

ARTS & CULTURE

# Veterans share their experiences through art

UTSA exhibit about experiences of armed forces personnel

By Elda Silva | September 1, 2015 | Updated: September 1, 2015 7:59pm

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Photo: Jerry Lara /San Antonio Express-News

Regina Vasquez, 36, of San Marcos, holds up her military fatigues that is part of her project, "Fatigue Clothesline," Monday, August 24, 2015. The U.S. Marine served from 1998 to 2002 and was sexually assaulted while she served in the military. Her project consist military fatigues from victims of military sexual trauma. The artwork is part of "The Uncertainty of a Life in Security," an exhibit at the University of Texas at San Antonio Main Campus art gallery that will open on September 2.

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When Scott Sherer was working on “The Uncertainty of a Life in Security,” an exhibit that explores the concept of personal security in relation to the experiences of servicemen and women, he was struck by a paradox.

“When you’re in the world of security, you’re actually really not secure — you’re in danger in so many ways,” said Sherer, who curated the show with Marissa Del Toro.

Part of Fotoseptiembre USA, the annual month-long photography festival, the exhibit features work by six artists, five of whom are veterans. In addition to photography, the show also has work in other media such as performance, sculpture and installation. It opens with a reception from 6 to 8 p.m. Wednesday at the UTSA Art Gallery.

“Some of the works in the (exhibit) show what life would have been like on the front lines or in deployment, but a lot of it is actually dealing with the scenarios back home,” Sherer said.

When Sherer and Del Toro were searching for artists to feature in the exhibit, they found two close to home, Joseph Duarte and Regina Vasquez.

A San Antonio native, Duarte, 37, is a member of the Lullwood Group arts collective. He enlisted in the Marines a year after graduating from high school for,



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he said, “socio-economic reasons.”

Duarte had planned to retire from the military, but he was injured in Iraq after falling two stories while pursuing an insurgent. He spent a year recuperating in California, then returned to San Antonio and enrolled at UTSA to study art, concentrating on sculpture.

For “The Uncertainty of a Life in Security,” Duarte created three large-scale pieces inspired by balsa wood airplane kits, specifically the simple punch-out gliders. In addition to a World War II-era plane, Duarte built a drone and a stealth bomber from unpainted ¼-inch plywood. If launched from sufficient height, the craft would fly, Duarte said. The pieces simultaneously evoke the innocence of childhood and the lethal consequences of war.

“I wanted to create something that was a toy, but that was really serious at the same time,” he said.

Duarte previously has dealt with his experience in the military in his artwork, embedding inert M16 rifle rounds in concrete and then chiseling out the bullets so they appear to be ripping through the surrounding material.

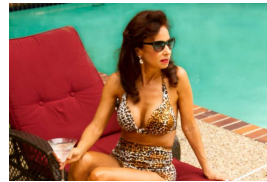
“I can only do what I know,” he said. “It’s really something, when I came back, I needed to express, I think. It really helped my development as getting some of that stuff that happened



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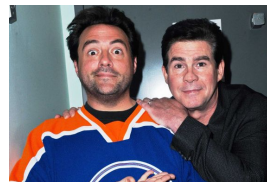
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to me and happened to my friends off of my mind. Through art, I was able to work out those conflicts inside of me.

“It never goes away,” he added. “You live with it for the rest of your life. It’s *how* you live with it.”

Art helped Vasquez talk about something she had kept quiet for more than a decade. It also inspired her to help others speak out through the Fatigues Clothesline, an ongoing project in which veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma — rape, sexual assault or sexual harassment that occurs during military service — share their stories through writing or drawing on pieces of their gear.

Following in the footsteps of her father, a Vietnam vet, Vasquez enlisted in the military, serving from 1998 to 2002. She was in military occupation school when she was drugged and raped by two fellow soldiers.

“I tried to report it, but their platoon sergeant threatened to kill me,” said Vasquez, 36, a single mother of five who lives in San Marcos. “‘There’s a lot of treelines to hide your body.’ That’s what he said to me, so I didn’t pursue it. And I didn’t want to go back home. I didn’t want to be a disgrace or whatever.”

Vasquez kept what happened from even those closest to her, including her now former husband. While studying criminal justice and forensic psychology at Texas State University, however, she said she “hit a wall.”

“We were studying about rape — the motives and everything,” Vasquez said. “I started spiraling. I would have flashbacks in class to the point where they would have to get everybody out (of the room) for me to calm down.”

Vasquez began attending group therapy. In 2010, she participated in a Clothesline Project event, detailing her experience on a T-shirt that was then displayed in public. The piece got a lot of attention, Vasquez recalled.

“That was hard for me to stomach, because I thought this was like anything normal — like

what happens in the civilian world and what happens in the employment world. I was thinking to myself, ‘This is such (expletive). Nobody knows about this stuff,’” Vasquez said. “And then it dawned on me. I was told that they will kill me if I told, so I started thinking ‘How many others did this happen to?’”

Soon after, she launched the Fatigues Clothesline. Vasquez said that in less than a month, she received thousands of emails from women and men with stories like hers. The show includes more than a dozen of the fatigues by anonymous contributors.

“This is my life’s work since 2010,” said Vasquez, who has continued working on her own art. “I carry all of these stories.”

Among the photographic works, the show features images by Erin Trieb, an Austin-based photojournalist and director of the Homecoming Project, a public service campaign to raise awareness of issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, combat stress and suicide among active military and veterans. Trieb’s images offer intimate glimpses of the lives of active military and veterans coping with the aftershock of war back home.

Meanwhile Giuseppe Pellicano, a Portland-based artist who served as an Army medic from 2000 to 2004, uses munitions to symbolize the effects of PTSD on soldiers and their families in his ongoing photography series “Grenade.” The works in the show include an image of a little girl in a princess outfit at a child-sized table pouring tea to a giant grenade sitting in a chair in place of her father.

Aaron Hughes, who served in Iraq, will present his collaborative performance “Tea” on Sept. 15. During the piece, Hughes sets out a rug and invites audience members to sit down and have tea with him. The hot drink is served in Styrofoam cups etched with floral designs such as those created by detainees at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

The show also includes a series of rough ceramic cups by artist Ehren Tool that are covered with symbols of the military and war — barbed wire, weapons, skulls.

“These are just powerful objects,” Del Toro said. “(Tool) talks about his work and how the reason he chose the cup is because it can be held — you can share it with another person.”

The cups, like the exhibition as a whole, are about creating a dialogue.

“I think it’s a great atmosphere, and outlet not just for veterans here on campus but in the community to come on in and share their own experience,” Del Toro said.

*“The Uncertainty of Life in Security — Veterans Back Home,” continues through Sept. 30, UTSA Art Gallery, 1604 Campus, 1 UTSA Circle. 210-458-4391, [www.art.utsa.edu](http://www.art.utsa.edu)*

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