

Los Angeles Times

Culture Monster

L.A. photographer documents U.S. military's 'don't ask, don't tell' policy

November 23, 2009 | 10:00 am



Why would you want to take a portrait of someone without showing his or her face? The essence of portrait photography, after all, is to capture the spirit of the subject and to reveal some crucial aspect of his or her identity.

But in the case of L.A. photographer Jeff Sheng's latest project, capturing his subjects' faces would almost certainly put their careers in jeopardy. That's because Sheng has set about to photograph U.S. military service personnel who are gay but closeted in their work lives. Titled "[Dont' Ask, Dont' Tell](#)," the ongoing project consists of a series of stark, sometimes sad, portraits of U.S. soldiers who are forced to hide a part of who they are.

"I want to give an invisible community some visibility, but at the same time, to keep them invisible," said Sheng on the phone from Vancouver, where he is working on another project. "There's already a lot of journalistic work on gay people in the military who have been discharged. My project is more about people who are still serving."

To conceal the identities of current military personnel, the photographer has used lighting and shadow effects to mask part or all of their faces. Sometimes, the subject will conceal his or her face with a hand, as in the photo above, titled "Jess, Bend, Oregon, 2009." (The names and towns of the titles are fictional for the protection of identity.) In certain cases, the entire subject is hidden in the shadows. The photographer sometimes meets them in a hotel near the base where they are serving.

Sheng, who grew up in Southern California and whose studio is located near Culver City, began the project this fall and said that he will have photographed 10 subjects by the end of the year. "I told myself that I'm going to stop the project when the policy ['don't ask, don't tell'] gets repealed," he said.

The photographer said that an L.A. exhibition of the project is in the works for next year, though nothing has been confirmed. He said he would like to include 20 photographs in the eventual show.

In 2008, Sheng received much attention for his photographic series "[Fearless](#)," which documented high school and college athletes who are openly gay, bisexual or transgender. He said some of his leads for "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" have come from his work on "Fearless." He added that many of his eventual subjects contact him through his website. Not surprisingly, "Don't Ask, Dont' Tell" has begun receiving attention on the blogosphere, where some of Sheng's images are already circulating.

"I've been active in the gay community, so I've been able to garner a lot of trust from that," said Sheng. "And that's the biggest fear that I think people have with this project -- how do you trust someone?"

-- David Ng

Photo: "Jess, Bend, Oregon, 2009," part of the series "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Credit: Jeff Sheng

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2009/11/la-photographer-documents-us-militarys-dont-ask-dont-tell-policy.html>