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Painter highlights struggles of the poor

**BY KEVIN CARTER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR-BANNER**

STONECREST - Take a good long look at something you don't want to see.

Marge Hakel knows that's a hard sell for most folks. No matter; her oil portraits of women stricken with fear, children ravaged by disease or hunger and men devastated by poverty are given away.

The Stonecrest resident's work has been shown in Ocala at the Appleton Museum of Art and Brick City Center for the Arts, but news of her work spreads mostly through word of mouth.

Because she feels she's called to do it, Hakel paints images of social injustice depicting people she'll never meet.

Some live in South Africa, Haiti, Afghanistan and Liberia. Others exist in highway underpasses and eat in soup kitchens in the forgotten corners of America.

"I feel like God paints through my hand," Hakel says.

She searches through newspapers for pictures of homeless people that show some arresting emotion in the eyes. Almost all the pictures she seizes on are black-and-white images she'll breathe color into as she reinterprets them on her canvas.

The people in her portraits are almost always strangers, but her nearly two decades of helping people in extreme poverty in a homeless shelter in Ohio and her current work with a Catholic Church service organization in Belleview have made their features familiar.

"There's a connection," she says. "When I look in someone's eyes, if they're suffering from poverty or homelessness, in a way, I know them all."

The starving African child with a distended belly and spindly legs was difficult to paint, but not for reasons you might suspect.

"I kept saying, 'That doesn't look right,' " she says, referring to the child's head. That was because the boy's entire body had been shaped by hunger, making him too malnourished



Zoom

Artist Marge Hakel, who paints about social justice issues, is shown with "Behind Her Hands," a painting of an ashamed Liberian survivor, in Summerfield recently.

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to grow hair.

"It's basically a skull with skin over it," she said.

The walls of her home are crowded with her work, including her own version of a well-known photo of an Afghan woman once featured on the cover of National Geographic with intensely expressive eyes.

The eyes are usually her point of connection, but the case of a Liberian rape victim was different.

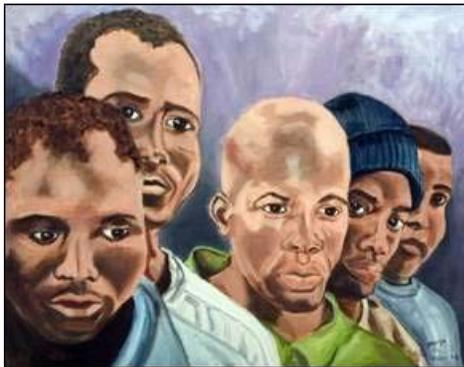
In Hikel's portrait, taken from a photograph, all you see are the woman's hands covering her face. Left unguarded by the village men who went off to fight, every woman had been raped by members of a rebel army. As this woman talked to a reporter, she could not bear to show him her face for the shame she felt, Hikel says.

Happily enjoying the sunshine in a gated retirement community as she does can easily give you a false sense of reality, Hikel says.

She volunteers weekly with the local chapter of St. Vincent de Paul. The Catholic service organization helps find homes for homeless people, restores power in homes that have been cut off and even bails people out of jail.

"She's really, really dedicated," says Karl Voss, vice president of St. Vincent de Paul at St. Mark's and St. Teresa churches. The organization helps close to 900 people each year.

"Life isn't just this paradise," Hikel says, gesturing toward her neighborhood of well-manicured lawns and well-kept homes. "It's so easy to forget how people struggle."



Zoom 

"African Immigrants," a painting by Marge Hikel, is shown at her home in Summerfield.
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