

# County Admin Building becomes gallery for Veterans' Paintings

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MARTINEZ, Calif. — Visitors and employees entering the Contra Costa County Administration Building will see that the lobby's walls are arrayed with portraits in watercolor and acrylics that range in style from realistic to impressionistic to creative expressions of the artists' feelings.

Each is a self-portrait by a military veteran.

This is the most recent "AboutFace: Building Veterans' Self-Understanding Through Self-Portraits" exhibit, and it's making its debut as an ArtPassages show in the county building, where the paintings will hang at least through November.

Roger Renn, managing director of the Arts and Culture Commission of Contra Costa County, organized this year's show, one of many activities the Commission organizes. Among its activities are October's ArtPassages show recognizing Head Start, and the upcoming Poetry Out Loud competitive recitations.

The veterans' painting is supported in part by the California Arts Council, a state agency whose website is [www.arts.ca.gov](http://www.arts.ca.gov).

In fact, the California Arts Council wanted to start a new program that would teach veterans some art techniques, then encourage them to paint to express themselves.

This follows other programs in

which theater, music and dance were taught to veterans, Renn said.

The beginning of the Contra Costa County AboutFaceshow started in 2015 at Artu4ia, the Martinez art studio owned by John Kleber, who designed the AboutFace logo.

Kleber also helped design the entire arts program, which helped Renn secure a grant to underwrite the program with a score of 8 out of a possible 10 points.

That happened the next year, too, in which the program scored 5 points out of a possible 6 points in a new ranking system, with much of the credit going to the program syllabus Kleber developed, Renn said.

Qualified artists taught the veterans at Artu4ia the first year, and that made the experience more "authentic," because it took place in an art studio, Renn said.

The veterans started with larger-scale paintings in acrylics. That meant the first round of paintings didn't need to be framed to be shown.

But some of the veterans are in wheelchairs or have trouble traveling. So the second edition of the arts program involved taking some of the classes to other cities where the veterans lived, going to the NIAD Art Center in Richmond, and to libraries and veterans buildings.

Working with Contra Costa County's Veterans Services among other agencies, the artists give veterans six workshop in painting. "Some of them have never held a brush before," Renn said.

The workshops give the veterans, both men and women, the keys to handling those brushes and the watercolors or acrylics with which they'll paint. Beyond that, however, the veterans paint their self-portraits as they please, without any stifling from the artists or the program organizers.

Originally, Renn thought those returning from Afghanistan or Iraq would want to participate. But he discovered those veterans often are busy getting jobs and starting families.

Many of the artists are from the Vietnam War, although one participant this year is 97. Five of those in this year's show are women. One artist is Martinez woodcarver Jim Marieiro, who was in the U.S. Army from 1961 to 1966.

The paintings vary from artist to artist, and those who have participated in both years often paint far different portraits the second year, Renn said.

One artist began his portrait in pink paint, but as he continued, the face got redder and redder. He told Renn that as he painted, he got warm and then got angry, so he painted the portrait as if it were burning up.

Another started with a mild portrait, but put the figure in prison stripes, adding words in between the stripes to express feelings that up until then may not have been given a voice.

But this isn't art therapy, Renn said.

The program uses professional artists as painting technique guides.

The goal is to encourage the veterans to keep painting.

Renn described his own adventures in painting, tackling media that at times didn't seem to want to cooperate. "One day, I woke up, and it liked me. I can't explain it — it's like learning a language. It clicked." He is hoping veterans will find a painting medium that click with them.

The California Watercolor Association has done its own veterans outreach, but that organization never gave those paintings a showcase, Renn said. So last year, the Arts and Culture Commission of Contra Costa County decided to incorporate watercolors and to make sure paintings got shown.

Cathy Riggs, who owns I've Been Framed, 411 Ferry St., chose neutral white mats and simple black frames that define but don't detract from the watercolor portraits.

Renn has known Riggs since he was on the board of the Martinez Arts Association. "Cathy will make it happen," he said in admiration.

The framing was done in time for the exhibit to be put on display Thursday at the Contra Costa County Administration Building lobby, 651 Pine St.

At Tuesday's meeting of the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, Veterans Day will be recognized in a ceremony that starts at 11 a.m., Renn said. The art exhibit will be part of the celebration, he said.

Once the show concludes at the Administration Building, the paint-



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ings will be exhibited at a variety of places, and it's been invited to be on display at the Capitol in Sacramento next year, Renn said.

Meanwhile, Renn is gearing up for the next year of AboutFace. "It will be the third year of the grant," he said. "We want participation.

We're the best-kept secret."

Website for the Arts and Culture Commission of Contra Costa County is <http://www.contra-costa.ca.gov/3185/Arts-Culture-Commission>.