

'EXPOSURE'



Cable Hoover/Independent

Vodka bottles and alcohol advertisements adorn a wall in the "Exposure" exhibit at ART123 Gallery in Gallup Thursday.

Art exhibit focuses on alcohol problem

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GALLUP — Art has the unique ability to bring to light, focus on and discuss topics that people otherwise ignore — topics that people have deemed too tough to handle, or too persistent to fix — can be shown from a new perspective that digs into the heart of the issue, while honoring those on the outside who are going through the struggle.

That's what a group of artists were trying to do when they began work on "Exposure," a multi-media collaborative show that focuses on the abnormally high amount of exposure and alcohol-related deaths in the Gallup area.

Artist Ashton Phillips came up with the idea of an art exhibition that focused on the seemingly prohibited topic of exposure deaths while sitting outside his home in Indian Hills. Phillips, primarily a painter, had spent lots of time recreating the grand and beautiful landscapes of the Southwest, but with persistent new reports of people found dead in fields, ditches, alleyways and near railroad tracks, he had a personal realization.

"On a personal level, I felt that my work would not be authentic or true if I just painted the landscape and did not acknowl-



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Ashton Phillips created several pieces and coordinated with other artists for his show "Exposure" at ART123 Gallery in Gallup.

edge and honor the suffering that happens in it," Phillips said, standing inside ART123 among the works created for the show.

Phillips began seeking out artists that would end up working together to tackle an issue that weighs heavily on the hearts of the community.

The group of artists — Phillips, Chris-

tian Bigwater, Jonathan Campbell, Ruth-erford Ashley and Henry Yazhe — began brainstorming some ideas and looking for inspiration. In Ashton's search for authenticity, the group traveled around town, seeking the places where people

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had been found — places in fields and ditches where people were known to sleep or congregate.

The group began collecting items and photographs from the sites. Dark Eyes Vodka pint bottles along with bottles of hand sanitizer, mouthwash and more than one can of hair spray, the latter all known as alternatives when alcohol may be unavailable. These pieces all made their way into the exhibit, but all were transformed.

No longer trash, the artifacts taken from these sites represent the real struggle many individuals in the area face, and in the exhibit, they are repurposed and beautiful, simple and sobering.

"We wanted the pieces to be rooted in reality, instead of our conceptions of the issue," Ashton said.

The gruesome truth

The artists, while creating intensely thought provoking and moving pieces of art, also wanted visitors of the exhibit to know the sometimes gruesome truth that comes with exposure deaths. They did this by obtaining police reports from the Gallup Police Department from incidents where individuals were found dead. Sometimes labeled unattended deaths, or open field deaths, the reports all show similar situations and leave no detail untold. The reports are presented unmolested, hanging on the walls next to the pieces.



A map of Gallup has the sites of exposure deaths marked in the "Exposure" exhibit at ART123 Gallery in Gallup Thursday.

As a collaborative show, most of the pieces were created by more than one artist. The group came together Feb. 11 to the studio and worked. They heard from speaker Robin Silverfox, who had lost two family members to alcohol addiction.

Silverfox, who had her own experience of the perils of alcohol, is sober, has received her Bachelor of Arts in pre-med and has been accepted to medical school. Phillips said that her testament to the group, while shedding more light on the reality of the situation, was uplifting, showing that there is a light at the end of the tunnel of addiction.

'Strong Diné women'

At one point in the group's conversation, they asked Silverfox what she credited for giving her strength to survive.

"Strong Diné women" she told us," Phillips said. "She talked to us about the women in her life that helped her."

Because of that, the exhibition includes a portrait that Bigwater painted of Bigwater's grandmother Ahesdebah Bia, which translates to warrior woman. The piece is different from the other pieces in the show, as it was not directly created for this

exhibition, but Phillips and Bigwater felt it fit perfectly. Bigwater describes his grandmother as a strong Navajo woman who lived and worked off the land in Canyon de Chelly. She lived to the age of 94 and was a role model to young Navajo girls.

"The Drunk Tank," another large piece in the exhibit, was inspired by a historical photograph of Gallup's "drunk tank" that was published in Marc Gaede's book "Bordertowns." The piece was created by Bigwater, Phillips and Campbell.

The triptych, three separate canvas, painting incorporates a lot of the detail of

the photograph, such as the clothes the individuals were wearing and their poses, but also depicts the individuals as ghostly figures, without discernible faces or stories.

"We painted the figures as ghostly and almost fading away, because that's what is happening," Phillips said.

The triptych was chosen because it is a style commonly used in religious art and altar pieces. The artists wanted viewers to draw that similarity when looking at the piece.

Another large piece in the exhibit is on display in the front display of the gallery, and it depicts a man, huddled onto a dirty old tarp, in a pose Phillips said was described in one of the police reports the group obtained.

The figure is shaped from scraps of metal found near an area when an individual was found dead by police. The metal was shaped and welded, creating the image of a frail and hollow individual, whose heart is clearly visible, big and complex, in the middle of the figure.

This piece, along with nine others inside the gallery, is accompanied by a poem written by poet Rutherford Ashley specifically for the show.

The exhibition "Exposure" is open and will be on display at ART123, located at 123 W. Coal Ave., until March 7. At 6 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 18, the gallery will hold an opening reception during which the public can see the completed project, hear poetry readings and chat with the artists.

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