

Finding art in castoffs helps her to help life's victims

BY DEBORAH SELDNER

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During two years living on an artists' kibbutz in Israel, Rachel O'Rourke decided creating her own artwork wasn't enough. She wanted to help others cope with life through the therapy art can provide.

O'Rourke said her own work, on display this month at the Atelier Z Gallery, has focused on the Holocaust and loss since her days as an art student at Humboldt State University in California.

After she earned her bachelor's degree, O'Rourke spent two years at Kfar Hanassi in the Galilee, where she worked with refugees from the former Soviet Union. Working in an afterschool art-based program, she said she discovered how important art can be for children, especially those from war-torn areas.

"I saw something happening," she said, adding she had never heard of art therapy before working with the art therapist at the kibbutz.

When she came home in 1998, she earned a master's degree in art therapy from the Art Institute of Chicago.

O'Rourke said she now lives three lives—art therapist, artist and director of Youth Take Action, a program of the Oregon Peace Institute and Green Fire Production. At OPI she is developing creative arts programming and conflict resolution training for youth.

As an art therapist, O'Rourke said she has discovered that "art can serve as a soothing mechanism and as a way to remember beauty in a place completely lacking in beauty."

Holocaust loss triggered Israel stay



RACHEL O'ROURKE creates mixed-media artwork using "found" components such as old photos, items found on the streets, and rocks and bits from Israel.

O'Rourke said she grew up knowing her grandfather's entire family had died in the Holocaust. Though

the loss of the family that had remained in Poland was not openly discussed, "It was always there," she said.

She said part of the reason she went to Israel was to meet survivors, hear their stories and find a connection to her past.

O'Rourke began collecting objects in alleys and thriftshops as symbols of what has been lost. It's "heart-breaking," she says, to find a family album in a thriftshop.

"I was working with people who had lost everything, but people in the U.S. are throwing away things from family history," she said.

The grief over the loss of family relics is not so much over the material loss as it is over the loss of memories, she said. "Objects trigger memories. What happens when you don't have family relics? How are you supposed to remember?"

See O'Rourke's work on display this month at Atelier Z, 328 NW Broadway, Gallery 117. For hours, call 503-236-4855

She called the art created at Terezin concentration camp a fascinating example of people remembering and creating beauty.

For people who survive horrible experiences, art can be a means of exorcizing the horror and rediscovering beauty, she said.

"People who have experienced extreme

situations need to get out extreme images," she said. "You see health ... when they move beyond it and create images from their imagination instead of the images they are haunted by."

After earning her art therapy degree, O'Rourke worked in Chicago with survi-

vors of war and torture—Bosnian refugees and inner-city children, adolescents and families. She realized that survivors of war and inner-city violence have symptoms in common. She also realized that despite common experiences, groups from different cultures were not communicating.

Knowing that the art process can bring people together across boundaries of language and culture, she wrote a grant and received support to create a mural with refugee and immigrant children from Bosnia, Cambodia, Somalia and Bulgaria.

"The mural project brought them together through imagination, music and food," she said. "They found commonalities."

The mural is being displaced by a building renovation in Chicago now and will be moved soon to the International Refugee Center of Oregon.

OPI hired O'Rourke to develop a program promoting youth peacemaking based on its video "Peace by Piece." The video was created for the Dalai Lama Youth Summit last year to inspire youth to take action and get involved in peacemaking.

O'Rourke now uses the video to facilitate discussions in school presentations and at community centers and conferences. With teen volunteers, she produces a monthly youth radio show on KBOO (usually 8-9 p.m. the last Sunday of the month), and a teen email newsletter.

She also has developed a creative non-violent conflict resolution program.

Using the video, interactive theater and a collaborative mural-making project, youths explore issues related to racism, violence, drugs and gangs.