

Art Adventure I Sam Dalkilic-Miestowski

nally displaced persons, IDPs, and live in camps within the coun-

Taryn Lotak — passionate new voice in art



Recently, I met Taryn Lotak, a college graduate from the Herron School of Art & Design. Lotak had two paintings juried in the 66th Annual Salon Show located at South Shore Arts in Munster. This enthusiastic young artist, 23 years old, is an award winner of the Renee Denmark Memorial Award for \$1,000 for her oil painting entitled "Amani," pictured center. I asked the enthusiastic artist to share her journey of art.

"I was born in Chicago Heights, in 1986 and lived in Homewood, Ill. until age 7, when I moved to Munster and attended Munster High School. I studied painting at Herron School of Art and Design from 2005-2009. While I attended, I taught watercolor through Herron's Saturday School program and also taught watercolor and drawing at Camp Tecumseh, YMCA during the summer of 2007. I have always been attracted to portraiture and how a person's face tells a detailed story. My work changed direction when I saw "Invisible Children" in 2007 and decided to travel abroad to Uganda. I am continuing my education in occupational therapy and plan on obtaining my master's degree.

The following is a portion of Taryn Lotak's senior thesis, "A Voice for the Voiceless."

In America, when a child is kidnapped, the police are notified, search parties are sent out, neighborhoods are told of who to look for, and an Amber Alert is posted on billboards and milk cartons. This is not the case, however, in all parts of the world. In East Africa, particularly in the Gulu district, an estimated 20,000 children have been abducted in the past 20 years. There are no search parties, no television broadcasts, and essentially no punishment for the offenders. This is not because the people see it as inconsequential, but rather because the villagers and the government have little control over the situation. With no weapons to defend themselves, the villagers are slaughtered by the hundreds. In 1987, Joseph Kony formed the Lord's Resistance Army, as an effort to overthrow the government of Uganda and turn it into a theocracy under the Ten Commandments. Claiming to be the cousin of "Alice Lakwena" (meaning "messenger" in Acholi tongue) leader of widely popular Holy Spirit Movement, Kony gained automatic support. He and his rebels rose to the forefront of the Acholi people's struggle against president Museveni's government and managed to curb the atrocities committed against the Northerners by Uganda's military, but soon the rebels began committing war crimes of their own. Since the rubbing of shea oil on the body and the sprinkling of holy water did not seem to work, the group adopted guerilla tactics and the children, only 6-13 years old, were given AK47s and machetes. They were taught firsthand to kill or be killed as they abducted other children, slaughtered civilians and burned entire villages. Eventually the government gave the villagers bows and arrows to defend themselves, which only angered Kony and caused them to retaliate.

Overtaken by the desire to help, I traveled to Uganda to personally witness the effect the war was having on the people and to hear their stories. I knew from my own experience that if people were more informed in America, they would be more inclined to help. In Uganda, I worked with an organization called Village of Hope. It is comprised of two women, whose vision is to create a shelter for over 250-orphaned children, many of which were formerly child soldiers in the LRA. The children are currently considered inter-

country's borders. Uganda alone has a population of over 869,000 IDPs due to the insurgency of the LRA. In the camps, the children are forced to fend for themselves and their siblings. Many were either forced to kill their parents when they were kidnapped, or their parents were killed before their eyes. Now the children are the heads of their families and responsible for keeping their brothers and sisters alive. A number of the young girls, only 11 or 12 are now mothers due to rape. Girls captured at that age by the LRA are forced into being wives, or sex slaves, to the commanders. Boys who are kidnapped are sodomized within 24 hours, with the intention of transmitting AIDS.

In my work, I seek to show the pain that lies deep within; the thing they try hard to cover, but is seen in their eyes. In order to accomplish this, I chose to paint large-scale portraits of the children I met, hoping to show through their facial expression, the pain they feel when asked to share about their experiences. This was not an attempt to cause them discomfort, but rather to give victims of violence an opportunity to share with the world and to show how much intervention is needed. In order to create this body of work, I used a DVD of the children's interviews as my source material. Each interview was about five minutes long, where the children explained what happened to them when they were kidnapped by the LRA. As I watched the video, I would do quick sketches with paint on my canvas, trying to capture the structure of the face and reoccur-



ring body movements. Some children would not look at the camera, whereas others seemed to be extremely anxious and fidgety. After watching the interview several times, and getting the first sketches down, I tried to pick a posture of theirs that what true to their mannerisms. For this reason, many of the children are not looking at the viewer in their portrait, but I am okay with that since it captured more of their essence.

Originally, I was using the audio directly from the DVD the paintings were from. However, the children were speaking in Luganda, and the translator, being from Uganda herself, was not easy to understand. Since the purpose of this series is to bring awareness about how this war is affecting individual people, it did not seem appropriate to play recordings that no one was able to understand. For this reason, I chose to look up audio clips online of children in East Africa sharing personal accounts of how they've been affected. Once the stories were gathered, I transferred them



from my computer to a soundboard, where I could put each clip onto its own channel. This enabled me to have a different recording coming out of each speaker in the gallery space, while they were all playing from one device. As you approach a painting, or rather, a corner of the room, you hear a particular story. As you move from one location in the room to another, different stories are shared with the viewer. The intention was to take what I had learned and share it with others. Through this series, I hope to bring people to the realization that these are real people, are real lives are being taken. Instead of hearing "300 people died in the Dominican Republic of Congo today," and letting that pass, I want it to sink in the same way it would to hear that someone close to you died.

The problem seems to be that even though these are



personal accounts told by individuals in Uganda, and even though these are paintings of real people who have suffered through these tragedies, they somehow still seem iconic. It seems that the farther I get into my own interpretation, the less their realities shine through. I seek to grow closer and closer to my source of inspiration. "Vision that responds to the cries of the world and is truly engaged with what it sees in not the same as the disembodied eye that observes and reports, that objectifies and enframes. The ability to enter into another's emotions, or to share another's plight, to make their conditions our own, characterizes art in the partnership mode." This is what I hope to do in my work. As I continue this journey, I plan for my work to remain within this train of thought. There is extreme need in the world, and unless people come together and see themselves as a community, rather than isolated individuals, problems will not be solved. Though some people think art cannot save a life, I believe it can. Art can touch others in a way that matters to them, by giving them a voice. It can awaken peoples' conscience and call them to action. Though the painting itself may not save a life, the people who respond to it can. For this reason, I plan to continue doing work related to social awareness and uniting individuals from all backgrounds together, allowing their voices to be heard." Taryn Lotak is at (219) 951-7109 or e-mail, tarebear86@sbcglobal.net. Select works will be on display at The Steeple Gallery.



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