

EMPIRE NEWS

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Art of homeless, mentally ill on exhibit

Finley Community Center show shows works by those often dismissed by society

By MARTIN ESPINOZA
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

In a teaser for the art exhibit “Unseen,” curator naomi murakami asks us to consider how we might react if we were sitting on a bus or in a cafe next to the likes of Vincent Van Gogh without any knowledge of his fame or talent.

The question is at the heart of an art show on exhibit at Santa Rosa’s Finley Community Center through Jan. 29 featuring

some 200 works by eight local artists who have struggled with mental illness and homelessness.

It questions our tendency to dismiss those around us who are not acting “normal,” and to assume that they have little to offer in the way of creativity, let alone genius.

“I see a lot of people who have those symptoms and when you talk to them I’m struck by their intelligence, their knowledge and their profound thoughts,” said murakami, who is art director of the art program at the Wellness and Advocacy Center, a weekday drop-in center on Chanate Road in Santa Rosa for people who struggle with men-

tal illness and homelessness.

Murakami points out that the exhibit is not a “charity event” aimed at eliciting sympathy for those with mental illness.

“I’m putting art first here,” murakami said. “I have a genuine respect for their creativity.”

Among the artists featured in the exhibit, is Rick Stewart, a 48-year-old Native American who once worked as a freelance illustrator in San Francisco. Stewart has been homeless off and on for the past 10 years and has struggled with alcoholism since the death of his father in 2000.

Murakami said that because of his current homelessness, TURN TO ART, PAGE B2



KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat

Rick Stewart, who is homeless, has several pieces of art in a show at the Finley Community Center highlighting works of art by those who deal with homelessness or mental illness.

ART: Program materials budget \$80 a month

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Stewart’s current medium is pen on “cheap” 8-by-11½ copy paper.

Another artist, Max Van Holt, describes his work as “Krypto Neo Random Fractalism,” in which he strives “for an unusual relationship with the space my vision is embedded in,” according to his artist description. Van Holt says he is influenced by Escher, Kandinsky, Braque and Dali.

Van Holt writes, “My painting is the aftermath of a visual dialogue attempting to reconcile paradox. Trying to perceive

while being deceived.”

For the exhibit, murakami said, she put together a group of people who could have jobs as professional artists and whose work could be in a museum. The stigma of mental illness and a legacy of criminalizing those who suffer from it often eclipses that creativity, murakami said.

“I start to think if Van Gogh sat next to me, would I be able to see his gift,” murakami said.

She added that the creative work of those who live with mental illness is often quite excellent and sometimes takes a backseat to what’s known as outsider

or naive art, which is artwork created by untrained artists with developmental disabilities.

That work receives far more public support than the creative work of mentally ill people, murakami said. The art program at the Wellness and Advocacy Center scrapes by with a materials budget of \$80 a month.

That translates to about 20 cents per person per visit to pay for such things as paper, framing and reproduction. She said she hopes those who attend the exhibit will see for themselves the hidden talent of the featured artists.