

Exhibit gives homeless a face

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Photo by: Craig Hodge

Artist Louise Solecki Weir stands with sculpture portraits in her exhibit on display at Place des Arts until March 25. Over a period of two years, Solecki Weir created about 20 of the sculptures; accompanying them are stories of their struggles with mental illness, addiction and homelessness.

Few people, when they come across a homeless person, stop for a chat. Most of us hustle past, hoping to avoid eye contact and the plea for spare change.

Vancouver artist Louise Solecki Weir took a different approach. She made sculptures of them, listened to their stories and turned it all into a powerful, moving exhibit of clay portraits showing at Place des Arts until March 25.

"When we see homeless people or when we're near people with mental illness we don't want to stop and talk to them, we want to kind-of walk by," Solecki Weir said. "This was me trying to get to know some of the characters."

A professional artist, Solecki Weir had been wanting to improve her skills in portraiture when she noticed a group of people that were often gathered outside an office in Vancouver's Kitsilano neighbourhood.

It was the same place where her father, a Russian immigrant, had first looked for work upon his arrival in Canada. Solecki Weir assumed the people standing outside were looking for day labour, but she was more intrigued by their interesting faces. Turns out the office was the Motivation, Power & Achievement (MPA) Society, a non-profit organization that helps people with mental illness.

She went in and asked if she could hire people to sit as models and before long she'd returned, this time with her sculpture stand and mounds of clay. In a few hours she would work up a good likeness and finish off the fine details at her home studio using photographs of the model.

Once the MPA clients started seeing the impressive results a model waiting list quickly grew, as did Solecki Weir's confidence.

An instructor in a sculpture master class she took in London provided further guidance for what Solecki Weir hoped would become a portrait exhibit.

"She said, 'Portraiture is about the sitter, not the artist,' and I thought if I'm going to have a show about portraits, I should take that into consideration."

Solecki Weir went back to the MPA centre and found as many of the models as she could and asked if she could hear their stories. What she heard has left a lasting mark on the artist.

There was Maggie, a romantic-looking figure who sells flowers at night. After a lifelong struggle with alcohol and drugs Maggie is now living healthy and sober in the Downtown Eastside.

She manages her anxiety disorder with plenty of walking, biking and playing guitar.

Tyler, once a hearty man with a shock of red hair, survived lung cancer before he was hit on the head in a construction accident in 1994.

Since then the 46-year-old who is fond of saying, "If it wasn't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all," was homeless for several years and was injured again — stabbed three times with a box-cutter — when he stepped in to stop a fight.

Bryan graduated with a master's degree in electrical engineering from Waterloo University but suffered from deep depression, then psychosis, after his divorce, leaving him unable to work.

Steve was a successful business owner, married with two kids, when the death of his mother sparked an onset of clinical mania and depression.

"This portrait was one of the first things that basically started to change my state of mind, as crazy as that sounds," he said in the interview. "I was so impressed that someone wanted to that [a portrait]. It gave me the sense that if she [Solecki Weir] thinks it's worth doing, I should be thinking that."

Tyler said the portrait helped him look at himself in a different way, prompting him to reflect on himself and where he's going in life.

"I was struck by how nice people are and what bad luck they've had," Solecki Weir recalled of the two-year project, and of their reaction to it. "People described it as being immortalized."

Visit www.louisesoleckiweir.com or www.placedesarts.ca for more information.