability?"

Knowles acknowledges that because of its abstract qualities, people may or may not tap into some of the issues she's addressing in her art. That's fine with her. Art, she says, is a conduit to get people talking.

"I think just getting people into a room is the big part," Knowles says. "Just being there helps raise awareness of veteran's issues such as poverty or post-traumatic stress."

It's also a way for women veterans to reach out to each other.

"I think it's a way to connect with women who I wouldn't necessarily connect with in my everyday life, to see how they're dealing with their military experience" Knowles says. "I also think it's good to support people in their artistic endeavors."

For more information, contact 415-252-4788 or swordstolowshares.org.